



TERRY THEISE

*** ESTATE SELECTIONS ***

GERMANY 2011



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.*

Contents

INTRODUCTION	1	RHEINGAU	63
<i>The 2010 Vintage</i>	3	Josef Leitz	64
<i>Highlights and Superlatives</i>	6	Spreitzer	68
<i>Principles of Selection</i>	7		
<i>Core/Hard-Core List Wines</i>	7	MITTEL RheIN	70
<i>Daddy's Fucked Up Tasting Notes</i>	8	Florian Weingart	71
<i>Plusses and the Quest for Perfection</i>	9		
<i>A New Way to Measure Sweetness</i>	9		
<i>Sommelier Alert!</i>	10		
		MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER	74
PFALZ	12	<i>Mosel Regionals</i>	76
<i>What is a Palate?</i>	13	Selbach-Oster	77
Müller-Catoir	14	Erich Jakoby-Mathy	82
<i>Scheurebe: What Gives?</i>	17	Meulenhof / Erben Justen Ehlen	84
von Winning / Dr. Deinhard	18	Alfred Merkelbach	87
Eugen Müller	20	<i>Dry German Wine</i>	90
Herbert Meßmer	23	Joh. Jos. Christoffel	94
Theo Minges	26	Heribert Kerpen	96
Kurt Darting	28	Willi Schaefer	98
<i>Making the Case for German Wines</i>	30	A.J. Adam	101
		Reuscher-Haart	104
RHEINHESSEN	32	Carl Loewen / Schmitt-Wagner	106
<i>The Question of Tartrates</i>	33	von Othegraven	110
Strub	34		
<i>Take Me to Your Liter</i>	37	REFERENCE	113
Weingut Geil	38	<i>Earlier Vintages Revisited</i>	113
Gernot Gysler	40	<i>The Best of the Last Decade</i>	113
<i>Questions of Yields & Organics</i>	42	<i>How German Wines Age</i>	113
		<i>Label Basics</i>	114
NAHE	44	<i>Glossary</i>	115
Dönnhoff	46	<i>Core List Wines</i>	118
Gray-Marketers	50		
Jakob Schneider	51		
Weingut Hexamer	53		
Kruger-Rumpf	56		
Schlossgut Diel	59		

Introduction



Seems almost quaint to write such a thing as a catalogue in our tweety age. Out of alignment with the zeitgeist. That plus we're all so very busy, so I shall try to be pithy.

I don't feel old except when the person I'm with is fondling some little device with his thumbs sending a text. At times I wish there were more people I could talk about books with. I like to read them all the way through; I'm silly that way.

I'm glad my own little book turned out so wee. It's shorter than *Gatsby*. I hoped it would provoke joy and even affection just as an object. Most people seemed to like it, and whatever its failings (which are far too many) it was an authentic testament of faith in the things that abide after all the dross and noise die away.

I sometimes sense the passage of time when I think of restaurant (and related "lifestyle") trends. Cigars. *Cigars*. I mean, urggg – though it did give Dave Barry the funniest line he ever wrote. Something like "I don't care how expensive the cigar is; the minute someone lights it it smells like his armpit's on fire."

Sake. I respect its depth of culture, and I think it's a good thing to appreciate. Just not for me, because I feel I can obtain more quality of flavor with less alcohol if I stick with boring old wine.

Now cocktails and mixology. Bless y'all for being so creative and for really *tasting* so powerfully. Blending is the essence of tasting, and even if I don't join in – being evidently a wine monagamist – I tip my hat, or would if I wore one.

I sometimes feel that mere wine isn't cool enough any more. I really hope I'm wrong. But one thing that I don't think I'm wrong about is a trend to grope for the novel and *recherché* at the top of the tree, leaving sweeter and lower-hanging fruit untouched. Please don't misconstrue me; I'm happy for most new discoveries, especially when they hail from the Old World, but I sometimes wonder why a marginally interesting wine from East-BFistan (from the "Krpffzg" grape no less) is occupying valuable real-estate on your shelves or wine lists, crowding out the classics you think it's cool to ignore. That's because you conflate "classic" with "stodgy" or dull. I doubt very much you've grown bored with classic wines. The reason they're

classic is that their thrall lasts a lifetime. Classic wines are the tantric sex between grape and ground, an explosive pinnacle of pleasure and fascination.

Which leads us to German wines, especially Rieslings, which in turn leads me to admit that the Germans haven't made it easy for me, you, or anyone else. The wines themselves will curl your toes, but the crap you have to suss is annoying, and the identity-crisis of modern Germany (viz. its incomprehensible dry-wine dogma) creates a miasma convenient to avoid.

But I'll help. Because no wine is greater than great German Riesling. Because no wine offers better value than good German Riesling. Because no wine is tastier with *most of what you eat* than German Riesling. Each of us finds her own way to these wines, and I'm lucky I found mine early, before my palate was corrupted by the bogus trash that passes for "wine" all too often. I had nothing I needed to un-learn. And what I did learn was worth learning, and was a wise and steady guide as my wine world broadened. All that matters is the quality of the flavor. Every wine will tell you whether it's at home, belongs elsewhere, or belongs nowhere. Grace, balance, clarity and deliciousness are the things to cherish; the rest is shoulder-pads and insoles.

But who has time (or bandwidth) for subtlety, you may demand. People are busy, the wine should get to the

point. Well sure, but I don't mean to say that subtlety is a *sine qua non*, even if it happens to be for me. There are superb *obvious* wines; Müller-Catoir comes to mind. You'll find that the virtues I identify are flexible; they can exist in small, medium and large wines, in delicate or direct wines, as needed and as you prefer. If you're busy and don't have time to sink into the rapture, I'm sad for you but I understand. The rapture will be there when you're ready to find it.

Yes, but all that Teutonic mess of a wine law; do you really have to learn it? Oy. (I might point out that you've seemed capable of discerning the distinctions between "Vitovska" and "Schmageggie," but we all think that anything Italian is easy to learn, and if it isn't we'll just whip up some carbonara.)

You don't need to learn the German wine law. In fact, if you're suffering any sort of manic high, or are just in a good mood, I promise that studying this law will plunge you into a black pit of misery. All you need is to suss a few basic facts about the wines and where they grow, plus a kindergarten tutorial on the necessities on the label, and you're there, in less than five minutes. Test me, man; it's like my party trick, telling you 90% of what's necessary in under 300 seconds. The rest is runoff and bureaucracy.

Here's how my portfolio fits into the general mix of German wine importers.



I have never sought the “elite” as a sort of divineright-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, lifeaffirming, 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*.”

I am constantly tasting new estates. A portfolio is never fully settled. You have to be very careful not to coast, and I often ask myself “If I were coming to this grower for the first time, would I want the wines?” That doesn’t mean I go all lord-of-the-flies on my suppliers; even the most talented and caring grower will have a dud vintage once in a while. When that happens you steer customers elsewhere and wait for the next fine year. You also, eventually, will deal with generational changes in wineries, and sometimes you will witness a winery’s demise, which is sad. Usually when the young man or woman comes along there’s a fresh jolt of energy and I can catch a star that’s rising anew. On rare occasions, the young person isn’t the vintner his parent was. Then a somber day comes.

But there’s an assumption this portfolio is somehow valedictory whereas the small new importers have the real “cutting-edge” hotties. Would it were true. I’m seriously encouraged by any new importer for fine German estate wines: I want them to succeed. But the notion they are sleuthing cool new things out from under my settled old gaze just doesn’t wash. In nearly every case, I know of the new estates coming over, I tasted them and they were either redundant for this portfolio, or they weren’t good enough to handle the internal competition.

I find what works best for me is when I can catch the chicken just as it hatches, and follow it as it grows. I am proud of the many “unknown” growers in this portfolio who have since become stars. These days it’s hard to do. Anyone with any ambition at all is thrusting himself out there, and unless you stumble over someone, his name’s bound to already appear in one of the many guides. Still, one keeps alert.

* THE 2010 VINTAGE *

In the olden days they used to give little mottos to each vintage. A hot one like ’76 might be “Bringer Of Sun” or a messy rotten year might be “Hedgehog Snot Everywhere,” but all of them had a semi-official motto (this being Germany).

I don’t even know if they still do it. But if so, I have no earthly idea what they’d come up with for 2010. My vote would go to “WTF?!!?”

Though every grower said basically the same things to me, the vintage was best summed up by Carl Loewen: “I never experienced a year like this one. Must-weights like the best years, and acidity like the worst years.”

The second salient quote came from Johannes Geil, talking about the extremely low yields that also mark this fascinating difficult vintage: “This year we didn’t really discuss *the crop*; we knew the names of each berry.”

Nothing anyone had ever experienced prepared them for 2010. No precedents exist. “A lot of what we’re doing, we’re doing for the first time,” said Walter Strub, as he showed me a filter pad caked with calcium. This is a vintner with some thirty years under his belt, mind you. But 2010 stands alone.

The headline is, what’s good is *absurdly* good, and there are plenty of that kind of wine. What’s not good is a mess. The crop was decimated by a sequence of events beginning with cold weather during flowering, and by the time these few bunches were harvested in late, late Autumn they had still-thick skins and very little juice – but what juice it was!

2010 is a freak. At times a happy freak and at other times a stunningly compelling freak. Don’t look for anything to compare it to, and abandon all attempts to place it in context. It constitutes a context of its own. And

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?

because of that, I'm going to be a wee bit careful how I parse my language, because I suspect that any of us who issues categorical pronouncements on this vintage will have too many words he'd rather not eat later.

So, to start with, I tasted a larger proportion of cask-samples than usual, because the wines were picked so late and developed so slowly. You learn after a while to see a cask sample as a thing of its own, a progenitor of the eventual wine but not identical to that wine. Bottling improves some wines (e.g., most 2003s) and can clip others (e.g., 2004), so I am seeing this vintage mostly through a periscope.

But with that caveat, I'm willing to state that 2010 is the most concentrated vintage I've ever tasted in Germany. Forget "vinosity;" these babies are as dense as paperweights. Extracts are through the roof (Kabinetts with mid-30s readings not uncommon) and tasting them compared to other "normal" vintages was like doing your usual exercises, only under water. You had to almost force your palate through these wines, pushing aside massive thickets of sheer material, pure substance.

Yet this is substance only obliquely related to what we'd call "fruit." Especially compared to the yellow-fruit basket that was 2009. These '10s are much more malic (apples, pears and especially quince) and herbal in a shady green way (balsam, verbena, wintergreen, aloe vera, sorrel). There's also a note of raw brassica like broccoli, not cooked so it stinks up your house, but just the florets eaten raw or with a little greeny dip – think avocado with threads of tarragon.

Nor are the wines at all heavy, or more correctly, they aren't *big* and heavy. They're a little 2-pound bag with 10 pounds of flavor in it.

I will hedge here, just a tiny bit, because I remember feeling similarly when tasting the young '98s and '95s, both high-acid years and one of them a high botrytis year too. Each of the earlier vintages lost body (or gained sleekness, if you liked it) after they were bottled. But neither of them was nearly as packed as 2010. It's like sitting on your bursting suitcase just to get the bastard closed; the '10s feel as if they're about to erupt.

But: acidity.

After about a week of tasting, I reframed the question I'd been asking. It was no longer about whether a grower deacidified, but rather when and by what method. I would guess that at least 90% of German Rieslings were deacidified – closer to 100% for the dry ones.

The practice used to be anathema, the one thing a conscientious grower said he'd never do. Until he had to. And then he did, if he knew (or remembered) how. I won't bore you with the geeky details and parameters of this question, except to say that the choices were to remove acid from the must or from the wine – or both – and by which among several methods. It was a classic example

of growers defending mutually exclusive practices with great conviction, such that each person convinced you he'd done it the best possible way – until you talked to the next guy.

Even after deacidification (which someone's bound to shorten to "D-ass," so I guess I may as well) the wines are packing some steel. A typical example might be a burly Spätlese of over 100° Oechsle, with a natural acidity of 15g/l. at picking, which would have had around 12g/l. in bottle if acids had been left alone. Now it has something just below or above 10g. The goal was to remove the late-palate sting. Some of you like the sting! I wonder if any of you self-described acid-heads will accept the sizzling taser-current of (some of) these '10s. I suppose we shall see.

The vintage didn't favor whole-cluster pressing, and many growers abandoned the technique, if they were nimble enough and had the flex. They also needed skin contact to mitigate those acids, and candidly to extract as much liquid as possible from the tiny berries. But in some cases the wines showed a certain clumsiness and even bitterness. Acidity is a literal felt sense in your mouth and on your tongue. It stings. Bitterness is something you taste. It doesn't hurt but it isn't pleasant. In 2010 it arose in various ways. At times it came from botrytis. Sometimes it was a residue of a type of D-ass that removes mostly tartaric acid and leaves almost 100% malic. Sometimes it was skin phenols. Whatever it was, I didn't like it, and rejected any wine that showed it.

A few growers had enough perspective to understand their low yields were a blessing in disguise. "Thank God for them," one man said, "Because without them the acids would have been unmanageable."

I find I'm less fascinated by minutiae of weather to explain a vintage than I used to be. In broad strokes 2010 was all over the place. Salient perhaps was the cold September, which retarded the falling of acid levels (and made for some stropy Sauvignon Blancs, none of which I liked or selected), so that when three weeks of nice Fall weather occurred in October, sugars soared but acids didn't fall. Botrytis accelerated this process in many locations, and in any case the last stage or ripening was by dehydration (further diminishing the crop) because leaves were dropping and assimilation ceased. I got a lot of emails those last couple weeks, from growers excited by the improbable quality of those final days' pickings.

But what's perhaps missing from 2010 is a class of decent ordinary wines. 2010s are either sensational or repellent, with little in between. There's a lot of gnarly botrytis, when it wasn't managed in vineyards or cellars. One producer even performed a carbon fining to remove it, a practice I'd have supposed to be too intrusive, yet the results are convincing. 2010 is cruel to the dogmatist and kind to the pragmatist.

Even so, I have a small still voice that issues forth a delicate rebuke; principles aren't principles if they are abandoned as soon as they grow inconvenient. And yet; what's the value in maintaining your principles if no one can drink your wine?

Once more there is no Kabinett that is remotely plausible. But if you're thinking this sounds like 2006, it isn't. In '06 we dealt with all kinds of rots, so that many wines were dubiously pure or clean. Nor did they have the amazing body-density of 2010s. '06 was marked by its basket-of-plums fruitiness (when it was healthy) and by a smoky botrytis. '10s are as solid as ancient trees.

Because this is all so unprecedented, I have no earthly idea how the wines will age. Maybe I'll know in a year. I'm suspending the little aging window I include with the tasting note because I fear it could mislead. Sensually the wines appear as though they'd be immortal, but I wonder if this is deceptive. We have no history of an almost entirely D-assed Riesling vintage. I feel it both prudent and professional to demur.

The question of malo – this came up with some regularity, as growers were curious whether it might be preferable to chemical D-assing. Back in the pre-war days it was not uncommon for Rieslings to undergo it, because the technology to block it was either unknown or unaffordable by a small grower. These days the catechism says it's anathema to Riesling, which is believed to depend on a taut zippy acid structure to reveal its innate self. But there are two currents pulling the other way, one short-term and the other long-term. 2010 had unacceptable acids, which had to be adjusted somehow, so that even heresies like malo should be considered. The long-term is more pernicious. It has to do with making the Trocken wines – on which the German vintner makes his living in the home market – palatable while young. Sometimes it's the only way to make them tolerable at all.

Yet this strikes me as a serious can of worms. There's a well-known estate on the Mosel, recently imported into the U.S., many of whose wines undergo malo. Even the sweet ones. Yes, Mosel with malo! Wonderful. The very essence of Riesling is corrupted, by the same people who'd recoil in outrage from a few drops of *dosage*. I truly do not understand.

Though I'd been told the vintage improved as one went north, I didn't agree. They may have had more problems in the Pfalz, but I liked most of what I tasted. Rheinhessen was spared the ladybuggy pyrenes of many '09s. In fact it was a superb year for several estates. The Nahe was best in the best hands; it called for persnickety attention and intelligence. The Mosel was most variable, ranging from almost sublime to almost execrable. It's hard to infer the quality of a Rheingau vintage from my two growers, who so consistently outperform the

vintage mean. But one of them (keep reading) showed the best vintage he's ever made – potentially.

Prices have to climb, between the two consecutive short crops, steadily increasing costs to growers, and the weaker Dollar compared to one year ago. Obviously I join you in wishing it were otherwise. But this much I can say with conviction: if a '10 is more expensive compared to its counterpart in '09, it is also in every way a bigger, more concentrated wine. You're getting a 2-class upgrade with nearly every bottle. To cite one dramatic example, a typical Merkelbach Spätlese might have must-weights in the high 80s or maybe low 90s (in degrees Oechsle). In 2010 they had *well above 110°*, but amazingly they are far from ponderous or palling.

There are simply too many unknowns and too few precedents to make a lot of ironclad judgments about this vintage. Will the wines end up being magnificent monuments or just fascinating freaks? Mind you, there are many dozens of individual wines of which I have no doubt at all – these are clearly and powerfully great. And so to....

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE IS:

(bearing in mind that a certain Mr. Dönnhoff is ineligible for this or any awards, his number having been retired, as it were). Oops, there are really TWO wineries of the vintage, and I find it seriously impossible to choose between them.

So: in one case there was a discernibly powerful intelligence in play, such that every one of the vintage's problems was avoided, and each of its virtues shone among an amazing range of masterpieces. For this estate it was their best vintage since 2005, which was supernal. This estate is **Selbach-Oster**.

For the other estate there weren't as many great wines, but there was a wider range of styles, all of them magnificently successful. In fact this grower showed the surest and deftest hand he's ever displayed, and though I hardly "need" to draw attention to such an already-successful producer, truth is truth. And so, hats off to **Leitz**.

OTHER MARKED SUCCESSSES:

Eugen Müller brought his A-game for the third straight year. **von Winning / Dr. Deinhard** continues to intrigue and impress. **Diel** was incandescent with craftsmanship in a series of gobsmackingly lovely wines. **Merkelbach** made the most singular and atypical vintage they have ever made. **Schaefer** and **Adam** will hardly surprise you any more. **Christoffel** shone again in his pixilated idiom, just as **Meulenhof** shone in his warmer more analog way.

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Leitz Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese

RUNNERS-UP INCLUDE:

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese

Loewen Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

von Othegraven Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Kabinett

Eugen Müller Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese

THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

A close call, with **Selbach-Oster's** Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling 2-star and **Diel's** Dorsheimer Burgberg in a steel-cage match (with X-treme rules). See if you can choose, tough guy.

THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

(in a vintage not markedly kind to Scheu) ...<yawn> yes again, **Müller-Catoir's** amazing Tocken version. I'm retiring this prize until someone else wins it.

THE KABINETTS OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling

Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling

von Othegraven Ockfener Bockstein Riesling

Diel Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling

Leitz Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Riesling

THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

SILVANERS from many growers, prominently including **Geil**.

Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett (simply another league for this wine.)

Merkelbach Ürrziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (the summit among a high range of almost bizarrely dignified and profound wines.)

Reuscher-Haart Riesling in Liters! (Shows just how good '10 really is, when even this "modest" wine has such stuffing.)

THE GREATEST DRY WINES ARE:

Diel Burgberg Grosses Gewächs

von Winning Kirchenstück Grosses Gewächs

THE ABSOLUTE TOP VALUES:

Geil Gelber Muskateller Trocken

Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben

THE BEST IMAGINEABLE FOOD-WINES:

von Othegraven 2009 Bockstein Grosses Gewächs

Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken (Liter!)

Eugen Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

THE BEST BATSHIT-CRAZY FUN WINES:

Meßmer Gelber Muskateller Feinherb

Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

Finally, the stories you heard are true; the crop is small. Most growers reported yields from 30% to as much as 50% below average. I think our Spring 2012 DI will be pretty thready unless the 2011s are early and copious. So please understand this isn't a vintage you can afford to "buy later." The smart money says to grab now and don't look back.

PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION IN THIS PORTFOLIO

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 around thirty, 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. 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.

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 Adam will be the next to ascend the lofty ranks of VDP-dom.

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.

HARD-CORE-LIST WINES

I like this idea and it was moderately successful in its first year. I mean, we sold Hexamer out of his Sauvignon Blanc, which felt pretty rad. But the 2010 vintage is very small, and growers have no incentive to concede on price. I'm still gonna offer a few things though. I need to draw attention to wines that just get lost otherwise.

Here's the basics for the hard-core program. I usually offer around 300 German wines per year, and of those we keep some 44 wines on the core-list. That leaves a lot of wine subject to the caprices of the DI system, where even my fulsome swollen tasting notes will often fail to entice buyers. Last Winter I drank a bunch of wine I'd bought from my growers, which I like to do because it's *drinking* like y'all do as opposed to "tasting" which is only a fraction of any wine's truth. While I drank the wines I got pissed off at how little of them we sold. I decided we

had to have a way to draw attention to the most *seriously wacked out wines* that would otherwise disappear into the maw of the pre-arrival offerings.

Thus the HARD-CORE list. It comprises a group of wines, not too many, which are so good they deserve special attention, but which may not be this good again next year (the core-list is about reliability) and which are in short supply (the core-list is about availability). We are going to *buy and stock* these wines, and when they're gone they're gone. They are the gnarliest of the gnarly, the apex of latex, the suppering monkeys of lackey imperialistic capitalism, the *best group of wines to which under normal circumstances you wouldn't pay attention*.

They'll be identified in the text. Here they are:

2010 Dr. Deinhard

Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter

2010 Messmer

Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb

2010 Geil

Silvaner Trocken

DADDY'S FUCKED UP TASTING NOTES

I've asked my colleagues to send me their favorite tasting notes they wrote while we traveled together. You'll see them in the text. I'm not sure what to make of my own notes any more. When I want to write about a wine I *want* to write paragraphs, or else nothing at all.

How, after all, do we write about flavor? The March, 2009 World Of Fine Wine had an essay on the subject, which made 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 deadly 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.

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 misspent 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...

The problem is, these notes have a specific set of purposes, either to help you choose what to buy (or to actively induce you to buy). Usually I'm just hoping to convey why the wine excited me. Sometimes a wine may seem ideal for a certain discrete use. In any case, I used to have days when I felt like *I'm writin' some good shit today*, but this year I almost actively discouraged that feeling. Because most of the time it shouldn't be about me, unless there's a light I can cast. As I write these words, I haven't read over a single note I took in the last four weeks. I wonder if they'll be as wanly self-effacing as I recall.

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.

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 (-1)**
Indicates sugar is discernibly absent but the wine is in balance.
- **MINUS TWO (-2)**
For lovers of austere wines.
- **ONE (1)**
Signifies barely discernable sweetness.
- **TWO (2)**
Signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive..
- **THREE (3)**
Signifies sweetness important of itself.
Remember, I reject any wine of grotesque or vulgar sugariness.
- **FOUR (4)**
is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!

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.

2010 Müller-Catoir Haardt Scheurebe Trocken // GMC-164	15
2010 Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken // 1.0 liter // GDD-050L	19
2009 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett // GDD-052	19
2010 Eugen Müller Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese Trocken // GEM-115	21
2010 Eugen Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb // GEM-117	21
2010 Eugen Müller Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese // 12/500ml // GEM-119H	22
2010 Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken // 1.0 liter // GMS-161L	24
2010 Messmer Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb // GMS-163	24
2009 Messmer Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb // GMS-157	25
2010 Messmer Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb // GMS-164	25
2008 Messmer Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese // GMS-150	25
2009 Minges Froschkönig Riesling Spätlese // GTM-136	27
2009 Darting Dürkheimer Steinberg Muskateller Spätlese Trocken // GDR-202	29
2009 Darting Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken // GDR-194	29
2009 Strub Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Feinherb "Roter Schiefer" // GST-157	35
2010 Geil Silvaner Trocken // GGE-047	42
2010 Geil Muskateller Trocken // GGE-048	42
2010 Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett // GGY-091	44
2010 Dönnhoff Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett // GDH-247	51
2010 Schneider Riesling Kabinett // 1.0 liter // GJS-096L	54
2010 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" // GHX-067	56

2010 Kruger-Rumpf "Schiefer" Riesling Feinherb	// GKF-159	59
2010 Schlossgut Diel Rosé de Diel	// 6/750ml // GSD-106	62
2010 Schlossgut Diel Pinot Noir "Caroline"	// 6/750ml // GSD-107	62
2010 Schlossgut Diel Dorsheim Riesling Trocken	// 6/750ml // GSD-109	62
2010 Schlossgut Diel Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs	// 6/750ml // GSD-115	62
2001 Schlossgut Diel Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese	// 6/750ml // GSD-117	63
2010 Leitz Rüdesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling "Terrassen"	// 6/750ml // GJL-184	67
2010 Leitz Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling "Hinterhaus"	// 6/750ml // GJL-185	68
2010 Spreitzer Riesling "101"	// GSP-070	71
2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett	// GSO-364	81
2010 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	// GSO-362	82
2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese	// GSO-365	82
2010 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett	// GME-174	90
2010 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese	// GME-178	90
2008 Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #7 #8	// GME-161	91
2008 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #16 #22	// GME-163	91
2008 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #21	// GME-164	91
2010 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	// GKE-133	99
2003 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese *	// GKE-135	99
2010 Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett	// GWS-186	101
2010 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett	// GWS-187	101
2010 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese	// GWS-190	101
2010 A.J. Adam Dhroner Riesling	// GAD-043	105
2010 A.J. Adam Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb	// GAD-041	105
2010 A.J. Adam Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Feinherb	// 6/750ml // GAD-045	105
2010 A.J. Adam Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett	// GAD-040	105
2010 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Riesling	// 1.0 liter // GRH-067L	107
2007 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett	// GSW-060	110
2010 von Othegraven "VO" Riesling	// GOG-022	114
2009 von Othegraven Bockstein Riesling Grosses Gewächs	// GOG-021	114

The Pfalz has completed a transformation. It is now a region for weighty, high-alcohol dry white wines (some Riesling, some Pinots, and far too much Sauv-Blanc), a token few “dessert” wines (or the occasional oversweet Spätlese), and a lot of reds, a few of them quite good, but all of them overpriced by the domestic demand.

I would like to explore the region. I like it, always have, and the portfolio would be enlivened by some eager young blood. But every estate with any pretension to “quality” has to twist itself into the prevailing formula. That is, a bunch of self-consciously “serious” dry whites (often named for the soil they come from), a similar queue of (often over-oaked) reds, and a token handful of sweeties. It’s a bit like Austria, except the Austrian Rieslings are more consistent, and her reds are less pretentious (and more sensibly priced).

There’s still a few holdouts from the old school. Let’s make all kinds of mischief and call it the “traditional” school; the Germans will despise that. But the trendiest estates see it as an either-or proposition: over-dry or oversweet, and so the whole thing is...overdone. Thus what used to be my favorite German wine region has sunk into a torpor; it’s 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 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*, much as I love selling under self-imposed pressure to *show you to the MOUNTAIN!*

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” Auslesen) and I want growers and their customers to be flexible and ecumenical and *honest* in their tastes.

It’s of course a bromide to observe that we all have different tastes. But we do. We have different tastes in cars, in food, in clothing, in every single thing on which we act based upon our taste. Yet somehow, in Germany, and especially in this region, *everyone has the same taste in wine*. Don’t you find this odd, even ominous? If taste were really the issue, wouldn’t you suppose there’d be at least a visible minority of people who didn’t like dry wines? Or who liked both styles??? It’s as if suddenly every single

person in Germany wore the same color shirt.

I’m a guy who sniffs for nuance. I was raised to mistrust the categorical. But the categorical insistence that all white wine must be dry creates a categorical response in me. And so, however at-odds it may be to my temperament to issue such a *pronunciamento*, it can’t be helped and has to be said. My friends in Germany, among whom I lived for many years, many of whom are among my most beloved friends, wake the fark up. *You do not* have an absolute monolithic taste for dry wine and only dry wine. You do not. You may think you do, but you don’t. Instead you do what you think is expected of you in order to be fashionable and acceptable. In so doing, you’re at risk of losing your connection to your true sensual preferences. Literally, you quite possibly don’t *know* what you like any more. You wear yellow because everyone wears yellow, and you get used to seeing yourself in yellow and you’re reassured you’re wearing the proper color. Five years from now when everyone’s wearing cobalt, you’ll realize you looked like shit in yellow.

But what if you look lousy in cobalt too? Maybe then you say “You know what, the hell with this; I’m gonna wear red because I like red and red’s my color. I look like the cat’s ass in red. And I don’t care what anyone thinks or how many people stare at me on the street. I believe in red!”

These days the newest darling in the Pfalz (and elsewhere) is Sauvignon Blanc. Most “serious” estates have it and feel they can’t do without it because it’s so trendy. Well hmmm. I think I might just have an opinion about that. First, many of the wines are pretty good, and a few are very good. And the world *does not need* them. Maybe if some clown at EU is bored one night he can issue a decree that for every Sauvignon Blanc vine planted in Germany a Riesling vine has to be planted in Pouilly-Fumé. Stir things up some. But what’s really sad is the gesture of self-loathing the German wine consumer is making. Over-strong language? You do know, right, that they already have a vine giving very similar flavors to those of Sauv-Blanc; many would say quite a bit better. This vine is native and has been in the ground since around 1916. Unlike Sauv-B it gives many different kinds of wines, including magnificent sweet and even dessert wines – and its recent dry wines

are at least as good as those of the imported arriviste. It is, of course, *Scheurebe*. And it is so damn sad to see the Germans squander the opportunity to stand *proudly* behind that which is *uniquely* theirs, instead of running behind the parade saying “We can do that too.”

I suggested to several growers they gave their wines

the name “Scheu-vignon Blanc.” Somehow I was taken frivolously.

And don’t you go fussing at me if you see a couple Sauvys in this offering. I said the wines could be good. I’m not gonna boycott them. I raise the point at all to show how oddly blind this culture can be to its native treasures.

What is a Palate?

A chapter of my book is devoted to this very question, in general terms, but the salient issue here is to describe what *my* palate is, since you ought to know what I like and why.

In fact I think there should be some sort of law that anyone who writes about wine should be able and willing to describe his/her palate, what it likes, what it recoils from, what it’s sensitive or insensitive to. I don’t believe the reader should need to infer these things. That’s unreasonable and even discourteous.

Perhaps we don’t perceive this need because we’re still chasing the romantic fallacy of “objectivity.” This capacity is not present in any human being I know, when confronted by an aesthetic object. Yes, there are certain facets of wine objectively present – degree of fragrance, for instance. We’d all agree, objectively, that Muscat’s a big ol’ shitload of scent. But I might love it while the next guy loathes it. He either recuses himself from writing about Muscat because it makes his stomach heave, or he tries feebly to be “objective” and produces flaccid useless prose, or he says what he feels and you conclude that Muscat is a yucky sort of thing. Because you’re stuck chasing the chimera of objectivity.

It’s fine to ask our writers to be as *impartial* as they can. It is fine to demand they surmount their natural preferences when appropriate. I think it’s imperative to want writers to be mature enough (and keen enough in their judgment) to know where their subjective palates take over. The line exists in every taster, but not every taster knows where it is. And this is because too few of us ask the question *what is the nature of my particular palate*.

Thus I advocate, not objectivity, but a consistent, visible and informed subjectivity. It is all you can ask of a person.

I do believe there are larger truths – or Truths – about wine, and we can make value judgments about them and argue all night – civilly I hope. But when it comes to scents and flavors of individual

wines, I am much less sure. Here’s a blatant example. One thing I know about my own palate is that it grows over-sensitive to tannin if I have tasted a bunch of young astringent whites. If colleagues are present I’ll always ask them “Does this wine strike you as extremely tannic?” and when they answer no, I’ll know it’s just me. Alone, I’ll suspect it’s just me. I’ve started to taste the red wines first for just this reason. So this “palate,” this part of ourselves that we *use* to apprehend wine, shouldn’t we begin by knowing it, and shouldn’t we share what we know with our readers? I mean, just to be minimally *useful* to them?

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.

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.

Müller-Catoir

Pfalz // Haardt

Pfalz

Müller-Catoir



vineyard area // 21 hectares
annual production // 12,500 cases
top sites & soil types // Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog (sandstone);
Haardter Herrenletten (loam, limestone); Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten (loess);
Mußbacher Eselshaut (gravel)
grape varieties // 60% Riesling, 10% Weissburgunder, 5% Grauburgunder,
5% Muskateller, 5% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 5% Spätburgunder

This estate keeps falling in the most influential German wine guides. One of them demoted it by one unit-of-ranking, despite having given “scores” in the mid-to-high 90s for several of the 2009 dessert wines. I wondered at this, and then understood.

The taster(s) for Pfalz estates are judging based on the dry wines, and the currently prevailing cliché about Martin Franzen’s Trockens are that he is from the Mosel and thus his wines are too gauzy. The Pfalz wants a brass knucks punch, I guess. Me, I don’t find Martin’s dry wines at all lacking, in substance or weight or clarity or anything. But I also perceive that I myself do not evaluate a German estate based on its dry wines. To me they are peripheral. I hope to like them, I often do like them, I select loads of them to offer you, but they’re not central. So I look at Catoir’s wines in the last 5-6 vintages and it seems the German wine guides have their tongues in their mouths backwards.

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 bold-faced lie – but they’ve got time to prosecute an honest grower who wants his customers to know where the wine came from. This year there seems to be room for at least a scintilla of optimism, as I was told the EU would be more tolerant of these micro-parcel bottlings when its law superceded the German wine law. We’ll see. These are the same

feckless assholes who forced French *Fromagers* to wrap their cheeses in plastic.

Meanwhile, nothing among these ‘10s prompts me to change my mind; Catoir remains at the very least *among* the elite estates in the Pfalz, and all of Germany.

Müller-Catoir at a glance // Maybe 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.

The Dry Wines

2010 "M-C" Riesling Trocken

GMC-162

SOS : 0

I held this back for three hours and tasted it after the TBA (!), and it shone. Fortright Pfalz ginger and pineapple fruit aromas; *dry* yet almost chubby – call it “dimpled” – on the palate, but with the tautly pulled acids of '10. Riesling in-balance but on a palate-scraping frequency.

2010 Gimmeldingen Riesling Trocken

GMC-163

SOS : 0

Leif Sundström notes:

“A nose that’s full on psychadelia (but truly so – way more Terry Riley than Grateful Dead) - lime chalk, orange zest, rhubarb plant, lily, lemon blossom, wisteria. So knit, even, and expressive; charming yet seductive. Rolling tangibility, no volatility. The mid-palate is graciously soft, round, floral. Some jadelpurple tones - jewels weathered under new river light. Palate grows creamier, evermore floral with orange hues emerging, fluttering dove feathers, tarragon tones, high frequency drones amongst bass half notes, lingering with natural eternal cathedral reverb.”

In effect a “village wine” à la Burgundy. Often my favorite, as the sandy soils give a garrigue-y untamed flavor that I like. This '10 is smooth – almost. It has a swollen yet granular fruit, like smoked hay. Rich fruit but almost peppery, singed, like a birch fire, yet the mouthfeel is nearly creamy. Franzen’s Rieslings often change markedly in their first 1-2 years, so this may yet have more to reveal.

2010 Herrenletten Riesling Trocken

GMC-166

SOS : 0 // +

A named site but not a Grand Cru, though it could be. It was the most backward among the site-wines but also showed the most substance and the richest reserves; yellow fruits in a powder sprinkled over stones and tortilla chips (!), iron filings and mizuna and buckwheat rusks – yup, sounds insane. But either it’s insane or I am, and I’m not, at least at this moment. The wine is gorgeously wacked out.

2010 Breumel in den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GMC-167

SOS : 0 // ++

Valerie Masten writes:

“Martin, when describing this parcel in the Burgergarten, said the soil composition was almost perfect and the parcel ‘more alive’ than the rest of the vineyard. I am reminded of beach visits with my family in early spring, to the North Carolina coast, cool breezes pass over oyster shells and river pebbles and wildly growing rosemary. This high mass of a riesling is sure in its mystery: it shows itself, but yet its presence is not quite definable.”

This is what is meant by Grand Cru. It’s overwhelmed by an ancient stony mass – it is the earth *performing* a high mass, the wine transubstantiates the innermost body, the viscera and the muscle of the world. A big cold splash of mint and stones and garrigue and ginger and lemon zest and salts – oh, forget it. We’ll never understand it. We can only stand before it, mute and grateful.

2010 Haardt Scheurebe Trocken

GMC-164

SOS : 1 // ++ // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

A relative gentleman, this Scheu, in a conservative grey suit but with a green polka-dot tie. Woodruff and subtle cassis and marjoram; focused and digital, refined, the reduction of tropical fruit to...what? To a ceremony of the roots, and to the black magma in which they live. I have a sense this could explode with extravagant spice and esoterica – live its wicca-life – so don’t assume this will be “subtle” forever. But I guarantee you, this is in *every way* more interesting, finer, better than the novelties you’re sourcing from those corners in Malta or Gibraltar or wherever.

2010 Haardt Muskateller Trocken

GMC-165

SOS : 0

This year it is pure elemental light Muscat, perfect in its way; the aperitif of your dreams. Save the Champagne for your lobster.

Wines That Are Not Dry

2010 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett

GMC-161

SOS : 2 // +

SOLD OUT. Bless them for still making this; Schildknecht describes the genre as “nearly extinct.” Peaches and limes and limes and peaches. Redcurrant. Seems a bit drier than usual, and greener than usual yet every bit as toe-curlingly pretty as ever, and with a larger, more searching finish that melts down from tarragon to wintergreen. Not profound, but playful and irresistible.

2010 Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese

GMC-168

SOS : 2 // + (+)

An absurdly expressive and brilliant wine, yet also keenly searching and inscrutable; it hypnotizes your palate. As always the warm smoky hay, salts, buttery pan-cooked leeks; in a sense this is *all there* – but is it? The twitching hyper-dynamism and thick custardy finish suggests otherwise.

2010 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Auslese

6/375ml // GMC-169H

SOS : 3

Hard tasting the sweet Scheus, which hadn't received their first SO₂ and still showed volatile. This is an old-school massive botrytis Auslese, but the mass justifies the botrytis (whereas I was unconvinced by a Spätlese); it's ludicrously spicy and like a potion of malt, shrimp stock, pineapple, nutmeg; it's a tangy wine, sweet and sour in a ringent standoff; very long, yet less “fruity” than the lighter Spätlese.

2010 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner Auslese

6/375ml // GMC-170H

SOS : 2? 3? // ++

What to say any more? Edenic primary fruit, massive acidity, gigantic yet invisible sweetness, a swollen mass of... swollen mass. It drinks *itself* and pisses you out. Drink it young (3-5 years) as long as you accept the claws of acidity.

2009 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner Auslese

6/375ml // GMC-158H

SOS : 2 (now-25 years) // ++

Here begins as singular and remarkable a trio of wines as I have ever tasted. It starts again with eucalyptus, stronger; the whole wine is stronger than the Spät, but not really sweeter-seeming, rather more solid and salty, and considerably more intense, with obdurate length; incomparable parameters of flavor and structure; paranormal vinosity.

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 Hans-Günter 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 . . .

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 *growers* don't like, as the yields are mingy).

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

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

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why? 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 Müller-Catoir. 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

2010 Müller-Catoir Haardt Scheurebe Trocken	//	GMC-164	.....	15
2010 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Auslese	//	6/375ml	// GMC-169H	16
2009 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett	//	GDD-052	.....	19
2010 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese	//	GTM-141	.....	27
2010 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese	//	GDR-207	.....	29
2010 Geil Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz Scheurebe Kabinett	//	GGE-046	.....	42
2010 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken	//	1.0 liter	// GGY-090L	44
2010 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese	//	GKF-160	.....	60
2009 Schlossgut Diel Scheurebe Spätlese	//	6/750ml	// GSD-101	63



vineyard area // 40 hectares annual production // 23,000 cases
 top sites & soil types // Deidesheim Mäushöhle and Paradiesgarten (loess, loam, red sandstone); Ruppertsberg Reiterpfad (sandy loam, red sandstone, marl-lime); Deidesheim Grainhübel, Langenmorgen GG and Kieselberg GG (loam, red sandstone, limestone); Forst Ungeheuer (loess, loam, sandstone, basalt); Deidesheim Kalkofen GG (limestone, marl, loam); Forst Kirchenstück GG (sandy loam, red sandstone, basalt)
 grape varieties // Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Weißer Burgunder, Chardonnay, Grauer Burgunder, Pinot Noir, Muskateller, Scheurebe, Gewürztraminer

The manic energy hasn't abated. But this year we received a list and had an overview of what was made. That said, I still had no idea they make a Muskateller until I read a review of it somewhere. Grrrr.

Stefan Attmann is the genial culprit.

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 Scherezadelike 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 prestige-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 has a sweet new restaurant, and work proceeds on the hotel-restaurant and the private guestroom they plan to add for the "VIP" visitor (like you, precious! I'm just happy to sleep standing up in the barn...).

There is cause for controversy, as Stefan has bought new casks – not barriques, but 1000-liter Stücks - and he's using them for his dry Rieslings without having steamed away any wood flavor. In theory I have mixed feelings about this. In the glass the wines are mostly outstanding, with only

a couple showing obtrusively woody notes. That said, I'd feel better if Stefan moved away from the notion of marked-woody flavors as signifying seriousness, let alone greatness.

For it's great wine he wants to make. At one point he said to me, "There's no point in working this hard if you're not going all out to make *great* wine. Good wine isn't enough."

And that makes perfect sense. The question arises, what is his *idea* of great wine, what are his paradigms and templates? At one point he told me he loved the likes of Dönnhoff or Egon Müller as much as any wine lover does, but in the Pfalz the wines should be more ruggedly powerful. Thus he eschews cold fermentations in order to avoid amylic aromas. He doesn't want "fruity," he wants manly. The results are so singular they can hardly be tasted aside other Pfalz wines but by themselves as almost their own genre.

I'll hazard a guess that Attmann looks to White Burgundy as his beacon. Not to oak as such, nor to a creamy texture, but rather to the patrician dignity of great old-school examples. Tasting his GGs in a row I found myself dreaming I was tasting 4 Grand Cru Chablis from a single grower.

The rise to fame has been rapid, and predictable. The best wines sell out before they're bottled. The guides bestow the appropriate rankings and accolades. And I am greatly curious how the local critics will feel about the 2010s. You will note I am offering an amazing quartet of GGs and also a tasty basic Liter Riesling H-T – and thereafter am repeating back-vintages. I may very well be wrong – I expect I am, in fact – but I felt it was only the elite dry Rieslings that had

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.

the majesty to support the gravelly concentration and acid torque of '10.

We're getting homeopathic amounts of them. Stefan and I want them shown, want them on the market, and I do

think they are among Riesling's most singular statements. We're selling them in 6-packs so you can buy all four, which I recommend in order to really understand this amazing new/old estate.

2010 von Winning Langenmorgen Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDD-055

SOS : 0 // +

A small and thus relatively unheralded Cru of Deidesheim; it reminds me of Leitz's Kaisersteinfels, light-footed, mineral-driven, hedge-flowery, a little casky, balsam fir notes; a near-perfection of stone-riven Riesling, and certainly tilts the palate toward Chablis. Lissome in light of its mass, with a mineral wash in the finish.

2010 von Winning Kieselberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDD-057

SOS : 0 // + (+)

Again the more feminine face of Deidesheim; it has wonderfully detailed high-toned aromas, roasted corn, allspice, cask; a direct attack, sleek yet with mass; spice and vetiver, just short of eucalyptus, quinoa and uncooked bacon.

2010 von Winning Kirchenstück Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDD-058

SOS : 0 // ++

From a parcel they bought from my friends Eugen Müller, and one which many believe to be hors classe in the Pfalz. This one's almost astonishing, a wine both deep and brilliant, like a tall tree with deep roots; sensational cherry, blackberry and quetsch aromas; this crazy-ass wine is like a cross of Boxler's Brand and a Corton-Charlie of Coche-Dury in its massively rich sweet-hay and keen minty faux-sweetness. Utterly original, crazily expressive.

2010 von Winning Kalkofen Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDD-056

SOS : 0 // +

Back to Deidesheim, but this "chalk-oven" is far from demure. It's the easiest wine in the sequence to grasp; it's about corn. Roasted, pureed, fried into chips; it's big, generous and casky, enveloping and comes right at you. Only a slight asperity in the finish precludes a second plus.

2010 Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

1.0 liter // GDD-050L

SOS : 1 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

A fine, easy, dry Riesling, or so you think. Aromas of plum tart (with a killer crust) and a juicy, almost buttery palate; 5-spice, tonka bean, key lime – this may be the best liter wine I've ever shipped. Drink it at cool room temp to see just how good it is.

2009 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett

GDD-051

SOS : 2 (4-15 years)

First offering. Lavish, exotic and spicy, almost doesn't smell like Riesling; has the sweetness of corn and the tartness of lemon; it's hugely expressive and seems to throb with flavor; quite the parfait of freesia and peach blossom. So original I'm not sure just what to make of it.

2009 Scheurebe Kabinett

GDD-052

SOS : 1 (now - 9 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT! VERY LIMITED!

First offering. A concentrate, like lamb cooked sous-vide with a lavender gelée, but amazing here is the core-palate; really uncivil sage aromas into a grapefruity palate and a cassis finish, an around-the-world journey of Scheu without the elderflower or passion fruit. A *serious* invitation to the Scheu-lover, waves of fennel-frond, a demand you not miss it!

2008 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese

GDD-054

SOS : 3 // +

First offering. A refined and highly complex fragrance, not a dessert-wine aroma at all. Plum blossom and meringue and hyacinth; the calm, cool lapidary quality of '08 – at least the best '08; a cool raspberry tartness makes for a wonderfully drinkable "Auslese," with iron grip, and elements of mint and tea.

Eugen Müller

Pfalz // Forst



vineyard area // 17 hectares annual production // 14,000 cases
top sites & soil types // **Forster Kirchenstück** (limestone, sandy loam, basalt); **Forster Jesuitengarten** (sandstone, sandy loam, basalt); **Forster Ungeheuer** (sandstone, gravel, basalt); **Forster Pechstein** (basalt); **Forster Freundstück** (sandstone, gravel, limestone)
grape varieties // 80% Riesling, 10% Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, 10% red varieties mostly Spätburgunder

I spent some of the last Winter drinking Müller's 2008 Trockens, just to ensure I made sustainable claims for them. I was not disappointed.

The estate remains below the trendiness radar – there are bigger “names” in Forst. But I like these forthright honest people, and their wines are excellent values just like they themselves are.

With Müller you can really see the impact of exceptional land.

Allow me a small rant. Admit it, it's entertaining when I rant! My pants are full of rants...O.K., 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

Eugen 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 harbingers of a change, as they are more “modern,” clear and bright.*

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.

2010 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese Trocken

GEM-115

SOS : 0 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Wonderful aromas! Brown bread, maple, spice cake, all leading to an immensely satisfying palate with a soy and veal-stock umami, into a stony finish – quite the journey. The tertiary finish is like warm rain-soaked forest. I'm gonna drink the very ass off this wine.

2010 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Cyriakus"

GEM-116

SOS : -1

Cyriakus being the primo micro-parcel within the already supernal Kirchenstück. The wine is the inverse of the Ungeheuer; all an inner heat of terroir, a magma-flow of ancient stones; it's a harder wine, a Riesling-lover's Riesling; ridiculously long and the funky iris note on the deep finish will emerge onto the main palate with 2-3 years in bottle.

2010 Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

GEM-117

SOS : 1 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Ultimate Pfalz insiders often cite Pechstein as their favorite vineyard. I wouldn't demur. And this again is a virtually perfect food-wine, just like the '09 was. If anything this one's even juicier and more apple – but all the facets of apple: as-is, sautéed in butter, chips, in a cake with cinnamon, and with all the classic vineyard wisteria notes, along with roasted beets with a drizzle of smoked salt.

2010 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett

GEM-118

SOS : 1 // +

Here's what Valerie Masten had to say:

"Savory and intensely mineral, tangerine and juicy clementine seem at ease with olive and water chesnut..And then pear rolls in, taking over, green anjou pear, pear skin, and red bartlett flesh."

CORE LIST WINE. This is actually also Pechstein, which is part of the Grosslage "Mariengarten," which Müller's private customers respect as a Brand, so I acquiesced. The wine is beautiful, a perfection of the flowery side of Pechstein; you drink the garden in luscious gulps, but it's mitigated by a tart plumminess, and finishes like a salted parfait of cherry blossom.

2009 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese

GEM-109

SOS : 2 (7-18 years)

A great foamy wave of aroma leads to a palate that's more elegant than usual, which one doesn't anticipate from the '09s. Caramel and suave, it recalls a Bürklin wine of the 70s and 80s in its forthright, deliberate and warm-blooded murmur of Riesling class.

2010 Gewürztraminer Spätlese

GEM-113

SOS : 1 // +

The 09 was, to my delighted shock, perhaps the best German Gewürz I'd ever tasted, and this baby ain't far behind; it's denser and less transparent, but equally fine and just as varietally true; utter lychee, and with superbly calibrated RS; violets and cherry wood smoke; neither bitter nor as mawkishly sweet as many in Alsace.

2010 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese
SOS : 2 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

12/500ml // GEM-119H

Leif Sunderström notes:

"Wonderful high toned fruit, flying high, lemon blossomy, energetic palate that renders high toned citrus, some mango and pineapple, all with concerted sweetness due to the intensely energetic high toned acidity. This is drinkable Auslese and quite stratified, with tons of mineral essence and saltiness here. Finishing clean, cool and pure. Ghostly fresh breath."

Perilously close to 3-plus territory, and also keenly close – disorientingly so – to a Dönnhoff wine, like some amalgam of Dellchen, Kirchenstück and Hermannshöhle; about as juicy and salty and writhingly sexy as Riesling ever gets, with mint and sencha and cherry; seriously wonderful and possibly great wine. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

2008 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling BA

12/375ml // GEM-112H

SOS : 3 (10-28 years) // ++ (+)

A slim, slippery masterpiece; studious, spicy, pure...I know this isn't the language that "sells" such wines. I can only say you lift the glass 20 times and have 50 thoughts, impressions and emotions. It's lamb-y somehow, as if it was grilled over lilac shoots and secreted its own mint. A thrall of detailed ripeness; you have to expand yourself to taste it, physically, and to get it sensually. Price is laughable for such a wine. Go on, do it.

2007 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling BA

12/375ml // GEM-097H

SOS : 3 (10-30 years) // +

For what is plain-and-simple a steal. Each time Müller makes this wine it's a quintessence of this great Cru without overt sweetness, but endlessly and firmly rich, porcini-rich, milk chocolate rich, old Beaufort rich, Amontillado rich. Where are the buyers for such a self-evidently useful and compelling wine??



Herbert Meßmer

Pfalz // Burrweiler

vineyard area // 25 hectares
annual production // 26,700 cases
top sites & soil types // Burrweiler Schäwer and Weyhrer Michelsberg (slate);
Burrweiler Schloßgarten (loam, limestone); Burrweiler Altenforst (sandstone)
grape varieties // Riesling, Grauburgunder, Weißburgunder, Gewürztraminer,
Muskateller, Spätburgunder, St. Laurent



Gregor Meßmer will initiate biodynamic viticulture starting with vintage '11. "I'm the sort of man who deliberates a long time, but once I decide I implement immediately," he says. So let's watch and see what happens. The transition, as you know, is the hard part.

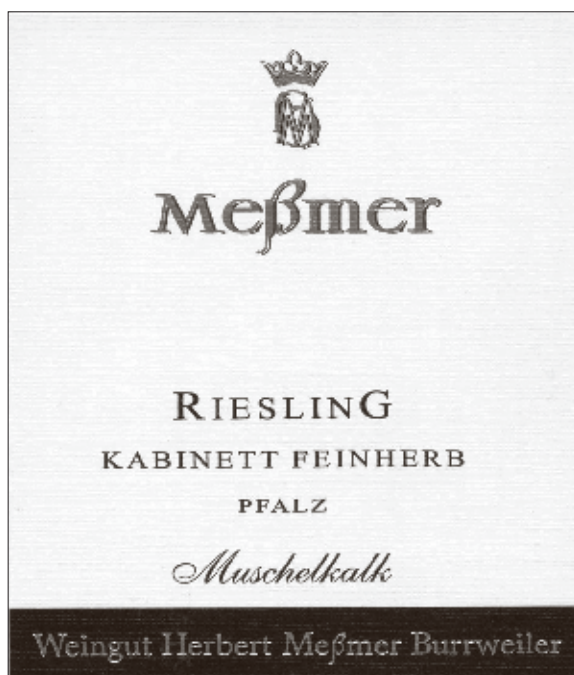
Not that I doubt he'll see it through. Gregor is maybe the least feckless man I know. And his '10s mark a comeback after a decent but not thrilling vintage in '09.

Meßmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

"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."



Herbert 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.

2010 Riesling Halbtrocken

1.0 liter // GMS-161L

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Meßmer was the 5th place I tasted, and I was starting to get a sense of the new vintage. As expected, this was denser and punchier, thicker and drier-seeming than the softer more pliantly elegant '09. These '10s can really throw a punch. This is the best rendition of this wine in at least ten years.

2009 Pinot Noir

1.0 liter // GMS-159L

SOS : n/a

I love how you're supporting this. I think it's seriously cool. Yet I sensed a teensy flicker of dismay cross Gregor's face, because he buys some of the fruit for this wine, and while it's laudable of its type and echelon, he doesn't want to be identified solely with it. That said, this '09 is richer and warmer than the '08 was, and you'll like it more if you prefer a more overtly ripe style. However, keep reading, because what's *really* interesting is coming right up...

2009 Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GMS-160

SOS : n/a // + (+)

This is among the most Burgundian PNs I've tasted from Germany. They're usually either lighter or they over-compensate by being oakier, but this has classic blackberry and sandalwood aromas, quite rich and dense; the palate is a parade of spice and length and depth – *that's* what tells here, the middle, the evening-long unfolding of history and nuance, the dark sweetness of loss and joy. The wine has gravitas and yet the up-front fruit sweetness; I find it meditative yet also thrilling in some way. It's always lovely when someone achieves such a thing with Pinot Noir.

2010 Weyherer Michelsberg Riesling Trocken

GMS-162

SOS : 0 // +

This might be labeled "Spätlese Trocken;" it was unclear at time of writing. And if you're paying attention you will notice it was the GG the last two years. It's the very same wine now, only less expensive, available earlier and in a lighter-weight bottle. You pay for the wine and not the frou-frou. "I wanted to have just one Riesling GG," said Gregor, "and that should be the Schäwer."

The wine is exceptional. A fragrant fruit-bomb, mirabelle and quince; it's dry but nearly luscious, with a huge long finish. Dry Riesling with almost gushing charm.

2010 Schäwer Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GMS-166

SOS : 0 // +

This has the sheer mass to justify its dryness – it's that simple. Rugged smoky curranty fragrance and a lovely salty wash of clinging mineral that doesn't let up; finish of leaf-smoke, licorice and blackberries; a long Riesling full of character that billows and expands into a swollen chord of fruit and pure terroir.

2008 Weissburgunder Grosses Gewächs "Im Goldenen Jost"

6/750ml // GMS-148

SOS : 0 // +

With bottle age, a nuance of barrique peeks over the baby fruit. Otherwise the wine is salty, graceful and focused.

2010 Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

GMS-163

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. It means fossil-bearing limestone, and whenever you find it you find a spicy tangy Riesling that's oblique to fruits or flowers. As expected, the '10 density wipes away any sense of tartness or austerity. (Times like this I love this work!) A little phenolically nubby, but vivid and complex and a perfect restaurant Riesling, with charm and length both up the ying-yang and out the wazoo.

But it's the classic one-at-a-time wine. It doesn't "show" well unless the lineup is smallish and the sequence calibrated. A spice-driven Riesling that's more zingy than voluptuous reveals itself at the table, not in the tasting room.

2009 Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

GMS-157

SOS : 0 (now-8 years) // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. The more refined and compact of two options, though you could argue it's less sexy, but I'm certainly aroused enough by its polish and clarity. It's an elegant, classy dry Riesling, with good length, shot through with rock-powder.

2010 Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb

GMS-164

SOS : 0 (now-8 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This is about as fun as wine can get, from the toe-curlingly euphoric aromas to the rich yet zingy palate, with an almost Riesling minerality and absurd length. It's drier than usual, and so gorgeously direct you want to chug it – but it's so concentrated it won't let you.

2008 Burrweiler Schärer Riesling Spätlese

GMS-150

SOS : 1 (6-18 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

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 feinherb.

2010 Burrweiler Schärer Riesling Spätlese

GMS-165

SOS : 2

This was unfinished when I tasted it, but the raw material is compelling, enough to let it be offered if/when the '08 sells out.

2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese

GMS-149

SOS : 2 (now-5 years) // +

This has come along beautifully, with the winsome structure and polish of '08; a classic fragrance of roses, incense and violets; graceful and slippery on the palate; no hint of finishing bitterness. *This* is how it's done.

2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Spätlese

GMS-151

SOS : 2 (now-12 years) // + + +

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.

2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Auslese

12/500ml // GMS-152H

SOS : 3 (1-15 years) // + + +

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. 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.

Gewürztraminer Trester

6/375ml // GMS-167H

SOS : n/a**Valerie Masten writes:**

"Gregor Messmer has 6 hectares of Gewürztraminer planted on a slate-y parcel in the Burrweiler Altenforst vineyard, which with a mountain spring source in the forest above the vineyards he uses to make grappa. Subtle parfum of soft flower petals- peonies and rosehip, and rose water... I'm reminded of strolls through the Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella, in Florence. With lemon zest, candied blood orange, and candied ginger...crystalline ginger. The fruit is lurking under all those flowers, and slowly and steadily begins to show itself, like the hills across the Rhein valley on a hazy day. With white tea and orange blossom, and a silky texture that the alcohol seems to disappear in."

Theo Minges

Pfalz // Flemlingen



vineyard area // 24 hectares
annual production // 16,700 cases
top sites & soil types // Flemlinger Zechpeter and Burrweiler Schlossgarten (loess-loam); Gleisweiler Höhle (sandstone, limestone)
grape varieties // Riesling, Scheurebe, Muskateller, Gewürztraminer, Grauburgunder, Spätburgunder

Theo's now in year-2 of transition to organics. Wish him well. I think it's a logical outgrowth of the way he's always responded to his vines.

Not surprisingly, all of Minges' 2010s were still on their *gross* lees. I think if the Buddhists are right about reincarnation, then Li Po has returned as Theo Minges, to make wine. His cellar is like some timeless sanctuary, where the wines meander their way to wherever it is they settle on going.

I visited on a Saturday, again. 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.

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

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 ten 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.

2010 Riesling Halbtrocken

1.0 liter // GTM-137L

SOS : 0

There's no other Liter Riesling because the crop was too small. This is a lively greeny sort of wine, all lime and wintergreen and aloe vera; as always with '10 it seems drier than usual but actually isn't. The vintage crams all its wines with juju and vinosity, but you'll need a tolerance for acidity with this one.

2010 Buntsandstein Riesling Spätlese Trocken

GTM-139

SOS : 0

This reminds me of Alzinger's Hörereck mixed with a jasminey Blanc de Blancs Champagne and meyer-lemon powder; the palate is charmingly plump and dimpled, salty tangy and focused. After bottling I expect a more streamlined jasmine/vanilla wine, but this puddingy yeast phase is awfully pretty.

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

how the wines taste // *Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors.*

2010 Muskateller Kabinett Trocken

GTM-138

SOS : 0

This is the out-of-control sibling of Gregor Meßmer's refined and well behaved kid. It's happily blatant, gooseberry and grapefruit, a minty gulper that simply brings the giggles. The vineyard, by the way, is under the full control of Theo's daughter Regina, who takes great pride in her fierce little Muscats.

2010 Gewürztraminer Kabinett Trocken

GTM-140

SOS : 0

If you want a truly dry Gewürz, almost delicate, with lychee and banana and sesame and not a lot of alcohol, but with a ton of substance and absolutely no bitterness, such as you rarely find any more across the border in Alsace – well here it is.

2009 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett

GTM-132

SOS : 1 (4-13 years)

Electric, buzzing neon Riesling; has cut and a jabbing precision. Exciting wine; talc, mint, cherry...

2009 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese

GTM-133

SOS : 2 (7-20 years) // +

CORE-LIST WINE, and probably the best core-list wine in this offering; "Tastes more like a Nahe wine, yeah?" said Theo, and the noble fruit embedded in the midpalate made his case for him; mirabelle, lemon-candy Auslese tones, sweet rhubarb, the wine is superb.

2009 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Spätlese

GTM-135

SOS : 2 (now-16 years) // +

A rarity in '09, and a shatteringly good wine in every sense, Rieslaner at its most exotic and implacable; salty banana candy but with mentholated high notes you cut with a knife, and the wine is the knife.

2010 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese

GTM-141

SOS : 2

25hl/ha in this stingiest of vintages, but the wine is rockin! A hint of botrytis, smoky and cassis-y, even less evolved than the Rieslings; it has the curranty sizzle of his Scheus, but let's see where the botrytis goes after sulfuring, filtration and bottling.

2009 Riesling Spätlese "Froschkönig"

GTM-136

SOS : 1 (6-18 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

First offering, and this is tremendous, 2009 at its best. And I'm so glad Theo wants to continue doing this, as it makes absolute sense for his particular soul, and it's a cousin to Selbach's *en-bloc* trilogy. Fragrances of toasted grain, meadow-flowers, brown butter, chamomile; the loveliest interplay of density, clarity and minerality; a chanterelle-y delicate earthiness, and a *perfect* food wine.

Valerie Masten was also transported, and wrote:

"I really sympathized with this wine, feeling wild like its origins, a wild herbivore munching on greens...except mine were the leaves of a kaffir lime tree, and tea leaf, and chamomile blossom. And clove, with its brittle bark-i-ness and exotic spiciness, I envision in the vineyard's home, a parcel of the Gleisweiler Hölle cut by wet stones tumbling in streams, sandstones and limestone. Energetic and lively like the frog it takes its name from, and pink grapefruit skin."

2007 Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel"

12/500ml // GTM-142H

SOS : 2 // ++

This is the wine I alluded to last year, picked later than the Froschkönig but vinified – or *not* vinified – in the same way. It was bottled in mid-2010, so it's the **FIRST OFFERING**. It's a monument of Riesling, rich and baroque; acacia-blossom and mirabelle, delicately honeyed, all golden and afterglowy; somehow it's exotic and almost confiture yet none too sweet. It has the maple-cured smokiness of '07. It's a glory of Riesling!

Kurt Darting

Pfalz // Bad-Dürkheim



vineyard area // 25 hectares
annual production // 20,800 cases
top sites & soil types // Spielberg and Herrenberg (limestone-marl);
Hochbenn (sandy loam)
grape varieties // Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Muskateller, Scheurebe,
Burgundersorten, Rieslaner, Pinot Noir, Pinot Menuier, St. Laurent, Dornfelder

I think Darting has become what I'd call a paradigm of a responsibly commercial winery. The wines are always excellent values and deliver more flavor than one's led to anticipate. They are full of tangy Pfalz charm; they are remarkably useful, and you get the feeling they arrive on your table wanting to help.

There are in effect two tiers of quality, by dint of the parcels in two Crus called Spielberg and Michelsberg, which are mostly worked by hand and which give concentrated, complex wines. But even the least of the family's wines are addictively drinkable and full of forthright charm.

When I first visited Dartings in 1992 the estate was smaller, and the wines seemed like mini-Catoirs. Helmut Darting had apprenticed with Hans-Günter Schwarz, made friends and gotten religion. I suspect if he'd had a ten-hectare estate in Deidesheim or Forst, he'd have gone all out for elite quality. He knows how. But business pulled in another direction, with the result that we get to observe the best facet of commercialism, wines we can drink and snuggle up to and still respect ourselves – if of

course we ever did.

The 2010s are as always varietally scrupulous and like all 2010s, exceptionally concentrated. The estate's been on something of a roll lately, after a few spotty vintages in the early part of the decade – where, in fairness, much of the Pfalz was challenged.

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.

2009 Pinot Meunier

GDR-201

SOS : n/a

Is this Helmut's best-ever red? It's the best I've tasted, at any rate. Wonderfully rich and with ripe physio-sweetness, cherry and blackberry and cherry-wood smoke and cherry tobacco. A delight in its sheer beaming directness, though it's far from simple and also shows some length, leading to a casky-smoky finish.

2009 Pinot Noir

GDR-200

SOS : n/a

I remain unable to explain how a wine with 14% alcohol can still taste so light. This is a juicy, tidy Pinot. It's not the Nth-degree of amazement but it's got that Old World coolness, and the finish starts with a woody char and then yields to a nice pure fruit.

Darting at a glance // The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made reductively brilliant wines..

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.

2010 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken

1.0 liter // GDR-203L

SOS : 0

My colleague Valerie Masten ID'd a GrüVe touch, nailing it. More vinous and herbal, and thicker than this usually is. It also seems drier though it isn't. Extra class this year. The slogan ought to be "Improve the dreck you drink on your deck." Because this is the archetypal knock-it-back focking-yum wine.

2010 Dürkheimer Spielberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken

GDR-205

SOS : 0

Spicy iris and coriander; classic Pfalz violets and garrigue; the palate is lamby, subtly stony, saline and almost oystery on the ludicrously long finale.

2009 Dürkheimer Steinberg Muskateller Spätlese Trocken

GDR-202

SOS : 0 (now-8 years) // SOMMELIER ALERT!

First offering of a late-bottled wine, and it's a wonderful juicy Muscat that has some attitude; this dude wants to be taken seriously and be seen as more than just catty and direct – and it is. If Muscat can ever be elegant, it's like this one.

2009 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

GDR-194

SOS : 1 (now-9 years) // SOMMELIER ALERT!

A lovely, fluffy salty Riesling with ideal balance, juicily dry; heirloom-apple and white nectarine aromas become an internal fruit below a chalky texture, nubby and juicy at the same time. Whatever great "food-wine" might be, it's gotta be just like this.

2010 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewürztraminer Kabinett

GDR-198

SOS : 1

As usual, delicate, moderate and varietally true, even to the prototypically bitter finish, though with its essential dense vinosity there's a mass of general wine flavor that doesn't alight on the particular grape.

2010 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett

1.0 liter // GDR-204L

SOS : 1

CORE-LIST WINE. Lots of clone-90 citricity – which Helmut says emerges more in wetter years – plus passion fruit, dried apricot, freesia and plantains; exotic and salty and dense.

2010 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett

GDR-199

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. I resisted writing a tasting note. It tastes like itself! As rendered by 2010 with its sorely silvery concentration. It's perhaps more stylish than usual. You'll like it at least as much as you did before.

2010 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett

GDR-206

SOS : 2 // +

Class! Multiples of fruits, and the enticing aroma at a good florist, with meyer lemon and white chocolate. Shows what Dartings can do from fine land.

2010 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese

GDR-207

SOS : 2

Oh man this is a gnarly and downright impolite Scheu, animal and with a small but mordantly pointed botrytis; snarling cassis and culinary lavender. The sex was *amazing* but there's blood running down your back.

2008 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner BA

12/500ml // GDR-184H

SOS : 4 (10-26 years) // + +

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.

2008 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling BA

12/375ml // GDR-183H

SOS : 4 // +

Not remotely a botrytis monster, but instead remarkably pure and virginal.

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

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 “rockheads,” 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.

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

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

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

Quick-cut to June 2003, at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic. I’m standing behind my table when an incandescently radiant young blonde approaches, boyfriend in tow. Said boyfriend is buff and tanned, a manly man. Woman has spied a bottle of dessert-wine from Heidi Schröck in its clear bottle and inviting gold. May she taste it yes she may. I pour. And you, sir, I ask: some for you? “No,” he says, “I don’t like dessert wine.”

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

“Excuse me?”

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

“Sure,” he says, “Yeah, I eat dessert.”

“So you’ll consume sweetness in solid form but not liquid form?”

“Well, I . . .”

“ . . . or you’ll consume it in liquid form but not when it contains alcohol?” I press.

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

“Well?” I insist.

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

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 another to get to German rieslings. Then there wouldn’t be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it’s probably 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 “discriminating” palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn’t the **EXTENT** of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We’ve all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we’ve all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there’s confusion over this issue, and it 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 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 lap-dance; *Yeah, that’s what I’m talkin’ about! That’s damn sure 97-point fruit there! Oh yeah, come to papa*. Meanwhile, us German wine lovers are reading Tolstoy and drinking cups of jade-oolong tea with our pinkies extended.

RHEINHESSEN

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 list 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 (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 flattish, 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. For the time being! Because this too is changing as the region grows more sophisticated. Its prices will always reflect the lower production costs of working in non-steep land, but the many growers who are converting (or have converted) to organics have increased those costs, and need us to pay for them. Will we? However much we may desire – or *say* we desire organic wine, it seems to be we desire even more that bargain prices never change. Please feel free to prove me wrong.

Another trend of concern is part of a larger impulse sweeping over Germany. I'm always looking for cool new growers, and this region is the place to look, and has been for the last several years. But almost every time I inspect a potential newbie's pricelist I see the same distressing phenomenon: overwhelmingly dry wines, punctuated by a few "dessert" wines mostly from non- Riesling varieties. The meta-message is that Riesling is taken most seriously and thus must – *must* – be dry, but the other stuff can be sweet because we respect it less. Now and again there's a token Riesling Auslese, which doesn't help me at all.

I want some of the wines to be dry, because they taste good that way and people should have choices. I don't want all of them to be dry because they don't all taste good that way, and people have no choices. But choice and taste are anathema in the modern domestic German market. And our demand is too feeble to make much of a dent. So even the Rheinhessen, for so long a breath of fresh air, is suffocating itself with the dry dogma.

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

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

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

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

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



vineyard area // 15 hectares
annual production // 7,500 cases
top sites & soil types // Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping, Pettenthal and Rosenberg (red slate); Niersteiner Paterberg and Brückchen (limestone)
grape varieties // 85% Riesling, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 3% Grüner Veltliner, 3% Weissburgunder, 3% Spätburgunder

Tall dark and handsome Sebastian Strub is making his mark, dividing his time between studies at the Geisenheim wine university and, I suppose, shooting pool at home in Nierstein. Actually he's helping make wine in Nierstein. "During the harvest he insisted on coming here every evening (after a day of classes), and he really wanted to be involved," Walter told me.

"Would it be more accurate to say he *helped* you, or that you made the vintage together?" I asked.

"Oh, we definitely made it together. He has a lot of ideas, and new ideas are always a good thing."

He damn sure oughta have good ideas, all the places he's been. Many weeks in New Zealand. A brief but influential *stage* at Glatzer – I await Strub's inaugural Zweigelt with bated breath – and longer periods of full apprenticeship at Darting, and Dönnhoff. I enjoyed the moments I could steal a glance at father and son tasting together or conversing *sotto voce* about the new wines. This commonplace drama is really very sweet. Especially when the dad is one of your oldest friends, and you've known the son since his infancy.

I don't assume it is *because* of Sebastian (though I'm sure he was very helpful), but Walter seems to have his best vintage in about a decade, since 2001. I say "seems" only because his wines tend to run tardy of late, and they're slippery to judge for another few months. That said, I'm there the same time every year, and I haven't seen the equal of these '10s for quite some time.

Walter and Sebastian changed their approach to cope with the bizarre vintage. Nearly no whole-cluster pressing. "When you're a fundamentalist in your approach it's easier to make mistakes," dad says. All the Rieslings came in between 83-104°, the riper wines from the thinner soils, but it isn't ripeness per se that makes these '10s stand out.

It's their tactile material density. Curiously, two perfect German words to describe this phenomenon have no cognates in English; *dicht*, and *fülle*, because "dicht" is more than density (it also means many-layeredness) and "fülle" is more than fullness (it is also polish).

There were of course fewer tanks, and thus less need for blending.

Walter installed chilling jackets over his tanks about five years ago, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. "*The era of süßreserve is over*," he insists. Fair enough, it probably is, though I in turn insist it shouldn't be. Now we might have about twenty-some-odd wines with different levels of sweetness (or none at all) that have to be blended to create cuvees I can offer proudly. It is time consuming and painstaking work, and I don't mind doing it – I *like* doing it, up to a point – but it entails about 600% more time and effort than using *dosage* to fine-tune.

After having determined that the Grand Cru sites on the so-called "Red-Slope" would henceforth be made dry, to satisfy the *diktat* of the domestic clientele, a couple of the '10s had other plans. You'll see one of them below. Bless my old friend for not forcing those wines to go dry. For I do not agree that these top sites – **Oelberg, Hipping, Rosenberg, Pettenthal** – are predestined for exclusively dry Rieslings. I rather think the opposite. But alas, the typical modern German believes that the presence of sweetness is such as to render a wine inherently trivial. Thus to be taken seriously

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. Walter's recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they're ripe and lush. They're very often reductive and spritzy, complex and long.

– or Taken Seriously – they have to be dry.

I have come to feel that Strub's wines need middle in order to really work. Theirs is a certain kind of brashness, a refinement beyond refinement if you will, where all of their aspects are brilliantly vivid – acidity, fruit, cut – and so the harmony they achieve is one of extremes. It works, and Strub is far from alone in this idiom (Gysler and

Hexamer work it too), but what prompts repeated gulps is the swollen middle. A vein of fruit, extract, some element that confers tastiness and vinosity. This year it was the very nature of the vintage that did it. But Walter and I talked about it; he agrees this is an exceptional year for him. Nor do I prescribe; I simply observe. "This richness is a quality I like in your wines," something like that.

2010 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Trocken

GST-156

SOS : 0

The 8th crop now. Walter brought clippings from Austria (from Bründlmayer, matter-o-fact) and told me GV used to be grown in Rheinhessen until Silvaner supplanted it. He has it in a sheltered plot on limestoney clay.

This wine has a "mere" 83° (good ripe Kabinett of the olden days, you could say) but the aromas are immediately perfect, the quintessence of light GV, like the best Steinfeders from loess, winsome and forthright; the palate is ripe, dense, almost fluffy, markedly long, with a delicate beany-legume finish. I only hope my friend doesn't drink it all during asparagus season next month.

2010 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Trocken "Im Taubennest"

GST-158

SOS : 0

This is an old parcel name from the sirloin piece of the Oelberg, and if there is one single red-slope vineyard in Nierstein ideally suited to dry Rieslings, this is it. It's an enormously fruity wine, as if the vineyard stones were cherry tomatoes that burst open in your mouth. Has the typical Oelberg peach-blossom and milk chocolate notes. Juicy as all get out. Early days yet, but excellent potential here.

2009 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Feinherb "Roter Schiefer"

GST-157

SOS : 1 (now-12 years) // SOMMELIER ALERT!

First offering, in fact from the Orbel. My first night over there, we ate an at-home dinner and Walter asked what I wanted to drink. "Something on the dry side but not completely, and with fruit," I replied. And he brought this wine out. Bear in mind I wasn't "tasting" and didn't have my notebook along. I enjoyed the wine a lot but didn't attend to it.

At some point I noticed the bottle getting empty. Basically I'd kept pouring. By the latter glasses the wine had consolidated into something I was actively delighted by. Nor was this the effect of alcohol, as I'd been eating the whole time and was entirely sober. In fact the wine was a wholly satisfying companion, tasty, interesting, and with that sip-me-again-ness that we never value highly enough. It showed the typical Orbel smell of the Salumeria and also the typical '09 grassiness, here as a pleasant counterpoint to the smoky meaty notes. It washed down a grilled sirloin steak, of all things, and was a fine yeoman about it.

The next day I asked to "taste" the wine again, so I could write my note. I visited it after tasting through the '10s. My impression was entirely different. But which impression was true, and how could they be reconciled?

I think they can only co-exist if you realize they are both true. The wine "shows" one way when you taste it with a slew of other wines – or at least, that bottle did. And it "drinks" a very different way at the table, as it is meant to be used. I go on at such length because we're all so suspicious of the bromide "It needs food," and sometimes we're right to be wary. But we ought never to forget that tasting and judging wines only shows what they are when they're being tasted and judged. How they are then used is another matter entirely.

2010 Riesling SOIL TO SOUL

GST-159

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. This year there's no red-slope wine in it. Not enough wine! So it's 60% Brückchen and 40% Paterberg, and it is in every way other than the preceding vintages; more extravagant aromas, more sweetness and much higher acidity, with notes of white corn and cilantro, citronella or lemon balm. In any case it's an "herbal" Asiatic sweetness, leading to a wintergreeny finish.

2010 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett

GST-160

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. And a chewy bite of Riesling. Quince and cox-orange pippins and with a vanilla-bean spiciness in the middle; like a corn bisque with apple chips and a dusting of Chinese 5-spice.

2010 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese

GST-161

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. A parfait of lemongrass and starfruit, ginger and mace, and this zapped-out electric creaminess of 2010.

2010 Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Spätlese

GST-162

SOS : 1 // +

98° Oechsle, 57g.l. RS, 10.6 g.l. acidity, no D-ass here. So sailor, ya *really* like acidity? Here's all the silky fruit of this great site, in a wine positively twitching with energy. Key lime and *San Daniele* in an erotically vicious snap of kitten-tooth power.



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!

2009 Messmer Pinot Noir // GMS-159L	22
2010 Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken // GMS-161L	24
2010 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken // GTM-137L	26
2010 Darting Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken // GDR-203L	29
2010 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett // GDR-204L	29
2010 Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken // GDD-050L	19
2010 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken // GGY-090L	44
2010 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken // GGY-093L	44
2010 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken (Demeter) // GGY-089L	44
2010 Schneider Riesling Kabinett // GJS-096L	54
2010 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Riesling // GRH-067L	107

Weingut Geil

Rheinhessen // Bechtheim



vineyard area // 30 hectares
annual production // 20,800 cases
top sites & soil types // **Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rosengarten** (chalky loam, carbonate-rich loess)
grape varieties // 35% Riesling, 15% Weissburgunder, 15% Spätburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 27% other

“Can I really not persuade you to emigrate to the Rheingau?” I asked. “That land is crying out for a grower like you.”

It’s a common theme, the great land begging, the ordinary land full of champions. But Johannes Geil had a new thing to say. “You know, in the last few years I’ve let myself be proud of my land,” he said. That’s good to hear.

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 five years ago, and y’all are buying lots of wine. Geil so perfectly exemplifies the new wave in Rheinhessen. Here’s some of the reasons why.

“Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellarmaster is to preserve the available quality and refine it.”

“Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don’t have to drill through ten meters of rock for a little water. They deal with three meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!”

“No year is like another, and winemaking-by-recipe doesn’t bring the best results. Naturally modern techniques such as cool fermentations are generally

advisable. The question of whether less is more should be asked!”

“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 sometimes have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We’re in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We’d prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be 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 CO².”

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.

Weingut 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.”

2010 Silvaner Trocken

GGE-047

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

The first Silvaner I tasted, and right away I knew; this high-acid vintage would take the sometimes sprawling Silvaner and tighten him up and cram his pockets with flavor. And yes, it may be a one-off, rarely to be repeated, but it's a *cheap* one-off and I think you should pounce on the chance.

The wine is super. In bottle three weeks when I tasted it, but no sign of lost expression or vitality; it's compact, even mineral, thick yet snappy, long and electrically juicy.

2010 Silvaner "S" Spätlese Trocken

GGE-049

SOS : 0 // +

"S" denotes a reserve-quality wine whose standards are created and enforced by a grower's association to which Geil belongs. And this wine taught me a lesson. For the first time, I began to understand why the Old Ones insisted Silvaner could also be profound. Later it was debased by high-yielding new clones, but this wine comes from an old clone selected by Georg Scheu (after whom daddy's favorite little vixen-wine is named).

The wine is fascinating, much more so than most of the trendy wines from...let's say points-south. Orchids and narcissus and stones and yellow fruits, with an almost Szechuan-pepper spice on the deliberate finish.

2010 Muskateller Trocken

GGE-048

SOS : 0 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Well hell-ooo! This is the purest expression of flowers and berries I think I have ever encountered. It's like *eating* wisterias and lilacs. Streamlined, focused, gorgeous, a pleasure both entirely direct yet not at all frivolous. Rather a profoundly candid simplicity.

2010 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett

GGE-050

SOS : 2

This is a cool, limey Riesling, lots of apple and mineral, forthright and animated and salty – a Tabula Rasa for German Riesling. Lots of palate-coating exotica, minty zing.

2010 Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz Scheurebe Kabinett

GGE-046

SOS : 1

CORE-LIST WINE. This will be more currant and sage, and less grapefruit and elderflower – or so I suppose. Scheu keeps its secrets and develops capriciously. It's hugely spicy and seems almost Feinherb (with 55g RS!), and has a sideways-sneaky long finish, with the empty glass smelling like Manchego cheese.

2010 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese

GGE-051

SOS : 3

I preferred the second of two versions, though it's richer and more Auslese styled. Lots of botrytis, but it's round and elegant, focused and fruit-driven, acacia blossom perfume.

2010 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner BA

12/375ml // GGE-052H

SOS : 4 // ++

Not much wine from this finicky grape in the most stingy of vintages – but wow. Stunning, apple-butter, Chinese 5-spice, sweated carrots...all I can say is jump to grab this, and you don't have to wait a zillion years to drink it.

Gernot Gysler

Rheinhessen // Weinheim



vineyard area // 12 hectares
annual production // 8,000 cases
certification // Demeter Certified Biodynamic
top sites & soil types // Weinheimer Hölle and Mandelberg (red sandstone)
grape varieties // Riesling, Silvaner, Scheurebe, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Huxelrebe

One of the loveliest things I've heard said about organics was something Alex Gysler didn't say, but would I'm sure endorse. "Working organically you get more answers from the vineyard. In conventional work you've already intervened prophylactically before you get a chance to ask the question." What a beautiful way to say it, and what a helpful reminder that organics are not only matters of environmental morality but also matters of beauty.

It is beautiful that Alex decided to convert when his first child was born. Every parent knows that feeling; you want to make the world perfect. Now his winery is almost entirely bio-dynamic (with Demeter certification) and what isn't soon will be. These are all the things you tell me are important to you.

Yet you're buying less of Gysler's wine. And I think I know why. The key wines have gone up in price by around 20% ex-cellars, not counting weak-Dollar increases, since 2006. Twenty percent doesn't seem like an awful lot to me. Gysler was always kind of ludicrously underpriced, and the conversion period is cash-draining.

With vintage 2009 Alex picked 70% by hand. That's unusual in Rheinhessen. It's more expensive also. He's also moved to about 70% natural yeast fermentations, and you tell me this is fraught with significance too. The wines are better than ever.

"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?" 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."

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 wholecluster 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.

Gernot 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.

2010 Scheurebe Halbtrocken

1.0 liter // GGY-090L

SOS : 0

Something I noticed with the '10s was how their acidities just burned away the sweetness, even D-assed wines. And so if you had a "formula" whereby a wine like this was always Halbtrocken, you either kept it that way and had a radically different type of wine, or you adapted the sweetness to create a *similar* type of wine that wasn't Halbtrocken any more. And so this is a serious wine and a serious departure from its norm, all sage and marjoram rather than cassis and elderflower. Zero botrytis yet over 90° (i.e., good Spät), salty and Sencha-like, with almost a GrüVe boxwoody note.

2010 Silvaner Halbtrocken (Demeter)

1.0 liter // GGY-089L

2010 Silvaner Halbtrocken

1.0 liter // GGY-093L

SOS : 1 for the non-Demeter, and 0 for the Demeter

CORE-LIST WINE. There are two, but it's easy to tell them apart. Alex estate-bottled a Demeter-certified version, but there wouldn't be enough to fill our orders, so he made another wine from purchased grapes. This one I saw pre-bottled, and with its 9g of acid I felt it needed to jettison the "Halbtrocken" limits and go to Feinherb for this vintage alone. With 25g/l. RS, the wine was perfect; greener and fresher than usual, and also longer and with more density.

The Demeter bottling was already made, to fill orders we'd already placed. It was painful to taste it just-bottled, plus it was a *sponti* and had the natural-yeast funk, and I suspected the acid-sugar equation was askew – but couldn't be sure, as bottling had shut the poor guy down. I am certain it is better than it showed. The bottle will have the Demeter logo.

2010 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett

GGY-091

SOS : 2 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

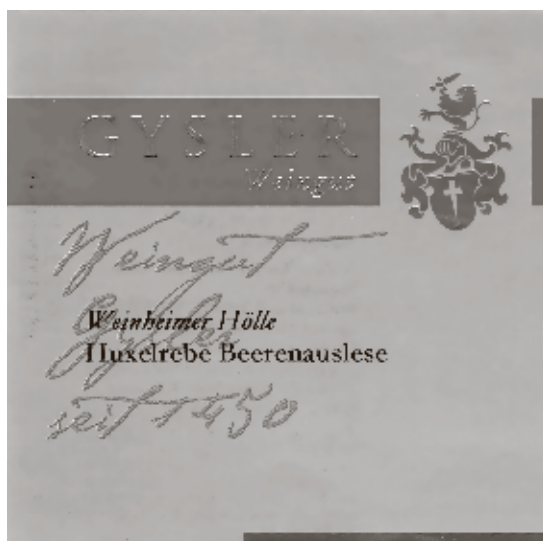
CORE-LIST WINE. And the best-ever vintage of it. Normally this is an extremely low-pH (and thus acid-driven) Riesling, which receives a generous sweetness in order to balance its steely structure. It succeeds by juxtaposing the two extremes in a high-tension dance. But in '10 there's a whole other layer of richness and fruit, and serious depth; the fruit is euphoric and not merely arch; key lime, aloe, balsam and kirsch, charming *sponti* aromas, almost Mosel like. Always a good value, this zooms above its long-term norm in this bizarre yet compelling vintage.

2010 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe BA

12/375ml // GGY-092H

SOS : 3

This has 160g RS and 15g acidity. You'd better mean it when you say you like acidity! But I'm sure you do, and the wine is as always markedly good value.



Questions of Yields & Questions of Organics

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 farming. 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.

I have two estates newly certified this year, one by Demeter and the other by an organic certification agency whose name escapes me. Others are in transition. I’m pleased with every step any grower takes toward the green, and I tell them so. What I won’t do is fuss at them to pass my purity test. Nor will I indulge anyone who tells me “We work organic but don’t want to join an organization because the paperwork is too hard and we don’t like the rules.” In that case, I tell them, let the virtue be its own reward. But if you will not certify, you’re not entitled to the organic Brand, and I’m not telling my customers you’re organic.

That organics are a Brand is something about which I have decidedly mixed feelings. Of course it's desirable. But what is undesirable is to oversimplify the world in order to make our moral choices easier. As doctrines go, the organic doctrine is one of the most attractive, but not as attractive as eschewing doctrine altogether. I suspect this is closer to the heart of the truly organic sensibility than to reduce the whole complex issue into bulletpoints.

Doctrine is always dangerous. Purism is an especially dangerous doctrine because it *feels* as if we should approve. The best growers are the ones who say, basically, "We have principles and we have arrived at practices that express them, but the greatest principle we've learned is flexibility and open-mindedness. Not as an excuse to do any-old-thing, but to avoid getting wrapped within our own dogma. If our principles are durable they will withstand challenge, and the best principles are those which remain aware of the complexities in play."

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.

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.

In essence this becomes a crusade. First for the wines themselves, their particular and incomparable virtues – grace, precision, complexity, food-friendliness. Second for the virtues of the culture in which they are inculcated, which cherishes these psalms of the earth and nurtures them with humility. If you've begun to suspect – or have long-since suspected – that much of what passes for viticulture in the NewWorld is the bogus strutting of macho parvenus, then Germany, for all its flaws, is the antidote. At least for now, there's a place we can go to see a kind of Platonic perfection of how wine should be.

NAHE

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 "VISITEZ 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 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 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.

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.

This year Valerie Masten and I hiked up the long way, from Niederhausen. It was an almost perfect day, a weekday, and we didn’t see a soul along the trail.

The thing is it feels so lonely. You’re really not that high up, but the view is soaring and you don’t hear any car noise. I know very well the sort of spiritual short-cut you take when you look down on the world from a high spot, as if you’re presiding quietly over humanity. It’s something of an illusion, exacerbated by all the endorphins you released with the 90-minute climb. But illusion or no, we still respond. I look out at that land and I am all alone. Even if someone is with me, I am all alone. The quiet is breathtaking, and you hear the breath you take while your soul falls through space.

It looks like a lost kingdom. I wonder, who found it? Unlike the Rhine or the Mosel, it wasn’t an obvious channel for shipping or other human commerce. The entire region feels like someone’s delicious secret. Even now it remains a detour from any direction, and once you arrive you wonder if they speak some new language. The people don’t, but the wines do. A language all their own, like none other, whispery and incantatory. We need a guide, a translator, who knows the words for the flowers and the stones.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.



Dönnhoff

Nahe // Oberhausen



vineyard area // 25 hectares
annual production // 17,000 cases
top sites & soil types // **Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle** (grey slate);
Oberhäuser Brücke (grey slate, loess); **Oberhäuser Leistenberg** (slate);
Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg (porphyry); **Norheimer Kirschheck** (slate);
Norheimer Dellchen (porphyry and slate); **Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl** (pebbles, loam)
grape varieties // 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder

Dönnhoff's wines are one of two things, either the apotheosis of a vintage, or the uncanny exception to it. In 2010 it is the second of these, for his wines seemed to embody the same tranquility they usually do, while most others were surging along on their waves of density.

This oddly at-peace quality seems to be growing in recent vintages. Or maybe it's just that everyone else's wines are getting more hyper. I've started to drink Helmut's '02s lately, and found a casky note in the Felsenberg I hadn't known was there. Another grower said that Dönnhoff is "the master of casks," that alone among growers he seemed to know precisely how to care for them and work with them for his wines. But I'm sure this isn't all of it.

Nor am I sure I'd want to know all of it. Nor am I convinced there is an "it" I could know. I can hear Helmut saying "Listen, I could take you through the whole process in minute detail and it still wouldn't explain why the wines are as they are."

You're standing by a mountain pond in the early morning. The water is glassy and still, and the reflection of the mountains is so pristine you can't be entirely sure which is the thing and which is the mirror. Then a little duck paddles slowly across the still water, and you watch the reflection break into ripples and the mountains begin to sway and wiggle. Infinitely slowly the waves recede and the vision of the peaks begins to form itself again. For a moment longer you're in the spell, the ordinary miracle of the world, all of you was there, all the parts you hardly know. You found you had the time to wait, to see the perfect reflection again. You forgot what you were going to do, transfixed and alive by the water.

Not many things and not many wines live in these places of silence and purity. We do well to pause and hear them, taste them, soften ourselves so we can be in the world together, with them.

It occurs to me we are all very lucky in Helmut Dönnhoff. Me of course 'cause I represent him, but more than that. First of all we have an unusually intelligent and articulate guy. Good so far. Next we have a guy who's uncommonly happy in his work. Then it happens that this smart, happy guy has some of the greatest vineyards in the world. And that for years the region in which he worked was 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 and a means of realizing it; we also have someone smart enough to recognize what he has.

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

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.

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?

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.”

“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.”

A recent development is the overall moderation of sweetness in the wines. I

suspect it has to do with Helmut’s health episode in 2009. “Back to the roots,” he repeated. “Not so many different vineyards, less sweetness in the sweet wines; back to basics.” It’s telling to watch the pendulum swing. In the early 90s we wanted absolutely minimal rs, and some of the wines could have used more, as it turned out. Having learned that lesson, many of the wines of the late 90s and through much of this decade were quite a bit sweeter; never imbalanced, but balanced on a flowery frequency. It was the zeitgeist, to pimp up the Spätleses so they’d get high “scores,” and though Helmut never fell prey to that queasy temptation, he did feel the wines needed “a certain sweetness” to guarantee their aging. And now, having had the tap-tap-tap on the shoulder of mortality, it’s back – or rather, forward towards the utmost pure honesty.

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 mineral 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.**

2010 Estate Riesling Trocken

GDH-244

SOS : 0 // +

This was just the palate-cleaner to lead us into the serious wines, but wait – this is awfully good! It's a lovely murmuringly smooth wine with length, a hint of fennel and a low note of stone. Best if you drink it good and cool, but not ice cold.

2010 Tonschiefer Riesling Trocken

GDH-245

SOS : 0 // (+)

Here's the dry wine from the Leistenberg. It's a wine that will really determine if you actually like Riesling – or dry Riesling. Because along with great volume you now have to deal with a seriously stony mid-palate and a frisee snap of bitterness; but in return you get more length and complexity. Also, please, not ice cold.

2010 Felsenberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDH-246 †

SOS : -1 // +

The small crop precluded the making of a sweet wine from this site in '10. This is a smoky and somewhat stern fellow, he loves a small number of people and of course his dog, who is his secret sentimental schnooky. But most people would find him, not austere but forbidding. If he knows you care or are serious he opens his mind to you, and he has a fierce proud intellect. The smell of smoke clings to him – he's as self-sufficient as a tree. You will never forget a thing he says, if you learn how to listen.

2010 Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDH-246 †

SOS : 0 // +

This is the above guy's considerably more accommodating wife. She smells of the kitchen and the soup she has simmering. She attends to your comfort. But she has a bookcase above the eating table, containing her many volumes of poetry.

2010 Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GDH-246 †

SOS : 0 // ++

The grandest vintage since the magnificent '05. Already amazingly complex delineated aromas and flavors; stupendous length and fervid concentration – it occupies your mouth.

† These Grosses Gewächs wines (GDH-246) will be sold in a mixed case of six, two bottles of each.

2010 Estate Riesling – SOLD OUT

GDH-243

SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

I think I'll come right on out and ask if there's a greater white wine value anywhere on earth? This year the sheer weight and depth are absurd, and the addition of aloe and tilleul to the normal smoky porphyry adds another entire dimension. Perfect balance, marked complexity, and we already bought every drop we could get.

2010 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett

GDH-247

SOS : 2 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Krötenpfuhl is like Dellchen would be if that riddlesome vineyard ever decided to explain itself. Soy, honey mushrooms, leaf smoke, stock and prosciutto; warmer, deeper-voiced; this one really laughs boisterously, but is also nobody's fool.

2010 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett

GDH-248

SOS : 1 // +

I feared this could be arch, stony or blatantly acidic, '10 being the critter it is. But it's none of those things; rather a showering wash of juicy crushed mineral, a fruitiness almost musky, and a greeny tingle of herbs.

2010 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese

GDH-249

SOS : 2 // ++

Who doesn't love this wine, year-in year-out? Who could possibly not love it? It's like a really cute girl (or boy) with a wicked sense of humor, and this year it's a ripe riot of greenness, key lime, lemon grass, wintergreen, lime blossom, and with the juiciest lavish cut; you can't bear to spit it. Yet it has *100°* and a gravity-defying lightness. It strains rational sense – but there it is.

2010 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese

GDH-250

SOS : 2 // ++ (+)

It seems drier but it isn't. It's explosively mineral yet its true depth is only glimpsed through a translucent mass of vinosity. Yet there's also a buoyant lift and yet again a sort of gravitas, like a monk who likes flying kites. Part of this wine sleeps the sleep of the untroubled heart. And part of it is awake for hours, troubled by the pain of the world.

2010 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese

GDH-251

SOS : 2 // ++

What, really, is left to say? All the images have been spent, the cupboard of adjectives is bare. In 2010 the slate is more prominent, the tones go less to scarlet and raspberry and more to limes and leaves and a surmise of licorice; the focus is arresting; the wine *bore*s into you. Spit all you want, it won't leave your mouth.

2010 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel"

12/375ml // GDH-252H

SOS : 3 // +++

Again, no blatant botrytis, no candy or syrup, just a deepening of the Spät, a strange and haunting meld of peacefulness and energy, a glowy endorphin calm, a salt-plum wash, deliberate rivulets down the sides of the tongue; a wine that's both in the zone and also *constitutes* the zone, with a suavity that isn't cocky.

2010 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel"

12/375ml // GDH-253H

SOS : 3 // +++

Micro-chiseled, neurosurgical detail, implacable length, cherries and raspberries, a little phenolic scratchiness....lost for words, or rather, tired of them.

2010 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein

6/375ml // GDH-255H

SOS : 4 // +++

Aloe, strawberries, tansy; articulate and massively rich and insanely focused and yet also preternaturally calm, religiously peaceful, a sweet floating night-snow you see against the streetlights; the world only seems colorless and cold, below the snow the seeds are squirming.

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 selling Jack Daniels and someone’s selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is out of line with the other guy’s price for his bourbon, you’re not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let’s say) Christoffel, it wouldn’t be long before y’all noticed Fritz Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

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.

Jakob Schneider

Nahe // Niederhausen

vineyard area // 19 hectares

annual production // 10,000 cases

top sites & soil types // Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle (volcanic soil, gray slate); Niederhäuser Felsensteyer (melaphyr);

Niederhäuser Kamm (porphyry); Norheimer Dellchen (grey slate)

grape varieties // 90% Riesling, 10% other varieties



Some of you know I moved last Fall, from the DC area to Boston. No diss to the District, but my wife's raised in New England and always wanted to get back. Anyways, we had a lot of wine to move, including many half-bottles of rather long-in-the-tooth dessert wines that had been in boxes at the bottom of the pile in the back of the closet. So we pulled a bunch of corks to try and glean which bottles were worth moving. Among these were a few halves of 1989 Auslese from Jakob Schneider, made in the old way (as they were in those days), and of course you know where this is going. These were among the freshest and best-preserved of any of my cellar, easily "beating" wines of greater stature, pedigree and even youth. I can't explain it but was glad to drink it.

By rights this creature should have been DOA, as primitively made as it was. But there's a lot we don't know about wine, and it always, always has the last word.

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.

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 cheekby- jowl, one the arch-mage of polish and poetry, the other almost rustic by comparison.

And yet it was Dönnhoff himself who urged me to stay with Schneider when I considered dropping them a few years back. It is a superb, incomparable collection of vineyards, he said, and a feet-on-the-ground relationship to them. And with the influx of the new generation, there's reason to expect fine things to happen. All of which is true — and persuasive. But there's another layer of truth which isn't easy to get at.

We all know the difference between bad wine and good, good wine and fine, fine wine and great. And we prize the splendors of great wine, as we should. Yet I am wary

Jakob 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.

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.

2010 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Trocken “Magnus”

GJS-099

SOS : 0 // (+)

This is their GG equivalent as they’re not a VDP estate, or are not yet. The ’09 was Very Serious Business and this one should be even better, though it was less evolved as were many ’10s. Still cloudy, but looks like being stern and masculine, with capaciousness, grip and length.

2010 Riesling Kabinett

1.0 liter // GJS-096L

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This year it’s Kirschheck and Felsensteyer, so slate and melaphyr; it mingles mined salts and flowers (wisteria and hyacinth) in a slender, tangy body that has a small phenolic nip on the finish, but the refined complexity is – as always – striking in this (or any) price-segment. The ’10 acids make it less fluffy and more potent than usual.

2010 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett

GJS-098

SOS : 2 // +

As good as this has ever gotten; the peach and mirabelle of the site but with the sorrel, aloe and balsam of ’10, leading to a salty finish riven with acid-energy.

2010 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese

GJS-100

SOS : 2 // ++

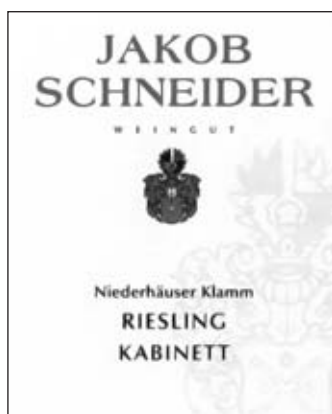
Much of this is from 70+ year-old vines. It’s a compelling alpha gentleman who, with exquisite tact and breed, does not suffer fools. Aromas of juniper, maple-cured bacon and tarragon; a great swollen mass of flavor, and the acid-driven finish adds a green note, seeming to double back and throw a whippy snap at you, but when it finally departs it leaves a superbly smoky complex final finish. A blend of three casks, with must-weights of 98°, 105° and 115° - that’s 2010!

2010 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Eiswein

6/375ml // GJS-101H

SOS : 4 // (+ +)

If this turns out as good as-promised, it could be miraculous. It’s streamlined and transparent and has none of the various funks of young Eiswein....so I am hopeful!



Weingut Hexamer

Nahe // Meddersheim

vineyard area // 18.5 hectares

annual production // 10,800 cases

top sites & soil types // Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg (red slate with a high content of quartzite); Schloßböckelheimer In den Felsen (volcanic, porphyry)

grape varieties // Riesling, Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder, Spätburgunder, Frühburgunder, Sauvignon Blanc



Who knew what I'd see this year? And after I left, I rephrased the question: who knew what I'd seen this year? For Harald's wines, as I surmised, were unusually un-ready, as he continued adapting to the vintage's curious parameters. For someone making wines like his, the acids of 2010 presented a challenge one could only meet by steering a new and foreign course.

It's not like you can turn on a dime, you know. You can't just go out and buy a slew of wooden casks, or a different kind of press. You have your cellar and that's that. People like Harald who make brilliant high-tension Rieslings found they got more brilliance and high-tension than they know to manage in 2010. So they took their time and didn't rush the wines. Though they're favored in softer vintages, where their brilliance and focus can stand out, a freak like '10 throws them a curve ball they didn't see in batting practice.

So, you'll see three 2010 Rieslings.

But I don't want you to think I tasted twenty and only three were any good. No no no. Most of the wines weren't done fermenting, many of the wines were pending acid adjustments – "When I have to deacidify I hate myself for a whole week beforehand," said Harald – and so I took what I was sure of.

If you're missing the Sauvignon Blanc – and who ever thought I'd be writing *those* words – I have a theory that September was too cold for its tertiary flavors to develop, so that every one I tasted was one-dimensionally red-

peppery. Harald's was unusually promising, though....but when in doubt, don't.

Hexamer is another study in success for a modern on-the-move young vintner in Germany. He's growing his property because good vineyards are available cheaply, and the deals are hard to resist. His dry wines are (mostly) too dry and his sweet wines are (sometimes) sweeter

than they need to be – because these are the shapes the German market insists they take. What is salient about Harald Hexamer's winery is imperiled as he fits himself into the mainstream. And those things are, first, his identity as the keeper of the Rheingrafenberg vineyard,



Weingut Hexamer at a glance // Sensational discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven wines of terroir.

how the wines taste // Anti-varietal in the best sense, the same way that Condrieu isn't merely viognier; the best from the Rheingrafenberg are wines of deep site-character as rendered by riesling. Splendidly mineral wines into which fruit of great charm is interwoven. Fresh, with exceptional purity.

an outstanding site of which he is by far the biggest owner; second, his rare ability to make consistently gorgeous dessert-wines – few if any have the gift of keeping them sleek and racy even when they're massively concentrated. And finally, the diamond-like cut and clarity of his wines overall, as if he refined them beyond refinement.

But that's O.K. Sometimes you have to let things get far enough out-of-control that you're forced to step back and ask "Who am I really? What do I want to be?" I don't think Harald is there yet, but there's some fraying at the edges of coherence.

Which made it all the more heartening to see the deftness of his '09s, as fine a group of wines as he's ever made, and in the best possible sense, dialed down a little. Starting with his 2008s he begun to see his wines in a rather different light, and this trend seems to continue. Hexamer's wines are balanced in the ultraviolet spectrum; they're steely, almost antiseptically clean and transparent, acid-driven, and because of that they've tended to be equally high-toned as regards to RS. A balance of two extremes is still a balance, but I find Harald's wines are getting deeper and moderating their extremes into something more drinkable, and even, dare I say, more wholesome.

Or else I'm full of shit; who knows. I liked the

fact the new wines were less marked by their attack and more by their inside-flavors, so I probe for the hidden meaning, I'm such an earnest goofball.

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.

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.

2010 Spätburgunder Weissherbst Halbtrocken

GHX-068

SOS : 1

This though was another story! Part of it went through malo. It's a pale colored yet markedly substantive wine, richly vinous and not at all a picnic wine; rather a dinner wine when good rosé is called for. Gotta be tentative with associations as it's still unfiltered, but I'm sure this will be seriously classy stuff.

2010 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit"

GHX-067

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE, and totally different from any previous vintage; drier, greener and mintier – in any other year you'd think it was feinherb – it's sorely and somehow made me think of mercury or quicksilver; there's a snap of acid but only a snap, and a pleasing sponti note for all you natural-yeast druids.

2008 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" Reserve

GHX-069

SOS : 2 (4-16 years) // +

First offering of a truly remarkable wine. It's 75% the standard Quarzit '08 and 25% one single 1200-liter cask that took until September 2009 to finish fermenting. A *sponti*, of course. ("What took it so long?" I asked. "I don't know; ask the yeasts!") The two were combined and sat on the fine lees for another year, then racked and held – it still isn't bottled.

It's another profile from this wines customary brilliance; it's silkier, more *green* (as in Sencha, Chartreuse, tarragon) and with a more integrated minerality. One of a kind, folks; a tasty wine and a cool back-story.

2010 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

GHX-070

SOS : 2

Don't you think it's silly that Rheingrafenberg isn't classified as Grosses Gewächs merely because Harald isn't in the VDP? I mean, what does the quality of a vineyard have to do with membership in a marketing association? Not a damn thing, of course.

I can't give you a final note because this wine was pending D-ass. There was a toasted barley and quince dialogue, call it butter versus steel, but beyond that I'll know when you know – at the June DI tastings.

2010 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese

GHX-071

SOS : 2

Through the periscope, this has the most fruit and exotica, but final note pending. Understand please, Harald wanted to wait till the last possible minute so as to *avoid* D-assing if he didn't absolutely have to. It's why the wines are so incomplete on March 7th when I was there.

2009 Sobernheimer Marbach Riesling Eiswein

6/375ml // GHX-072H

SOS : 4 // ++

First offering. There are usually a few teensy tanks of sweet wine still gurgling away when I visit, and a year later they're already sold in most cases. Which is a pity, because Harald Hexamer is a *wizard* at this kind of wine. He has The Touch. He understands the rarest thing of all; that sweet wines get better to the extent they are sleeker and more pure, not merely richer and more intense. You want a cool eerie line stretching to infinity, not a blob of gunky richness.

Marbach is a hillside of sandy loam. Its microclimate is conducive to early frosts. This is Eiswein at its purest and most pristine. Seriously, I taste fifty to find *one* like this. A platonically sublime grape essence, cirrusy and iridescent, silvery and zero-gravity, moonlit and charged with ecstatic calm. I know we're all jaded with so many sweet wines being made, but if you want to remember how it was when they were *miraculous*, then don't miss this.



Kruger-Rumpf

Nahe // Münster Sarnsheim



vineyard area // 22 hectares
annual production // 13,750 cases
top sites & soil types // **Münsterer Dautenpflänzer** (slate with sandy loam);
Münsterer Pittersberg (slate); **Münsterer Rheinberg** (weathered quartzite and sandy loam); **Binger Scharlachberg Rheinhessen** (Rotliegend and porphyry)
grape varieties // Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Scheurebe

This was the first year I went and Stefan wasn't there. We couldn't get our schedules to mesh; he and Cornelia were in Normandy on a long-planned vacation, and the week they were gone was the only week I was in the vicinity. But it was OK, because Georg got to be Le Patron and take us through the wines.

I confess I was curious. Rumpf's wines have been best in years when the vintage texture was already graceful. What would prevail, in the 2010 battle between density and angularity? And many of you have noticed an uptick in quality here, and it's always fun when those go on. In general, I think '10 is admirably consistent here, except for the dry wines, for which the vintage was often unsuited. One might miss the highest notes of '09 and '08, but one is reassured by the many generously ripe, lusty fellows in '10.

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. . .

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 Weinbörse—DOSAGE IS NOT EVIL, BUT DOGMA IS. A good dosage from top-site Riesling, used to finetune just before bottling, nearly always works better—which is to 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. . .

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.

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- Sarnsheim; 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.

2010 Dautenpflänzer Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GKF-163

SOS : -1

They feel this is the best GG they have made. I’m tempted to agree. The overall effect is stern, but the heavy tread lands a deep blow of terroir, smoke, lemon and violet, with a stony-earthy foresty length. The wine isn’t easy, but lovers of a certain craggy austerity will find a rare pleasure.

2010 “Schiefer” Riesling Feinherb

GKF-159

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

From the GG Pittersberg. If you want to know why he cannot use its name on the label, write to *VDP, La-La-land, “Twisted In Knots” cul-de-sac*. They’ll explain. This wine is effectively dry, that’s to say that any normal sentient taster would find it acceptably dry if dry were what he insisted upon. There’s a classic slatey fragrance with notes of quince and balsam; a tangy palate with a *pleasing* gingery sourness and smoky length.

2010 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett

GKF-157

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. Ah, 97° Oechsle. I mean, good grief. Since it is a Spätlese, and a “star” Spät at that, it needs more RS than in lighter vintages. There’s some tonka-bean *spongi* aromas; a large-scaled tangy apple palate, granular and fibrous. You get a 1-2 class upgrade to a lovely (and not all that sweet) Spät.

2010 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese

GKF-161

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. I sometimes wonder whether any Scheu sneaks into this wine; it’s so exotic, and they have Scheu in the site...and this ’10 is salty and lovely and oh-so-slightly grassy, and again it’s green, Chartreuse and verbena, a whipsaw of steel, mint, quince and smoke; determined yet also gracious.

2010 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese

GKF-162

SOS : 2 // +

Only 400 liters (about 42 cases) were made. Nearly 100°, a *sponti*, whole-cluster pressed; a rapturously flowery aroma, with another hint of grass; on the palate a surprising whomp of stern power on the back; the fruit is green again but there's an orchid-y kelpy kick of yuzu below the giddy floral high notes. Not an easy wine, but it's one of those your mouth isn't quite big enough for.

2010 Scheurebe Spätlese

GKF-160

SOS : 2

The cat has to peek out from amidst the thickets this year, but the wine is like a paperweight in its concentration of substance and weight; really piney and limey and Riesling-like – but this will change, and its inner Beelzebub will emerge.

2009 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese

GKF-155

SOS : 3 (9-25 years) // + +

At this point this was only the second Auslese (other than Catoir) I let myself select. I told myself I had to be overwhelmed. And wow, this is sensational, a monument of Nahe-Riesling; 56-year-old vines, 122° Oechsle with 25% botrytis, and the reputation of '09 will rest on wines like this, a swollen mass of apples and crushed rocks and walnut- extract; infinitely rich but not blatantly sweet; salty, like a *tarte flambée* with slices of apple.

2009 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein

6/375ml // GKF-164H

SOS : 4 (13-50 years) // + +**2009 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein “Goldkapsel”**

6/375ml // GKF-165H

SOS : 4 (13-50 years) // + + (+)

First offering. These are both astonishing wines, and you owe it to yourself to see what the *real thing* is actually like. All due respect to the Canadians, but it's too easy, and it shows in the wines. The “lighter” of these – at 180° - is a fascinating elixir, salty and malty and wintergreeny, an essence of Pittersberg that will age elegantly; these are not sugar-heavy acid-freaky Eisweins. The Goldkap is of course riper and richer yet amazingly still transparent, albeit massively plummy yet still brilliant; has a fat and salt sweetness like a cidery miso brine you use for pork-belly.



Schlossgut Diel

Nahe // Burg Layen

vineyard area // 22 hectares
annual production // 12,500 cases
top sites & soil types // Pittermännchen (slate); Goldloch (gravel);
Burgberg (quartzite)
grape varieties // 70% Riesling, 25% Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc



2010 was a vintage where a smart and flexible estate like this can really shine – and boy did they shine. There’s a quality of enlightenment in this collection, as if they’d been born already knowing the vintage, how to sidestep its flaws, surmount its challenges, and express its singular potential. Just unerringly intuitive and smart. It got to the point I didn’t want to keep babbling accolades, so I just piped down and wrote plusses everywhere. Valerie asked a lot of probing questions, many of which Armin deflected toward his daughter.

After I wrote that Caroline Diel’s “schmutzy vineyard boots should attain iconic status, like Marc Veyrat’s hat,” she now thinks she needs to wear them for me or else I’ll be dismayed. She even said so: “I put them on for you!” I’ll bet she never wears them otherwise. I’ll bet she has a totally different pair of much nicer vineyard boots that she usually wears. She would have thrown the schmutzy ones away except now she puts them on for me. I think that is very touching.

We also met a charming baby of three months, who has her mother’s (and grandfather’s) bright eyes, and who was at the precise age where each moment presents a delightful discovery. Toward the end of the evening while we were still at the table, I held her a while. It’s about the nicest thing a person can do, to hold a baby, especially a bonny child like Anouk.

It’s one of those rare moments when things are as they should be. Each thing is where it fits, and everything fits together into a happy continuance. I sometimes feel that way when I look at grazing critters. They’re doing what they were made to do, surely they *have* to be happy. You drive (or walk) along and the slopes or meadows are full of munching beasts and all is well with the world.

And you see a family wine estate where the first grandchild has been born, and the young mother is embarked upon her life’s work as a vintner, and the baby is smiling, and everything fits into everything.

I wrote about Caroline in *Reading Between The Wines*.

Tasting at Diel reminds me of tasting at Bründlmayer, because both estates do a remarkable range of things remarkably well. You grow certain of a strong guiding intelligence and craftsmanship. These are smart wines, through and through.

Caroline Diel is settling in. 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.

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

Schlossgut Diel at a glance // Elite blue-chip estate on the lower Nahe, producing scintillating terroir-driven rieslings ranging from tingly slaty to baroque. Attentive viticulture and intelligent craftsmanship in the cellar make this one of Germany’s leading estates.

how the wines taste // The temptation is to compare them to Dönnhoff, he-to-whom- all-riesling-producers-aspirer and all that, but I think Diel’s wines are too different to tolerate direct comparison. These 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.

are similar in the three sites, only a few meters separate them from one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir,” says Armin.

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.

2005 Sekt Brut Nature “Cuvée Mo”

6/750ml // GSD-113

SOS : n/a

This is quite an achievement, and I don’t remember a more ambitious sparkling German wine. Named for Armin’s lovely wife Monika, it’s 70-30 PN-P-Blanc, disgorged 1/11, and if you can imagine Krug minus the chalk and Meunier, you can imagine this singular and striking wine, all the way to its impeccable integration of wood, and the masculine birch-smoke finish. It trumps many zero-dosage Champagnes, in fact (having exactly 0.8g RS), and I can’t recall another thing like it.

2010 Rosé de Diel

6/750ml // GSD-106

SOS : 1 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

The best since the magnificent ’06, and as wonderful a Rosé as you can ever taste – all Pinot Noir – combining charm, depth and length, not to mention complexity, and a finish so fetching it demands you sip again. I seriously doubt there’s a better Rosé on the market.

2009 Pinot Noir “Caroline”

6/750ml // GSD-107

SOS : n/a // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

A wonderful and sophisticated Pinot, with clear suave fruit and the sweetest most subtle oak tones; silky body, berries and flowers and stock. You could wonder for a second about the oak but it’s quickly overwhelmed by cool marrowy fruit. A deft refined Old World Pinot Noir.

2010 Dorsheim Riesling Trocken

6/750ml // GSD-109

SOS : 0 // (+) // SOMMELIER ALERT!

50% Goldloch, the most fruit-driven of the basic dry Rieslings, and loaded with charm; the ’10 thickness of fruit-extract makes this a virtual equal of light-vintage GG; some *sponti* and woody tones, remarkable length, a dramatic overachiever.

2010 Eiefels Riesling Trocken

6/750ml // GSD-108

SOS : 0 // (+)

It’s the 2nd-wine of Goldloch and Burgberg GG; stonier and more stern now, makes me think of Riquewihr and Schoenenbourg; the finish is fennely and stony with a clinging-for-dear-life tertiary finish. It’s equally balanced but on a different frequency, more hay and white tea, less seductive but just as long and fascinating.

2010 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GSD-115

SOS : 0 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

For whatever reason (and after being admonished repeatedly by Armin for visiting so early, before the GGs were ready) these GGs *were* ready, at least to taste with any half-decent sense of where they’d go. As usual Goldloch is the fruit-bomb of the trio, with such tactile sorrel and wintergreeny density you need a power-drill to push your way through. Dramatic, clearly great and massively endowed, the best I’ve yet tasted, even at this embryonic stage.

2010 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GSD-116

SOS : 0 // ++

Stunning! Potentially supernal Riesling; even now the stone and licorice is paired to a juiciness almost beyond credulity, as if the very stones were sweet, or a mine was drilled so deep into the terroir that a sweetness was unearthed from the seam. I'm less certain how this will manage filtration and bottling (vis a vis the fruitier Goldloch) but wow, what density and mass.

2009 Riesling Kabinett

GSD-097

SOS : 2 (4-16 years) // +

CORE-LIST WINE: And it's ridiculously charming, a loveable dancing wine; a little girl very neat in her school uniform, playing hopscotch on her way home; among the most innocent and child-like of any '09 I tasted; lots of lime and garrigue and sassafrass, piercing brightness, whistling to itself as it skips out of view around the corner. One can be fond of wine like this.

Note: I actually think that's important, and something we don't consider nearly as often as we should. That is, what is the nature of our emotional response to a wine. It's healthy to do this, because it connects us to how we feel, and reminds us how irrelevant scoring systems are in terms of feeling. I was greatly struck by something David Schildknecht wrote – coincidentally apropos of a wine from Diel – in his recent 2008 report.

“With all respect due to the best dry German Rieslings – and Diel renders some of the best – this little, sweet Kabinett offers genuine intrigue, not to mention a set of virtues whose like you cannot remotely approach with any other grape or in any other country on earth. Furthermore, I'm waiting to taste the Grosses Gewächs that has the energy, agility, or elegance to challenge this flyweight Riesling after 15 years in the bottle.”

Now David's not the most explicitly emotive guy in print, but he has several high-chi words floating through that passage – “intrigue,” “agility,” “flyweight,” – and I know he's feeling some dee-light, and contrasting it to the cooler admiration one feels for the self-consciously “important” Big Dry Guys.

And this is part of why I am sure the world will be diminished if we stop appreciating these charming, useful and affectionate “little” Rieslings with their lilac frivolities and fluting lyric melodies.

2010 Pittermännchen Riesling Kabinett

6/750ml // GSD-110

SOS : 2 // ++

Rare for this to run so hard, but it's the class of the (several) Kabs, and again a lissome but zippy sonata of slate, and with the absurd density of top '10, with overtones of cinnamon, strawberry and wintergreen.

2010 Goldloch Riesling Spätlese

6/750ml // GSD-111

SOS : 2 // ++

On its gross lees till March; and what an exotic concentrate of plums and vetiver and quince and verbena, smoldering down to an allspice and cardamom finish. Crazy! Fry some apple slices in sage butter, dust them with ginger and coriander and serve with a tarragon ice cream. There's a Chinese green tea called Tai Ping which exactly three of you will have ever heard of but you three will remember its ethereal green sweetness. It's here too.

2001 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese

6/750ml // GSD-117

SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Amazing, the '01s are ten years old now. I've barely started in on mine. This is a perfect, sublime, young-adult Riesling; a saucy lick of apple butter follows pure slate and the salt-smoke of the vintage; perfectly balanced sweetness and a swollen finish that seems to pulverize the slate on your very palate.

2009 Scheurebe Spätlese

6/750ml // GSD-101

SOS : 3 (now-15 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

The best sweet Scheu in this (or anyone's) portfolio of '09s! Impeccable grapefruit and sage; a cool spicy Scheu, a bit on the sweet side but it really *stalks* your palate like a lynx on the hunt; satiny and gingery with a roasted pineapple finish. But use it as you would an Auslese.

2010 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese

6/375ml // GSD-112H

SOS: 3 // ++

In vintages with such massive fruit, the craggy stony Burgberg indicates another vein and layer of profundity; it's like a statue of Zeus looking stern and imperious (at least until his wife has her way with him); it's Riesling as *fleur de sel*, the liquid foams away, the air is charged with ozone, a few flecks of salt cling to the stones. Quite the future in store for this.

2010 Dorsheimer Riesling Eiswein

6/375ml // GSD-114H

SOS: 4 // ++

From the Klosterpfad vineyard (across the Autobahn); it's another of those eerie parfaits of *green*, Chartreuse, verbena, peas and mint; perfect balance, poise and clarity with no shrieking acidity; finishes like a pycillocybin margarita, yet there's a charge of tenderness here, a welcome.



RHEINGAU

Eventually, in the business and marketing curriculum at some wine university or other, we'll see a course called "How To Squander An Impeccable Reputation," and the subject of study will be the Rheingau..

30 years ago the Rheingau and Mosel were considered the two great classic Riesling regions. Pfalz and Rheinhessen were outliers, and no one knew from Nahe. But the Rheingau rested on its laurels, and quality began to slip. This was obscured by its ready local clientele, as the region sits astride a little megalopolis of three cities (Frankfurt, Mainz and Wiesbaden) and everyone can get there within thirty minutes – can and did. Alas, most of those customers seem to have been content with any-old wine as long as it came with an imprimatur—the Germans love those.

These days one hears an equal number of tales of great “name” estates still making mediocre wine from supernal land as well as lordly estates who seem to be fitfully improving. One also hears of former names going under, which is sad. What one doesn't hear is any stories of an ambitious young generation determined to make the most from the great vineyards they were endowed with. This is even sadder. And when I taste the splendid wines of my two suppliers I have profoundly mixed emotions, grateful for them and despondent at how few of them there are.

There's still distressingly little buzz about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is 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 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?



Josef Leitz

Rheingau // Rudesheim



vineyard area // 40 hectares
annual production // 30,000 cases
top sites & soil types // Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg and Kaisersteinfels (red slate with quartzite); Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck (quartzite); Rudesheimer Berg Rottland (grey slate); Rudesheimer Dragonstone (loess-loam and quartzite); Rudesheimer Klosterlay (loess-loam); Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz (sandy loess)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

Johannes Leitz, or “Yo-zee” as many of you know him, is an emotional guy, and he is always in love with his latest vintage; a crush on the crush, if you will. “When I am honest, this is my best vintage ever,” he is wont to say, and he hasn’t an insincere bone in his body. He means it. I love that he means it.

And I love being able to say that 2009 really is his best vintage ever, or at least the best in many, many years. Leitz was in the zone in ’09. But I have a piece of advice for you. When you serve his dry ’09s, don’t serve them too cold (cellar temp around 55° is ideal), and if you can, decant them an hour out. The results will amaze you.

If anything, 2010 is even better. Some of it can be explained, perhaps; a new spacious winery allows him the technical wherewithal to do what he’s always wanted to do. And the “Oscar” he won last year (Gault-Millau “Vintner Of The Year”) puts him under the microscope – not that Jozee needed prompting to take every possible care. Some of it has to do with the superb relationship he has with his fine GM/cellarmaster Eva Fricke (who has her own winery in Lorch, and makes noteworthy wines herself). And some of it has to do with kismet.

The stage was certainly not set for my tasting visit. Jozee had a vicious chest cold and was also dealing with a recent loss

which certainly cast a pall over everything. In a way it was odd to taste such a stunning array of wines in a way that wasn’t celebratory. I wanted only to offer company and sympathy. It seemed almost rude to talk about wine. But by the end I had to tell him. It was the best vintage I’d ever tasted from him, not to mention an astonishing achievement in a tough, tough year.

We are all very successful with these wines, and so the last thing I need to do is pump up enthusiasm, especially in a vintage where we won’t *get* enough wine to satisfy the ordinary demand. But truth is truth!

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...

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

Josef 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. 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 megatechnology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

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-wineguy can obscure some of what gets you there — any clod can climb on a plane — and what got Johannes Leitz there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire.

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. ROTTLAND 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*!

2010 Riesling Eins Zwei Dry "3"

GJL-181

SOS : -1

CORE-LIST WINE. After the elegant doughy '09, this has the most adamantly delineated fruit of any vintage yet — and also the most adamant dryness. The usual quetsch and red currant appear, but with an obdurate length and a surmise of nettles and cress. A litmus test: if you like this, you like dry Riesling. (Bear in mind the sample I tasted was 10-days in bottle and probably didn't show all its vinosity.)

2010 Rüdesheimer Bischofsberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

GJL-183

SOS : 0

I like to show a Bischofsberg, because its character is so completely apart from its next-door neighbor Berg Rottland. This '10 is a round and almost fluffy critter, quite wildly herbal — tansy, lovage and nettles — all of which sound very tart but the wine is like cashmere and velour. Some Veltliners also do this Szechuan pepper thing, an uncanny mélange of soft structure and hard flavors. I find this wine original and soulful, very much a *Leitz* wine.

2010 Rüdesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling "Terrassen"

6/750ml // GJL-184

SOS : 0 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Grand Cru flavors and almost shockingly blatant terroir, in this case juniper and gentian, allied to a lovely woody touch and an umami of balsam and enokis. This is one happy freakin' nut case of a Riesling. Probably just over the legal Trocken limit but I don't care; to me it's a perfect dry wine.

2010 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling “Hinterhaus”

6/750ml // GJL-185

SOS : 0 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

How do you follow the almost perfect '09? This one is more angular, with a less sanguine temperament; the buckwheat and quinoa mid-palate are there but with minty edges, so that it seems to be a cozy brown-butter sort of wine until this manic lash of mint, vaudovan and menthol. Again please, not too cold.

2010 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling “Ehrenfels”

6/750ml // GJL-186

SOS : 0 // (+)

This seems a little sweeter and also a little more tart; it's certainly more emphatically mineral, with a pinch of acidity but it shows as a jalapeño jab rather than a tooth-clenching sharpness, all riding over a wave of sweet hay, lees and casky umami. Fascinating embryo here; can't wait to see what happens.

2010 Riesling “Dragonstone”

GJL-177

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. We got a driving tour of the vineyards so Valerie and Julie could see them. As we were driving through the Berg Roseneck (and as Julie was being nervous about the steepness and the drop out her window) we looked up at even more steepness and terraces. “That's Drachenstein.” *That's where Dragonstone comes from?* Yup, right there.

Even after judicious D-ass, this wine is sportin' some torque. I think it's the best vintage ever (which pisses me off as there's less of it available) – at least apples-to-apples tasting in March. It has the crazy grip of the vintage, the thickness of fruit and spearmint, plus the kirsch of the site. A really happy wine to drink now, though if past is prologue you can age it for ten years and have a beauty on your hands.

2010 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett

GJL-178

SOS : 2 // ++

No doubt whatsoever, this is the best vintage I've tasted of this wine. Another level of depth and penetration and saltiness.

2010 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese

GJL-179

2010 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese

12/375ml // GJL-179H

2010 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese

3/1.5L // GJL-179M

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. Our little “Maggie” (which is what I suggest you call it) has its customary serenity and glow, with plum blossom and a hint of milk chocolate; it's the best since the '05, a swoon of prettiness, apple and lime parfait, silky but not soft.

2010 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese

GJL-187

SOS : 3 // +++

Part of it is gauzy and inferential, like a drawn bath full of yellow rose petals, and another part is as concentrated as a *demi-glace*; smoke and mirabelle and cox-orange pippins, sensationally firm structure and this mystic dreamy length that seems to arise from some lost cloister inside your soul. It swirls and swells in a chromatic chord of stones, flowers and lemon blossom. Hypnotic, amazing, my wine of the vintage.

2009 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Spätlese

GJL-168

SOS : 2 (9-27 years) // ++

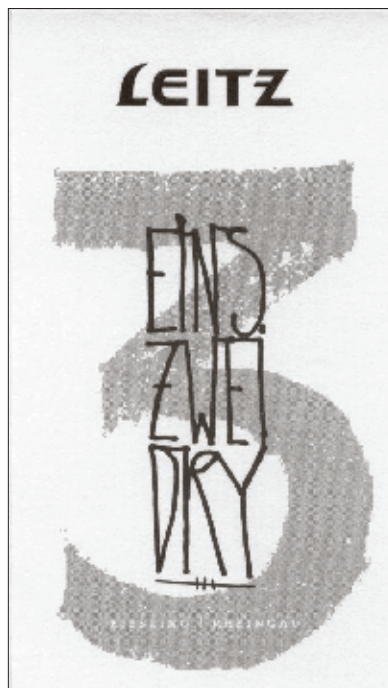
From the sirloin parcel “Hinterhaus,” this is Leitz's first sweet Spät from Rottland for many years. Nice he doesn't do things by rote! It's a rich, dense wine, a powerful masculine Spät in the patriarchal Rheingau paradigm; dark bread and chestnut puree; alpha-dog Riesling, not a demure or yielding bone in its body. Shows how to be gorgeous without being charming.

Picked the day after Christmas. This is among the greatest Eisweins I've ever tasted. A parfait of wild strawberries and peonies. Evokes memories that aren't even yours. Something singular and sublime here, as ethereal as meringue, as solid as a loving dream. I'm quite overcome, as you see.

The problem is, you try to use language equal to the power of what you're feeling, but when you do, you suck power out of that language because there's too many high-chi words crashing into one another. What I'm feeling tasting this little miracle are the presences of the sublime, and of divinity. But once you say "sublime" and "divine" you have named the thing but not conveyed the numinous emotion. For that you need poetry or music.

Maybe the thing about Eiswein is how poignant it is to express this ecstatic truth of the world by dint of something frozen. As if, in order to learn its truth, you have to stop its heart.

Great botrytis wines are more wolfish, more salivary; there is savor in them. Great Eiswein are like an ether of existence in which a hidden sublimity is revealed. Great Eiswein is also in some way absolutely *still*. It's like the curve in the road you can't see beyond, or like the instant between inhale and exhale, calm and yet suspenseful.





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

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.

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.

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.

2010 Lenchen “Rosengarten” Riesling Erstes Gewächs

6/750ml // GSP-074

2010 Wisselbrunnen Riesling Erstes Gewächs

6/750ml // GSP-075

SOS : -1 (both)

The Rosengarten's juicy and ripe enough to manage without RS in Andreas' modern polished vinification, though it's the less substantial wine in terms of minerality. Wisselbrunnen is potentially better but it's also more austere, though strangely it has a smoother finish. I wasn't sure what to do at first. Then we added just a smidgeon of sweetness to both wines (still keeping them under the silly limits for legal-Trocken), and Rosengarten was basically solved, it no longer felt parched for balance. Wisselbrunnen felt as dry as before yet it had an even stronger minerality, length and a finer finish. All from a dose of sweetness as small as a few crystals in a teacup.

2010 Riesling “101”

GSP-070

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. You know, your basic Riesling! It's one-third each from Lenchen, Doosberg and the slatey Hallgartener Hendelberg; the base wine is Spätlese quality, and this wine works perfectly with exactly five more grams of sweetness than the '09 had. And bless them for recognizing this and not yielding to formula-think! Mirabelle and apple skin, lots of dicht and minerality, cool balsam and sorrel; everyday Riesling doesn't improve on this.

2010 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

GSP-072

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. The sweetness has been inching down each year, which makes me glad, because this '10 shows you don't need a lot of fructose to eke out this wine's cider-y soul. This is a riot of apple, a pagan orgy of apples, apples re-enacting Caligula (co-starring aloe-vera), an insanely, bewitchingly lip-smackingly delicious wine, as this is at its very best.

2010 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese

GSP-071

SOS : 2 // ++

This wine has been so consistently superb since it was introduced (it used to be bottled dry but I done begged) that I'd say it is now a Rheingau paradigm, a wine one should have in every vintage, a wine that says what This Thing Is.

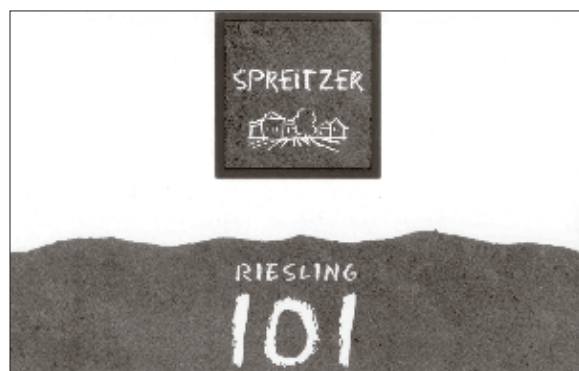
The '10 has the purest fragrance of wisteria, massive palate length that's full of spices and every purple thing plus white iris and lavender; it's chewy and juicy, classically solid Rheingau yet with a shimmering waterfall of juicy flowery yumminess.

2010 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese “303”

6/750ml // GSP-073

SOS : 2 // +

Botrytis in the form of leaf-smoke over an almost eucalyptus fruit; despite its sweetness it's actually quite stern – you feel the iron in the Eisenberg (which I now see I also wrote last year; I may be repetitive but at least I'm consistent) and the effect is benevolently martial and also fathoms deep. Highly expressive and also impressive in its authority and umami length.



MITTEL RheIN

In 1900 there were 2000 hectares of vineyards planted in the Mittelrhein. In 1970 this had sunk to 1000. In the next thirty years it reduced again by half; as the new century began there were just 500 hectares remaining, a loss of 75% in a single century. 50 more hectares were abandoned last year alone. What's to become of this region?



In most but not all cases the best sites remain. In most cases the most impassioned vintners will continue. We're seeing a possibly beneficial herd-thinning, but we're also seeing a changing world, and would do well to consider how it will look and how happy we'll be to live in it.

Because the Mittelrhein is so rife with tourism, a lot of ordinary plonk was made to be sloshed down by heedless gawkers misty-eyedly sailing past the Loreley. I'll bet the boat-lines and taverns bid prices down to below subsistence for the poor growers. The vineyards are steep, Mosel-steep, and costs of production are high. The system was basically unsustainable. But what will take its place?

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to represent via Heinrich Weiler until the domain encountered some problems and I opted out) and Linde noted wistfully that its days appeared to be numbered. "But it's one of the great sites of the region," I protested. "Why is that?" "Well look at it," Linde replied. "It's all old terraces, too steep to work by machine. You can't get to it. Do you realize what you have to do to bring the harvest in from that vineyard?" she continued. "First you have to carry all the grapes on your back as there are no pathways for tractors or wagons. Then you have to cross a busy road, and then you have to cross the railway line, and then you have to get into a boat and row across the

Rhine!" Well, I dunno; sounds like a day in the park to me. I mean, it's not like there's man-eating fish in the river or anything. In any case, it turned out the vineyard's sole proprietor was merely leasing the winery and had no incentive to invest in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A species of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old 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 Moselaners sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.

Florian Weingart

Mittelrhein // Boppard-Spay

vineyard area // 6.5 hectares

annual production // 3,300 cases

top sites & soil types // Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay (devonian slate);

Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg (devonian slate with small amounts of loess);

Bopparder Hamm Engelstein (loess with variable contents of lime, slate, and volcanic ashes)

grape varieties // 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder



Florian met me at the door apologetically. “None of my dry wines is ready to show you,” he said. “They’re all still in malo, and some are still fermenting.” Florian is the only grower I work with who is open about his preference for Rieslings with RS. So don’t read anything into the small assortment; I only tasted 40% of the crop.

And what a crop it was. Essentially all Auslese, and with massive acidity. Again, no D-ass had been done before I arrived. I’ll show you what I can. And bear in mind, these wines were all over 100° Oechsle, with 12-13g of acidity (!) and RS beyond 100g/l. – outsized to say the least.

I’ve never known a vintner like Florian Weingart. He’s unusually intellectual, and his demeanor is sweet and humble. He seems pensive, at least when I’m there. It takes time to taste, because we’re always off on some side-track conversation that fascinates us both.

And he’s a quiet revolutionary, our hero. He allows himself the occasional heretical wine, and he’s willing – at least with me – to say some unusually radical and provocative things. Let’s talk about dry German Rieslings, shall we? Most growers accede to the style as a matter of commercial survival. It’s all they can sell to other Germans. It’s hard to know how they actually feel about the wines, and I often suspect they’ve made a virtue of necessity. “<Sigh>...if we must produce such wines then of course we’ll do our best, both to make the wines and to pretend we like them...” Now no one has actually said that, and I have an axe to grind, but I’d bet serious money it’s how many of them feel.

Florian makes unusually consistent dry Rieslings. He understands the basics of the beast. And yet this year, as we both reached the place on the table where the sweet

wines began, he mused – with no prompting from me – “One day I will only produce sweet wines, sell what I can and drink the rest myself.”

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 pencilnecked 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?

Florian 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.



“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 offflavors). Those released S-bindings can react to H₂S (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 (USresearch) – 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.”

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 slaty 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.

2010 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese

GAW-106

SOS : 3

This has its typical sweet-corn and mirabelle notes along with '10s verbena and a racier palate than usual – relatively! Polenta and eucalyptus lead to a grappa-like finish also suggesting lemon candy. With less acidity, and when it's girdled by bottling, this should attain the lift and clarity it needs.

2010 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Spätlese

GAW-105

SOS : 3 // +

Even more explicitly and directly yellow-plum-like. Indeed if you think of a Meulenhof Auslese you're all the way to understanding this; it's a big-boned fair girl, with the Mosel dancer's spring and buoyancy.

2009 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese

GAW-102

SOS : 2 (8-22 years) // +

An outsized trophy-wine, hugely rich and expressive, not subtle, not searching, though if you drink it cold (and after it's bottled) I expect it will slim down. Right now the stewed-fruit aromas and flavors are pronounced, though there's an energy, a rocky musculature below the salty foaming tides of fruit and vinosity.



MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER

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



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

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

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

Here's something I'll bet only a few of you knew. There are very likely some *half-million* ungrafted vines on the Mosel, about 10% of the total. The proportion is shrinking, as the law stipulates you must plant grafted vines whenever you re-plant. Meanwhile, I know you're into ungrafted vines and willing to pay a premium for their wines, if the wines are French or Spanish or Italian. Right? Yet a few pages hence I will offer you a wine from vines planted in **1896** which costs the consumer some \$25, and sorry but y'all aren't clamoring the way you might be.

It's just another example of un-told stories emerging from Germany, because no one *examines* the place as carefully as they do other places they actually care about. In the interim this is a good thing for the few and proud partisans of Mosel Riesling, because we can own it for a pittance. But is it sustainable?

Speaking of sustainability, some of you have heard of an *Autobahn* bridge that's being built over the valley near Uerzig-Rachtig. It's terribly important, you see, to get truck traffic moving efficiently, along with getting discount-fliers to the airport at Hahn, the old U.S. Air Force base. These are useful things, but at what cost? One might similarly argue for the demolition of a wing of an art museum in

order to build a parking garage. After all, how many people look at paintings? But everyone's gotta park!

It was in fact agreed to by the *Mayors* of Erden, Rachtig and Uerzig, who argued it would assist local tourism. I don't know if it will be the debacle some claim, but I'm very sure it risks blighting the landscape, and no matter what it's a shameful choice to have made.

When I wrote my book I found myself talking a great deal about the Mosel valley. It's one of the few remaining places that demonstrate such cohesion. You know you have entered a very singular culture, which is valuable enough, and *then* it's also so beautiful.



The Mosel is also a self-contained culture. 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 fishbowl 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.

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 NOBEL HISTORY OF TJ RIESLING

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.

J. & H. SELBACH

2010 Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling

GSR-110

2009 Zeller Schwarze Katz Riesling

GSR-209

2010 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling

GSR-310

2010 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett

GSR-710

2010 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese

GSR-810

2010 "TJ" Riesling

GSR-610

SELBACH

2010 Riesling "Incline"

GSZ-035

2010 Riesling Dry (Fish Label)

GSZ-036

2010 Riesling Kabinett (Fish Label)

GSZ-037

2010 Eiswein

GSZ-038H

Selbach-Oster

Mosel // Zeltingen

vineyard area // 21 hectares
annual production // 13,300 cases
top sites & soil types // Zeltinger Himmelreich, Schlossberg and Sonnenuhr;
Wehlener Sonnenuhr; Graacher Himmelreich and Domprobst; Bernkasteler
Badstube (All blue devonian slate. In Graach with a layer of loam underneath)
grape varieties // 98.5% Riesling, 1.5% Pinot Blanc



When you taste a collection as splendid and pristine as Selbach's in 2010 – surely a vintage in which many toes were stubbed and plates dropped crashing to the floor – you find yourself wondering at the source of such deftness. I'll never know where its taproot may be found, but it manifests as intelligence and most saliently, as perspective. I have the impression of Johannes standing well above the turbulent waters of a challenging harvest, when other producers were paddling furiously to keep from sinking under. From his vantage point he knew what to do. And he prepared himself by creating a culture of flexibility in his winery, so that he could adapt to minutely changing conditions.

“We don't do all casks or all stainless steel; we don't do all cultured yeasts or all *spontis*,” he says. “We do some of each, so that we can respond to the fruit during the crush, and also blend afterwards if it seems to suit the wines.” This may seem like heresy to certain kinds of people who like to make religions out of cellar practices. Can't the feckless man *take a stand*?? But you see, he has. He's taken the wisest stand, the only sustainable stand. Take the best from all methods and approaches. Listen to what the fruit asks for. Tilt as needed. Flexibility and pragmatism are not excuses for lack of principle; they are principles.

We were a group in the little parlor Selbachs still use as a tasting room; me, Kevin, Leif and Julie. We had gotten up to the *en-bloc* trio of Anrecht, Rotlay and

Schmitt, parcels I'd pointed out to Julie during a vineyard walk the day before. She knew what the wines entailed, but she asked Johannes where the idea had come from.

And so he told her. And we listened. This is the spirit of what he said.

When I arrived at the estate I was convinced all this talk about terroir was mumbo-jumbo. What mattered most was how you made the wines. Well after about two years I had no choice but to change my mind, just by tasting the juice. We were doing the same things in all the vineyards but the wines were simply different, and there was no other way to explain it.

Then I wanted to push the wines forward a little. Everyone was pushing more and more ripeness, lowering yields and harvesting selectively, and we started doing that

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.

too. We still were making relatively moderate wines for the table, not the fruit bombs that some of our colleagues offered, but I certainly got seduced by the idea of micro-picking for 2-star and 3-star lots. My father went along.

After a while I remember he said to me, it's a little silly to talk about "terroir" when you're going out into the vineyard three times to select what aspect of terroir you're going to push forward. It's like picking two or three voices out of the chorus and saying "Now you three shout." What you want is for the entire chorus to sing. He went on to say that in his day a grower waited as long as he possibly could, taking all the risks that this entailed, and then picked the whole vineyard in one pass. The botrytis grapes, the shriveled dry ones, the golden ones and also the green ones. And then you really saw what that vineyard gave in that vintage, the whole picture, the real terroir.

So I thought yes, we could try that. And Papa and I discussed it and we thought we'd try it with one of our best parcels, a part of the Schlossberg originally called Schmitt. The first vintage we did it was 2003. The wine was an Auslese, though now we don't use the Prädikat names any more. As soon as we tasted it we knew we had something. It was alive, multifaceted.

So we added the Rotlay to the program with the 2004 vintage, and a couple years ago we started with Anrecht. And I came to see that Papa had been right; you can't respect the vineyard if you're trying to manipulate the vineyard. He brought me around to seeing what terroir really could mean. I owe this all to him...

...And you know, the last wine he ever drank, the day before he passed, was that 2003 Schmitt....I'm sorry, men aren't supposed to cry...

What Johannes is doing here is closest to the very soul of what I hope to do with my working life among these people and their wines. It seems simple. It's an ongoing search for authenticity. And in these beautiful wines there's an existential and spiritual reality that can't be reduced away. The truth of a vintage is in them. The truth of a vineyard is in them. The courage and love of a vintner is in them. They are all of the things that true wine can be.

Having written at such fulsome length about Selbach so many times, and wanting to shorten this unwieldy beast of a catalogue, what is the absolute *pith* of the message?

It starts with a simple declaration: Johannes Selbach, his family, their wines, embody every virtue I hold dear. Not just virtues pertaining to Mosel Riesling, but virtues that touch upon questions of honor and even morality.

Sometimes Johannes and I have co-presented seminars about this & that, and I've lost count of the number of times I've sat and listened to him and thought "That is exactly the right thing to say and the best way to say it." He has no dogma except the inherent mistrust of dogma. He instinctively steers his wines toward honesty and integrity. He is a *shaman* of terroir. Given

a choice between making a wine more ostentatious or more genuine, he always chooses the latter. His wines have an incomparable mid-palate depth, so that you start by dancing on their polished surfaces before you fall slowly through the cloud-like substance below, and then you finally get to taste the essence of slate on the clean dry finale.

The word "gravitas" comes to mind except that it suggests solemnity, and Selbach's wines are never solemn, just serious.

I spend the best part of a whole day tasting Johannes' vintage. Not only because there are a lot of wines – and variations of many – but because I find it important to taste these with nowhere else I have to go. There is something in them that builds, which you don't find if you're in a hurry. They take you inexorably toward wordlessness. The more you know, the less there is to say, or that needs to be said. Reality, after all, is simple – it's just real. There it is. It is simple, but man is it elusive. Because when we encounter it, we're often confused or even annoyed.

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 crawl in your windows while you're running to get the door. 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 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.

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

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 fullbodied. 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.

2010 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

GSO-363

SOS : 0

"2010 isn't a vintage for dry wines," Johannes acknowledges. Yet this wine with its sterling track record of excellence over the last ten vintages tastes dry in '10. It's two-thirds in steel and one-third in Fuder, 50% *sponti*, and 98°, which is of course serious Auslese. It's a cousin to Strub's Paterberg this year, a spicy minty torque-ridden powerhouse, with a garrigue-y finish.

2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

GSO-364

2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

12/375ml // GSO-364H

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Acidity shows; it's a bit steel-toed this vintage. In some ways this occupies the place normally occupied by the Himmelreich Halbtrocken — consider switching over! It's mostly Himmelreich in any case, and the wine's got the merest surmise of RS.

2010 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

GSO-362

SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. It's amazingly generous of Johannes to even make this wine for us. It's his top single-site, and no way is it remotely a "Kabinett," yet he gets it to work almost spring-y; sharp-chiseled site aromas sing blazing clear from the glass. As expressive, deep and brilliant as many vintage's Späts; all Fuder, 50% sponti; silky and murmuringly soul-deep.

2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

GSO-365

2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

12/375ml // GSO-365H

SOS : 1 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Exceptionally expressive this year; Himmelreich spearmint and tarragon. It has a deliciously weird sort of lusty restraint; you feel it both settled-in and straining forward. Best vintage ever of this wine; from steep 30-year old Himmelreich.

2010 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese

GSO-366

SOS : 2 // +++

CORE-LIST WINE. My first ever 3-plus core list wine. It smells like Rotlay does in many vintages. Perfect, pure, rich, bottomless, classic Mosel aromas – all *sponti*. I don't claim this is the ultimate degree of intricacy or complexity. It is just the purest sublimity of its type. Clear, expressive, serenely energetic and long.

This is the taste I fell crazily in love with back in 1978, and came to understand as "Mosel." Back then there were very few primary-fruit driven, stainless steel wines made. I like that style, but it's explicable and it adds up; it's linear. This kind of wine is mysterious and haunting. It's like trying to describe why you think your lover is beautiful. You don't enumerate her features and draw a diagram of how they're positioned on her face. She's just beautiful. And the way you feel when you look at her is a welling from your hidden heart. I feel something like it, when I taste a wine like this.

2010 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese

GSO-367

SOS : 2 // + + (+)

All Fuder. This is an **OMG!!** kind of wine. These '10s really recall the '05s – still the greatest single vintage I've ever tasted from any one estate. Classic pistachio, quince and guava of Domprobst; classically vivid crunch of slate; it has a little RS to assimilate, but what deranged succulent brilliance and crazy-ass cherry-peppermint length.

2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

GSO-375

SOS : 2 (9-26 years) // +

First offering, of a slow-fermenter that's still not yet bottled; but it's fun to see this ripe yet elegant *comme il faut* classic in contrast to the crack-high '10s; this is streamlined with the finest possible fruit; subtle botrytis, polish and grace; will go all cox-orange and beeswax with age.

2010 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese *

GSO-368

SOS : 3 // +

Might as well go for it. This is the rich-bitch of the Späts, actually a very strong Auslese or meager BA – 120° – with almost a *gelee* of botrytis; yet it's not massively sweet, just lavish and extravagant.

2010 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese **

GSO-372

SOS : 3 // ++ (+)

Another scintillating masterpiece to follow the amazing '09. Jo's in the zone with this vineyard lately. Somehow this still conveys a silky clarity given its richness, as if it grows taller but not thicker. All Fuder; all gorgeous.

2010 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese **

GSO-373

SOS : 3 // ++

This is probably the very finest mega-rich Auslese Johannes has made; it has a clear stream of lime and pêche-de-vigne; a perfectly streamlined yet huge Auslese, from below the sundial, 80+ year vines; it's juicy and addictively tasty yet entirely proud and serious and yet with no *affect* of seriousness; it's not huffy.

Leif Sundström writes:

"The nose is sweet to be sure, but with so much non-fruit suggestions – chocolate flowers, lime blossom, lime oil, clean high toned mintyness, fennel blossom, anise almost. There is an incredible creamy sweet-umami note which juxtaposes the delicate and elegant density. There is so much meat packed into such a small space. But the complexity is virtually intangible yet so clearly stratified. The balance is alarming – sweetness: apple/pear/strawberry crème; umami: birch foam tones; bitter (sweetly): lime zest rings cool and with rounded spice; salty: elegantly delicate salty slate ringing through; floral: as if there is some lavender essence and vanilla dotting the sauce..."

2010 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein

12/375ml // GSO-374H

SOS : 4 // ++

Total batshit minty madness! Wonderfully derangedly over-the-top, so vital I wonder if a mere bottle can contain it. This is a *seethe* of nature – strange to think it came from frozen grapes picked out of a moribund world. It's like a pagan orgy encased in ice.

The En-Bloc Harvested Micro Parcels

2010 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling "Anrecht"

6/750ml // GSO-369

SOS : 2 // ++

This isn't as arch or screamy as the wonderfully manic '09; it has more material to struggle through. The giant is just waking up. What starts to come through is almost scary; a sinus-clearing mass of spearmint and verbenia and spiced apple. Stand by me and hold my hand when I taste it again.

2010 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling "Rotlay"

6/750ml // GSO-370

SOS : 3 // ++

This is a relative giant. It will take years to exhale its deep held breath, as if it comes from the belly of a blue whale. Picked *en bloc* with 145° Oechsle – I mean, come on! You don't cut it with a knife and fork, you take a jackhammer to it.

Leif Sundström writes:

"There is sinfully clean botrytis hues on the nose, with sweet/cool sponti; fuzzy pineapple tones, melting peach, living changing fruit. This is wild for sure. The wine strikes with crystalized, clean fruit. The wine has intensely coiled concentration, with pronounced apricot, pineapple, and golden apple fruit, but still with that green apple skin tartness keeping a firm guard rail on the palate. This concentration has momentum, energy, and direction therefore not weighty or broad at all. Subtle sponti flavors are perfectly integrated into the creamy texture here and also married to the long fruit that finishes with such energetic spice and a cooling tone, a mint stem essence. Of the single parcel wines this is the most fully blossomed at the moment but with still a helluva lot to unfold. This wine is seeking something, and confident it will find it."

2010 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling "Schmitt"

6/750ml // GSO-371

SOS : 3 // ++ (+)

I seem to have been channeling Dr Seuss when I tasted this wine. "Shatter and shimmer and gleam and glimmer, deep and crisp and weep and lisp...(etc)" Nothing rhymes with brilliance except consilience, but when flavor is mentioned, this has millions.

2010 Selbach Saar Riesling Spätlese

GSR-410

SOS : 1

Attractive grapefruity aromas, angular and tangy; salty mid-palate; the usual '10 density and length makes this seem drier than '08 or '09; nice and quince-y and granny smith appley; a more earnest if less frisky wine in this vintage.

Erich Jakoby-Mathy

Mosel // Kinheim



vineyard area // 4.5 hectares
annual production // 2,500 cases
top sites // Kinheimer Rosenberg (blue devonian slate);
Kinheimer Hubertuslay (grey-blue devonian slate)
grape varieties // Riesling, Pinot Noir

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.

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 higherich ly visible grand Quixotic gestures like the outstanding Daniel Vollenweider estate is doing – if you can ask (and receive) stratospheric prices in return. It’s quite another to labor in modest obscurity on behalf of an idea that isn’t remotely sexy, but every bit as passionate.

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 firstclass 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 some incredible values.

If you’re wondering what became of the Riesling “Balance,” the simplest explanation is the ripeness and acids of 2010 meant that in order to properly “balance” the wine it would have needed more sweetness than it’s envisioned to have. If we give it what it actually needs, then...< sigh>...you guessed it; it’s too sweet to *sell in Germany*. In case you thought my malaise and frustration were merely theoretical. In fact this perversity of taste amongst the Germans makes it bloody awkward for me to do business at times. Too many damn times.

Erich 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.*

2010 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett

GJM-082

SOS : ?

Flying blind here. '10 was just as outsized and botrytisey here as most everywhere, and the two samples of Kab I was shown were both too dry to manage their ripeness and botrytis. Taking the wine up to what it needed would take it too far away from the idiom "Kabinett." So new made a few makeshift blends and talked candidly about them, and I finally left it for the family to decide, having said what kind of wine I was looking for. I'll taste it when you do, Schnooky.

2009 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese

GJM-079

SOS : 2 (7-18 years)

This time I chose the sensual darling over the more soulful sponti (they gave me three different options), because we do get to be seduced once in a while, right? This is a salty corn fritter of a wine, with an applesauce dip. Trust me, that nails it.

2009 Kinheimer Hubertuslay Riesling Spätlese "Goldkapsel"

GJM-080

SOS : 2 (7-21 years)

Indeed! This is the saltiest wine on the table, with stylish Mosel buoyancy and cut; there's real class here, and lovely articulation, and good length, and IMO this warrants trading-up to.

2007 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese

GJM-069

SOS : 2 (8-22 years) // +

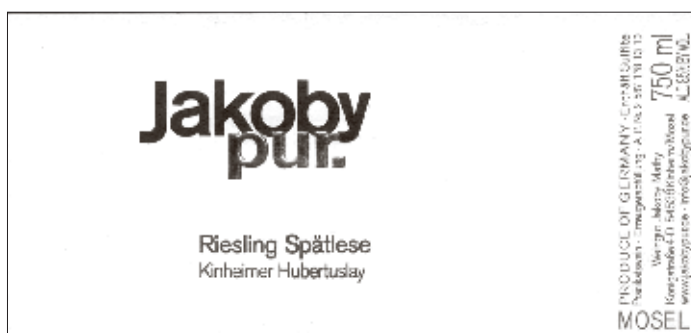
There's a slinky sort of bouquet-garni minerality here, and it's covered by layers and clouds of cox-orange peachy fruit and fervent key-lime citricity, and a sense of blooming wisteria on a clear Spring day. Taut and racy and classy.

2010 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese "Eulenlay"

GJM-084

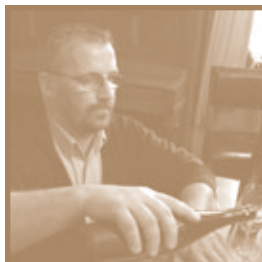
SOS : 3

It's as if the vintage is trying to fit into clothes too small for it, until you hit Auslese, and then it sighs with relief. Yes, but – Auslese, I know. Yet this is excellent, even exciting wine, a ton of botrytis but tied to a ripe lavish fruit; roasted pineapple and candied lemon and an underlying jacket of mineral.



Meulenhof / Erben Justen Ehlen

Mosel // Erden



vineyard area // 7 hectares
annual production // 4,200 cases
top sites & soil types // **Erdener Treppchen** and **Prälat** (devonian slate with Rotliegend); **Wehlener Sonnenuhr** (devonian slate)
grape varieties // 85% Riesling, 10% Rivaner, 5% Kerner

I'll confess I arrived with some trepidation, even after Stefan Justen's astonishing performance in 2009. Superripe vintages have not always been good for him. Yet he finessed the '10s as if it came easily, though I'm sure it came not at all easily. And while it may have missed the highest-of-the-high notes of those superb '09s, it is an even greater achievement, to have sidestepped all the many ways 2010 could befuddle a vintner. So this makes two straight years where Justen has outperformed. And two straight years where his prices have... stayed the same. I wonder how long that can continue.

These wines are analogue, and they have big fruit and a lot of warmth. They're a little like Hiedler's wines in that respect. Not "fat" but ample. If you're looking for neurosurgical detail and lacy intricacy, try Christoffel (among others), but ideally you're not looking for just one single thing.

There've been times when I wondered whether Stefan steered his wines toward the utmost fruit and let the other questions fall where they might. When his and my opinions diverged it was always right there: I liked the firmer more structured wines even if they had less fruit – because they all had enough fruit. He wondered at my coolness toward some of his bigger wines. But I can't recall the last time this happened, actually. I'm walking out of his place grinning like a dope these days. "Wow, did he nail it... people are gonna love these wines..!"

Stefan is still acting mayor of Erden, so y'all let him know if you need a parking ticket fixed. He's also the curator of the Roman press house that was unearthed when Treppchen had *flurbereinigung*. And he was instrumental in creating the amazing hiking path that goes from Ürzig to Erden far above the cliffs. His phone rings a lot. (I still forgot to ask him if he could pass a law making dry Mosel

wines illegal.) He remains a model of what a loyal, nice man should be. Which is why we have done business together for twenty five years, first with Stefan's dad, and now with him.



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.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

GJU-124

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. The first of these to be shipped (which will have arrived by the time you read this) is #4, which will be followed by #9. The first-bottled wine shows the peachy side of Treppchen, and is entirely yummy and streamlined, even having just a week in bottle. The cask sample was again bright and peachy, not as thick as many '10s, but is a fruit-driven charming Mosel Kab.

It bears mentioning there are two faces of Treppchen. Near the cliffs (i.e., near the Prälat) the soil has more *rotliegend* and the wines are fuller and more exotic, smoky and peachy and ripely citric, like tangelos – almost like Nahe wine. The vines are older also, as *flurbereinigung* was impossible here. Downstream towards Lösnich the slope moderates to an undulating hillside with some very steep sections, and here there's more grey slate and the wines are tighter, more Granny Smith apple and walnut – and younger vines.

2010 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

GJU-123

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE, and like the Kabinett, an early-bottled version is shipping now (#5); the cask sample seemed a little drier and even slatier, though both were super-streamlined and entirely clean and site-classical. This is actually a very fine wine! There's an evanescently vaporous finish that's pure Sonnenuhr, blowing a plume of lime and balsam all through your senses. In other words, "The retro-nasal is like, really *out there*."

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese

GJU-125

SOS : 2 // +

This is from heavier soil downstream from the cliffs, and it's the classic apple-skin and walnut side of ET, here in a juicy lip-smacking rendering, a hint of cloves and a lot of animation and *spiel*; delightfully fresh and slatey.

By the way; there's been some confusion in the past when the label doesn't say "#108" (or whatever) and you're not sure you got the right wine or the wine that got the big score. The cask number is an internal control so I know I received the cask I wanted, but you should key off the code. If you ordered "GJU-XXX" then that's what you'll receive.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben

GJU-126

SOS : 3 // ++

"These are parcels I know neither my father nor grandfather planted," Stefan said. "They'd have to be well over 80 years old." Massively exotic, peach and tangelo. If Norheimer Dellchen were more explicit it might well have this to say. Solid, rich, almost chewy; star-fruit, cloves, smoke and papaya; so concentrated it's hardly Mosel any more. But does it *RAWK*?

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese

GJU-127

SOS : 3 // +

Oh whew, I have 4 Ausleses still to taste, and usually I taste them all and then cull out the ones I want – but this stopped me in my tracks. Exceptionally dense, compact, dynamic, swollen and salty; minty high notes and a big thick mid-palate. This isn't a schnooky-sweet wine but rather an almost brawny adamant cheese-wine – or one for the foie.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese Alte Reben

GJU-128

SOS : 3 // ++

This isn't as radically different from its brother-Auslese as the two Späts were from each other. In this case it's a deeper interior, more resonant, more reverb and echo. There's *pêche-de-vigne* and key-lime and wintergreen, and for all its fathomless depth there's a clear line of flavor, a narrative, a profundity that compels serious admiration.

SOS : 3 // +

Though you can see how much I liked it, I was going to leave it behind so we didn't have too many Ausleses coming at you. Prälat can also be indirect and allusive compared to Treppchen. Kevin Pike made a strong case that this wasn't a flaw, and that Prälat was iconic, and this wine showed its character to perfection.

This is what Kevin wrote:

"I consider the Prälät to be one of the most iconic terroirs in the Mosel valley. It's a tiny 2.2 hectare site sandwiched between the Treppchen and the Ürziger Würzgarten, entirely south-facing, with pure red slate soils. The site is naturally enclosed by cliffs and outcroppings which shelter the vines and make the Prälät one of the warmest sites in the entire valley. If there were a Mosel vineyard pre-destined for Auslese, it would have to be the Prälät. There are only a handful of owners in the Prälät and Meulenhof is one of them. He's not the biggest (Ernie is), but Stefan Justen is the man who introduced the vineyard to me."

On my second trip to Germany, over ten years ago now, Stefan organized a trip up the Treppchen on the monorack-bahn—a two inch-wide, single rail system on which a narrow seat with a kind of lawnmower motor pulls a two-seated cart through the steep sections of the vineyard. It's a noisy, precarious, exhilarating ride in between the pole-trained vines, a few feet above the broken slate. Once at the top, we hiked through the cliffs toward Ürzig and into the Prälät where Stefan had a bottle of 1993 Auslese waiting for us. I still remember well that wine: dried herbs, red currant, Asian five spice and fresh pear. We drank it in the cliffs looking down at the Mosel River as the mid-morning summer sun started to heat up the slate.

Stefan's 2010 Prälät Auslese is a deft interplay of minerality and the tropical fruit which mark this vintage; it is also compact. Candied ginger, mango and tangerine aromas melt into a spicy, slate core. The palate shows cayenne, cinnamon, black tea and quince paste with a crunchy acidity balancing all of these exotics into a long, salty finish. There was only one Meulenhof Auslese that didn't grab me, and the Prälät wasn't the most charming, but it was the most seductive. It shows less phenolic grip than the Treppchen Auslesen, also less tartaric acidity, but the refined density of the fruit and slate in the Prälät is beautiful. It's a wine for my cellar."

Well then! It is less linear and more inferential, less a line than a mosaic, a kaleidoscope of flavor. It's especially analogue and less scrutable than Stefan's other wines, but a bright vein of lemon and vanilla comes through, and Prälat is always slow to tip its hand. Stature and power it surely has.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling TBA

6/375ml // GJU-130H

SOS : 4 // +

The lighter – or “lighter” – of two, an elegant TBA with 165° Oechsle. It’s astonishingly buoyant, almost weightless. It conveys the purest fruit with no snarly botrytis; focused and with studious clarity, which I vastly prefer to syrupy fruit, figs and white raisin. You won’t see a lot of TBA in this offering, though I *tasted* a lot, because huge sweetness bores me. What I want – and what I see here – is the zenith of the pure clear line. I don’t want to see the fruit passed out after eating too many sweets; I want to see the look on its face as it passes into paradise.



Alfred Merkelbach

Mosel // Ürzig

vineyard area // 1.9 hectares
annual production // 1,700 cases
top sites // Ürziger Würzgarten; Erdener Treppchen; Kinheimer Rosenberg
(blue devonian slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling



At one point during the tasting Alfred said an amazing thing. “Thank God we still were doing this, so we could have experienced a vintage like this.”

Amen.

I had no idea what to expect. Superripe vintages like '06 and '03 are usually not the forte of this estate. And they do things the old way. How would they manage the botrytis?

As it turns out there was relatively little botrytis in Ürzig, because of its dry soils, I was told. Both Merkelbach and Christoffel reported “about 15%.”

You'll recall (I hope!) my love of Selbach's *en-bloc* wines, but it bears mentioning that Merkelbach handles all their vineyards that way. Other than a pre-harvest to remove bad fruit, the parcels are picked at the right moment in single passes. And so with the galloping ripeness of 2010 a grower like this one is wont to be thrown off his game. Acids are too high to pick – yes, but look how ripe the grapes are.

And so they picked, and what they received for their labors is not only the most remarkable vintage *they* have ever made. It is one of the most singular and miraculous vintages anyone has ever made. Forget everything you've come to expect from here. Especially forget that the wines are generally light. For Rolf and Alfred, this vintage is a monument hewn from iron and crags.

I have long felt the presence of a divine kind of dignity here. I write at length about it in my book. It has always been poignant in light of the girlish innocence and

purity of the wines. But in 2010 it has its apotheosis; these wines speak a death-bed message, the last pure words, not even sad any more. Just the final simple truth. I found myself thinking, what would my message be? I was too often afraid. I might have given more. I found life to be remarkably mysterious. You should try harder than I did, to understand it. Such thoughts.

Not that Rolf and Alfred are at all ailing. They're about as ruddy and hale as two gentlemen in their early 70s can be, who have spent much of their lives in the fresh air on the steep slopes. Nor do I cherish any conceit that the wines do their speaking for them. I think this vintage is a miracle that none of us comprehends. But, if the Gods sent this vintage as they sent dreams to the ancient heroes, its gorgeously implacable dignity would beautifully summarize the lives these two men have lived.

Next year they can return to the adorable fluting Rieslings we've loved for so many years now. This year, there is another kind of attention we need to pay.

I'll divide the assortment into the 2010s, and supplement it with some of the “normal” wines we can still supply from earlier years.

Alfred Merkelbach at a glance // The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my most beloved Mosel agency.

how the wines taste // These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of 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.

About the Vineyards

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 appley fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years they can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

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

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

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

GME-174

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

It's Fuder #6, but it's the only Fuder of Kabinett in the vintage. I still didn't know what I'd find. It shows the '10 signature of brassica, a many-layered body and a *soupcou* of botrytis, but so rich and salty; quite outsized for these guys. So I looked at the analysis. 96° Oechsle! 11.1g of acidity. 33.4 g. of dry extract! The RS is a jaw-dropping and untaste-able 71 g. This is virtually unthinkable; in any other vintage this would be their top Auslese.

2010 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese

GME-177

SOS : 1

Another masculine wine here, almost stern. The vintage makes itself at this address. These are the branches and twigs of Rosenberg, not the apple. Long and markedly slatey. Tastes Feinherb. A remarkable new view of Merkelbach. 115° Oechsle. (wha???) RS of 71g is essentially invisible. Cuddle up to the very bones with this wine!

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese

GME-178

SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE, and not a ton of it – just two Fuders, so about 220 cases. This may be the most profound wine they have ever made. It is primordial Ürz-Würz, a Mt Rushmore that ought to have *their* two faces on it. Have I ever tasted a more powerfully elegiac Mosel wine?

2010 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese

GME-179

SOS : 2 // +

Sensational fragrance, both amazing fruit and a magma of slate; seriously, this is a monument of terroir, chiseled from a cliff-face of slate, with more sheer gravitas than in many self-important “old-vines” bottlings. 118°, RS an extremely moderate 61g – acidity and extracts off the charts.

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese

GME-181

SOS : 2 // +

A delirium of spice here! Peppermint and kiwi and scorched slate, a surmise of strawberry beneath an iridescent avalanche of spice and mint and slate.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese

GME-180

SOS : 2

A strong BA with 125° but only 92g RS – “only!” Only, you barely taste it. The wine is another monument hewn from the very stone; massively salty, a thick liquid that isn’t creamy. A noble sort of bitterness that isn’t sour. The finish is all campfire and iron. Astonishing, challenging wine.

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling BA

GME-182

SOS : 3 // +

I noticed that “#5” on the list. “How much did you make of this?” I asked Alfred. No one ever makes a lot of this kind of wine; usually you hear about “60 liters” or “120 liters,” but Alfred looked at me quizzically and said, as if it was self-evident *MMMM, a Fuder, (naturally)*. Ohh-kay. The first BA they’ve made since 1976, and they made an entire barrel of it – 1200 liters! And this is because they wouldn’t *make* such a wine unless they could make a barrel of it!

It was picked *en bloc* from two parcels, the great Lang Pichter and the equally great Sonnenuhr (downstream between the sundial and the road, perfectly sited and sheltered). The wine is amazingly gauzy and even refreshing, though with concentrated but refined, even noble fruit. When has a wine with 137° ever been so lithe, so bewitchingly spicy? Pure apple compote and cinammon. This really is exotic yet classic, not at all *recherché*. And you can drink a couple glasses! And open *another* bottle – there’s a fuder!

Older "Normal" Wines (which believe me, we are *glad* are still available!)

2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #7, #8

GME-161

SOS : 1 (5-17 years) // SOMMELIER ALERT!

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.

2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #16, #22

GME-163

SOS : 1 (6-20 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

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.

2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #21

GME-164

SOS : 1 (7-19 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

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.



Dry German Wine

Florian Weingart told me an interesting story. “When my father’s helping out our private customers, he always asks them what they want to taste, and of course they invariably answer *Trocken*. So he shows them the dry wines, and they taste and write their orders. Then when he goes to the cellar to pack the wines, he leaves an unmarked bottle for them to taste while they’re waiting. When he returns the customers always say *My God, what was that, it was wonderful! Can we add a case to our order?* And of course this is a Spätlese with residual sugar.”

You do, I hope, know what this means. In today’s Germany, no one will even taste a wine they think will be “sweet.” You have to trick them and hope their simple senses and wits take over. This year we were at Theo Minges’ again on a Saturday, and observed the parade of customers tasting and carrying wines away, and I didn’t hear a single one ask for anything but *Trocken* wine – not to mention few of them asked even to taste Riesling. (Theo makes Pinots also, and a bunch of reds.)

As I get older I find I drink a rather higher proportion of dry wines than before. I key it to my food, of course. It’s good that options exist, and I can enjoy a dry Riesling when it’s called for and an off-dry one when it’s called for. As it so often is in your fusion-y restaurants. Those options are in mortal peril in today’s Germany, which seems to wish to insist on a sort of divine right of dryness.

Last summer I did a dry Riesling seminar for the Society Of Wine Educators. Germans and Austrians, not as a contest but as a contrast. The stated theme of the tasting was “If these are so good then why doesn’t anyone buy them?” Because they are, and you don’t, or don’t often enough. This experienced roomful of professionals couldn’t enlighten me either. My German friends are bewildered. Even my Austrian business skews heavily to Grüner Veltliner, which outsells Riesling by a factor of four to one.

Here’s what I think. We like to say we like to drink dry wines. Even if we really don’t. Also, we like to drink dry wines as long as they’re not especially dry. They have to be smooth, round and generous. You’ll be outraged if you’re an exception to these rules, but all I can say is I wish there were multitudes of dudes like you.

The Germans, though, are quite another matter. They’re much of the way to suffocating their Riesling culture.

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!) “This is like a pianist sitting down to play and saying *I won’t play the octaves immediately above or below middle-C, but only the two extreme ends of the keyboard.*”

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.

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*.

But 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 put it another way. Suppose the earth passed through the tail of a comet or some such thing, with the result the dry German Rieslings suddenly became uniformly good. Hard to believe, I know, but work with me. Now they’re all good, and the Germans rejig their entire production to them. Nothing but very good dry wines, just what you want, or what they think you want. My question: would the world gain more than it *lost*?

Because what’s happened is we’ve gained

another source for something we already had. But lost the one and only source for something astonishing and miraculous, because we didn't know how to cherish it.

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.

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.

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 them. 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*.

Remember any little feature of fashion from the last ten years. Doesn't matter which one. While it was trendy we had to have it, and thought it looked good, and we looked good in it. A few years later when the new trend came along we adopted it. All well and good. But admit it: you look in the closet at the old stuff, whatever it is, wide lapels, four-button blazers, hip-huggers or bell-bottoms or flowered neckties, and you think *That looks ridiculous; what was I thinking!* Fashion exerts a kind of hypnosis, and if this is true of fashion imagine how true it is of dogma. "Wrong?" I think not. Misled, and therefore dishonest with themselves.

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.

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

simple.

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

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

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

Later on I had this note from Weingart, which is so apropos I reproduce it verbatim: "While 'Anarchie' maybe implicates a total abandoning of normal categories that is actually not what I intended. The 'Anarchie' is a natural — non-chaptalized — wine and we would like to show this on the label by using the Prädikat. 'Anarchie' refers to the fact that it crossed my plans when it stopped fermenting naturally but in doing so revealed a perfect harmony

that I would not have found intentionally. It does not fit in the category halbtrocken but should we care if the result is ideal balance? 'Anarchie' just likes to say that every wine is an individual, and that this wine taught me to respect that by naturally finding a balance of residual sugar. We don't want to negate the necessity of regulations and categories but find that life itself and enjoying wine is an experience beyond categories."

Oh, AMEN!

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 collect 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.

The whole spastic conniptions of the VDP, with their 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 GEWÄCHS" 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.

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 tosimplify?!?!? 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.

I wonder whether VDP shouldn't stand for "vigorous dissent prohibited," or "violent damage proposed," because it is distressing to watch them pratfall around cleaning up their self-made messes

by making yet greater ones. It is nothing short of appalling to observe them propagandize so sneakily on behalf of their dry-at-all- costs agenda. I'll repeat, if a vineyard is "great" then it is *great no matter what "style" of wine happens to be made from it*. Certainly, mandate allowable grape varieties, and feel free to have a nice feel-good agenda as regards sustainable viticulture – and then shit all over it with the stupidly heavy pretentious bottles they use – but do not dictate grams of residual sugar.

What then is the drinker to do? How can she know if the wine she proposes to consume is dry or otherwise?

I have a "marketing" solution to this problem, which again I'm glad to give away. It is to associate flavor profiles with clear icons.

DRY (up to around 12 grams or so) will be **STONE**.
OFF-DRY (13-27 grams) will be **APPLE**.
BALANCED-SWEET (28-55 grams) will be **PLUM**.
DECIDEDLY SWEET (56-85 grams) will be **PEACH**.
DESSERT-SWEET (86 grams +) will be **HONEY**.

You put a little drawing on the label. You call the wine "Grosses Gewächs Stone" or whatever applies. You honor the greatness of the vineyard *without* sneaking in your agenda on dryness. And then you can reconcile the two currently disparate families of "product," the nobly dry wine of pedigree versus the yucky sweet stuff still subject to the whole "Prädikat" system.

So if you're, say, Andy Spreitzer, you no longer have to have "Lenchen Erstes Gewächs" astride several sweeter wines from the same vineyard labeled Kabinett or Spätlese or Auslese ("Tell me again why those wines aren't great growths even though the vineyard is the same???"); you'd have a nice tidy range of Erstes Gewächs according to their sweetness style, and if you had a crappy vintage or a bad cask you'd declassify it to "Rheingau Riesling" and have done with it.

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.

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 it on as many sweet wines as he likes, because of course the sweet shit is infra-dig, not only beneath ones dignity but beneath ones 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.

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.

Joh. Jos. Christoffel

Mosel // Ürzig



vineyard area // 4 hectares
annual production // 3,200 cases
top sites & soil types // **Ürziger Würzgarten** (red slate); **Erdener Treppchen** (blue slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

It was, almost predictably, a deft and refined vintage here. Though they had virtually no musts below 100°, and the wines were two weeks in bottle, everything showed in the digitally clear and charmingly delineated manner of the modern era at this estate. Hans-Leo was so convinced this was his best-ever vintage, in fact, that I requested a vertical tasting be held next year, taking just one wine (ideally the Würzgarten Spätlese), and scrolling back to about 2001.

In general the wines continue to present with polish and brilliance and digital focus. (Eymael's own Mönchhof wines are rather more baroque.) They are certainly more masterly than Merkelbach, and at many

points in each vintage they are wines that raise your eyebrows and send a flush of pleasure through your senses. They're high-bred and racy, and at their best they touch upon mystical qualities.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

GJC-191

SOS : 2

Pleasingly angular, digitally focused and hi-def, certainly plausible as a Spät, and if you have a long memory, as an Auslese. Stylish and almost sleek, with a really walnut-y finish.

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

GJC-189

SOS : 2 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. A really beautiful fragrance; the palate is a miniature of the 1-star Auslese, licorice and wisteria, bright and dancy-springy, as if it trailed slately streamers in the air behind it. By no means "Kabinett," but they've learned a lot since 2006 – these wines work.

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.*

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese

GJC-192

SOS : 2 // ++

CORE-LIST WINE. And a superb, light-ish Auslese – yes I know it's a Spätlese, and it does have a refined shimmer of fruit and great fresh contrasts and relief, but there's also the slight underlying syrup that identifies Auslese. Not "sweet" as such; just a concentrated little core. Extra fine wine.

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese

GJC-190

SOS : 2 // ++

Exquisitely refined aromas, and the palate is stunningly bright and spearminty yet also herbal and slatey; hyper-animated, with a fascinating tilt toward dryness, so that a swollen molten slatey iron shows; the finish is almost caraway seed and juniper. Remarkable, original, nearly explosive wine.

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese *

6/750ml // GJC-193

SOS : 3 // +

Some fruit from the 2-star parcel is in here, and it wasn't clear whether this was a small-vintage expedient or if the range was to be compressed forever. I fancy it seems to show fuller fruit than usual, but perhaps that's power of suggestion. A hint of botrytis also shows. The angular fruit is determinedly streamlined yet also shows a mirabelle jam tertiary flavor. This is wonderful, but I miss that original and singular old 1-star – there really wasn't another Mosel wine like it – and I hope it comes back.

2010 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese **

6/750ml // GJC-194

SOS : 3 // + (+)

The aromas are a little mute, and the palate is turbulent and nubby and with kitten-teeth of acidity, yet it's drenched with internal perfume, and recent bottling has surely twisted it into an obdurate knot. What does show is compelling.

2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese ***

6/750ml // GJC-195

SOS : 3 // ++

Botrytis shows but doesn't obtrude. 2010 was some kind of electric charge here in Ürzig/Erden, as if the stone itself were zapped. This amazing wine is almost gauzy but incandescent with spice and fruit, and with an elegant restraint that conveys a kind of melting, a swoon of fennel and lavender. Truly a *vino di meditazione*.



Heribert Kerpen

Mosel // Wehlen



vineyard area // 7.5 hectares
annual production // 6,250 cases
top sites & soil types // Wehlener Sonnenuhr (blue devonian slate);
Graacher Himmelreich and Domprobst (blue devonian slate with loam)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

My old friend Martin Kerpen's wines fall into two groups. Up to and including most Auslesen, they are what I'd call "shady" wines. They refresh the way sudden shade does on a warm day, and they have a cool kind of glow, they are woody and leafy and dappy. Once botrytis enters the picture they seem to about-face, and become much more overt.



All the wines are done the old-school way, in Fuders, as I like them best. But that is as far as I think one can go in describing them. It's as much as you can be certain of getting in every vintage. But compared to, say, Christoffel or Schaefer, whose wines are to some extent predictable – delightfully so – with Martin you'll sometimes be surprised. You can taste everywhere else, you can reach any conclusions you like about the nature of a vintage, but you can't quite guess what Kerpen did until you're in his winery tasting.

Though I'm here at roughly the same time every year,

vintages develop at different speeds, and this year Martin's wines were especially surly and unfinished. So I had to peer through the periscope (and through a heavy gauze of botrytis) to suss what to show you. I know what Martin can do – I know what he has done for a quarter-century – and I expect to find the wines for more comely and better-behaved when I taste them again.

But in the interim, I err on the side of caution. I will gamble with my uncertainty, up to a point, but not with your trust.

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.

2010 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

GKE-133

SOS : 1 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. Now look, I like some of Kerpen's dry wines, I've offered them, and as a rule he's better than many Moselaners at them. But '10 was perhaps unkind to the idiom as a whole. This was the first "normal" wine on the table, and it had, *immediately*, such a pretty fragrance I wanted to weep and scream over all the wines devastated by dryness. So, what have we got here? Brassica, sorrel, lime and vanilla, and the tiniest nip of botrytis; it's a balsam classic, finely smoky and dry-feeling; there's a modestly phenolic texture, and a lot of salty complexity. However, the "phenolic texture and nip of botrytis" may well be gone after bottling.

2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

GKE-129

SOS : 2 (8-22 years) // +

As you see, a consistently *fine* vintage for Martin, though (for me) rather less successful among the dry wines than '08 was. This Spät was both riper and yet – at first – more pensive than the Kab. I'm a guy who's immediately intrigued by anything that's present but quiet. This wine isn't flirtatious, but it's absorbing and mysterious. Shorter in perceived sweetness but longer in juiciness than the Kab, and with a fine minerality softly but thoroughly embedded. The alert drinker will see at once the singular way of Mosel Riesling – so loveable yet also so serious, exhaling its particular lyric gravity.

2010 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese * (Artist Label)

GKE-134

SOS : 3

Our little bird in his jaunty boat. Here's a wine rich enough not just to manage but to warrant its botrytis; a very concentrated mega-Spätlese; has the toasty singe like a '93, a very easy wine to read and like, all apple-butter and candied lemon, with an almost buttery finish.

2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese *

GKE-135

SOS : 2 (8-24 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

LIBRARY RELEASE. Want to be completely convinced how totally wrong most of us were about 2003? Here's an almost adult Riesling that's wonderfully balanced and limpid, and shows all the beeswax and chamomile of the vintage to perfection. It's not slim but it's quite graceful and its weight is elegantly dispersed; it's barely "sweet" but wonderfully drinkable.



Willi Schaefer

Mosel // Graach



vineyard area // 4 hectares
annual production // 2,900 cases
top sites & soil types // Graacher Himmelreich and Domprobst
(devonian slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

That dear man! Willi unearthed a copy of the pricelist I saw when I first visited him in May of 1978. I recall it had nothing below Auslese on it – unthinkable today. It certainly made for an interesting tasting, that first time.

This time we tasted the wines up the hill, in the house that Willi and Esther now live in, which they exchanged with the family manor in Graach in which Christoph and his strapping young family now reside. And which

was basically a construction site when we were there. So we tasted elsewhere, up the hill, outdoors in the weird March warmth, with a big view over the Burg Landshut and the Mosel valley. Schaefer's house is very much out-of-the-way, and I'll bet Willi appreciates

its isolation, especially since he's still completely active in the vineyard and with the wines. Now at the end of the day he can get away a little.

Christoph and I mused a little walking through the empty rooms where he grew up. It was odd to see them without the furniture I'd seen so many times before. I told him what a charming child he was. In case you think this

was nostalgic, nuh-uh. First of all Christoph towers over me, so it's not like I can pat his head. And then there's a lovely ageless quality always here. I looked at old pictures of Willi, with mutton-chop sideburns and a biker scowl

and I thought first of all, no wonder his daughter had her death-metal phase, and then that Willi still has that wild child in him.

I have rarely seen wines that provoke as much affection as Schaefer's wines do. They are of course unusually admirable, but

people are fond of them in a lovely way, and no one who loves these wines would be surprised to learn that the family who make them are complete sweethearts.

So, this barely-4 hectare estate has more than 100 parcels, half of which are over 50 years old and ungrafted. And Schaefer's make as many different wines as are called for.



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

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

2010 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett
SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GWS-186

When Willi and I meet we mostly kibbitz. We don't talk about the vintage until we taste it, and I had no earthly idea what to expect; '10 is a vintage of *big* wine and Schaefer is a producer of *delicate* wine, so?

This was what I hoped I'd find, outsized concentration and *dicht* and lavish juiciness, yet silvery and wet-forestry; miraculously lambent and sanguine though riven with energy, and with the sweetest, purest, longest wash of apple and pink peppercorn and slate on the finish. Wow; off to quite a start!

2010 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett
SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GWS-187

Julie Dalton writes:

"Citrus bounces out of the glass in the form of meyer lemons and key limes... then the tiny alyssum flowers show their pretty faces. The palate is crunchy with minerality... kind of like if you somehow collected the rainwater runoff from the slate itself... and slurped it. All of this is tied together with thin curly ribbon made of granny smith apple peel."

Leif Sundström notes:

"The aromas show exciting candied ginger, apple orchard, pineapple core, candied Meyer lemon peel. There's a bass note here that verges on cereal grains, but is more dusty-charmer. Tangerine oil develops. A bit caty-cassis here too, feral and pheromone-y. The palate is at first seductively elusive. Flavors waver from yarrow tea to tropical fruits, with surprising structure and grip. The clarity is pure, and the concentration leads through the mid palate with such energy you basically forget how dense the wine is. The palate is cleansed with the fresh Meyer essence and left completely alighted and clean (but not empty). Tangerine oil finish, rich and warm toned. Ginger spice lingers here; it's sassy but so pretty pretty."

As always, more starched and at-attention; overtly slatey and stony and with the clearest green apple; some wines show outside size but this shows inside size, it's like free-run apple juice with semi-precious stones dissolved in it; the wine starts out assertive and palpably seems to melt, dissolve and soften, the way you feel if you see your beloved across a crowded room.

2010 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese
SOS : 2 // +

GWS-188

Unusually exotic, even papaya-like, and while it's as "cool" as these often are, this is the most explicit Sonnenuhr Willi has ever shown me. Racy and sexy, perfumed with narcissus and freesia. The merest surmise of botrytis shows on the tertiary finish.

2010 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese
SOS : 2 // (+)

GWS-189

More energetic now; as commending as a fanfare; botrytis appears but correctly; there's an almost peppery finish preceded by aloe and wintergreen; not as developed as the preceding wines, but seriously long and poised to deepen and fill out.

2010 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese
SOS : 1 // ++ // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GWS-190

It's AP#5 but it's also the only one, so no worries. The wine is so good it's almost appalling – it nearly makes you angry. It is digitally micro-focused slate, as if it were being examined through those glasses the jewelers wear; it is *charged*, shot through with detail, not to mention the gorgeous, searching flavor itself. It seems to gather attention to itself by a magnetism attracted to silence.

2010 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #1
SOS : 2 // +

GWS-191

Streamlined clear aromas with *good* botrytis; the palate has talc, mint and high-toned almost ginger-y fruit; recalls a '75 BA in fact, in its trebly quince-like spiciness.

2010 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese

GWS-192

SOS : 3

Again, the only one. Here we have a forthright, scrutable Auslese, jammed with fruit and with pointed acidity.

2010 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #10

GWS-193

SOS : 3 // (+)***Leif Sundström notes:***

"The aromas primarily lean in a floral direction, but also leaning toward Bosc pears (if they were purple). Of the Auslesen this is the jewel of the bunch, the creamiest of the group with the most purple and red tones. Still great pure apple here with some pear, cassis and rhubarb and whatever the hell fruit is lavender in color. The concentrated slate comes through more in texture than taste, and even leaves a salty tinge on the finish that works to balance the concentrated fruit. The elements are extremely dense, but less tightly wound than the Himmelreich. I love the white tea meets oolong element on the palate here, along with subtle virginia tobacco spice and a slight white rose hue. Of the Auslesen this, I think, is the most densely complex fo' shizzle."

As evening came on, the wines showed more midday brilliance. This wine virtually cries out from the glass – it is not calm, even as the outside light grows amber and glowy. It is forceful, even adamant. What will it melt into, when will it dissolve?

2010 Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA

12/375ml // GWS-194H

SOS : 4 // ++

Here, oddly, we rise above the clamor of the Auslesen and arrive in a realm of purity and stillness. Even with the generous botrytis the overall effect is of the sublime. The empty glass smells like a drippingly ripe peach.



vineyard area // 3.5 hectares
annual production // 1,250 cases
top sites & soil types // **Dhroner Hofberg** (weathered devonian slate with quartzite);
Piesporter Goldtröpfchen (blue slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling:



It was the first warm day, and everyone was euphoric, so we tasted outside among the busily remonstrating sparrows. I don't think I'd ever tasted wine with sunglasses on. I was being extremely critical because I've learned that wine always tastes better, more vivid in the fresh air, especially if the air is on the cool side. I don't know about "fruit days" or "root days" or any of that stuff; I suspect I myself have "Spam days" or "partially hydrogenated vegetable oil" days. But this day was clement and sweet, cloudless sky, full moon at night. So I swore at the wines and tried to make them yucky, just so I wouldn't be seduced.

We looked at a couple pictures of the grapes, and saw the difference between the OK and not-OK botrytis (which was separated on a sorting table). Dhron itself may be out of the mainstream – it is in a side valley off the Mosel, and the Adam estate is in a nondescript house at the edge of the village – but Andreas himself is among the most cosmopolitan vintners I know, highly plugged in and au-courant.

OK, I'll admit it; I feel a little smug. I've been saying for what, nine years now, that Andreas Adam would be a stellar estate, and already was making remarkable wines. And now he's done caught on. Here's what Jon Bonné, San Francisco Chronicle Wine Editor, had to say when he placed Adam's '08 Kabinett among his top-10 wines of the year (at #5):

2008 A.J. Adam Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Spatlese
(around \$40; Importer: Terry Theisel/Michael Skurnik Wines)

Andreas Adam, from the tiny Mosel town of Dhron, makes fewer than 1,000 cases a year, and his Rieslings burst with absolute purity. They are made with indigenous yeasts (a rarity in German Riesling) and no additions beyond

a bit of sulfur dioxide.

In a lean vintage that left some bottles too nervous and fragile, Adam's wines feature electrifying fruit and dense minerality.

I had plenty of great Rieslings to choose from this year, including a 1937 Steinberger Trockenbeerenauslese from the Rheingau's Staatsweinguter Eltville. But now I understand why Riesling lovers become giddy at seeing Adam's ornate label.

Yuh, giddy, that's me; giddy and smug. I'd like to be a better person, if only I could. Smug, baby!

As Andreas grows his estate (and his American importer watches smugly), he has options where he can buy land. It's heartening the degree to which he seeks to be identified with his home village of Dhron. He's picked up some parcels in Piesport also, but he was intrigued when I said I was unsure those vineyards were suited to his style. "What would be better?" he asked. "Well, I know it's farther away, but I'll bet you could get some vineyards in the Thörnicher Ritsch," I said. "Oh yes, that's a damnably good vineyard..." he answered. Perhaps

A.J. 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 set something in motion...?

“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 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.”

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.”

Next I ask about terroir.

“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 clayslate 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 mustoxidation 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.”

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 qualityminded 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)**

2010 Dhroner Riesling

GAD-043

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

As good a dry Mosel wine as I've ever tasted, especially from '10. Aromas are fresh and sappy, like a Styrian wine; balsam and those quince and allspice notes from sandy slate; a super-friendly food wine with a key-limey umami.

2010 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb

GAD-041

SOS : 1 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

More angular than the Dhroner, albeit not as dry; as often happens here, these have the lambent, lapidary quality of other sanguine wines like Dönnhoff's or Nikolaihof's. Sweet hay and peach-blossom fruit, becoming more refined and compact – the 50% steel shows – and the whisper of sweetness is charming. Walnuty on the finish.

2010 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Feinherb

6/750ml // GAD-045

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

110°, from the severest terraces, planted in the early 40s; an iridescent shimmering brilliance, almost minty, with a tart-plum fruit and a thick finish with echoes of slate and Empire apples.

2010 Hofberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs

6/750ml // GAD-044

SOS : -1

Steely mineral power and a craggy palate profile; a bit radishy the way Kögl and Zwerithaler can be; a wine for lovers of liquefied iron and pulverized rocks; leads to an equally huge-feeling finish of molten terroir and the smoke from burning shoots.

2010 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett

GAD-040

SOS : 2 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This has the *purest* fragrance of old-school Mosel Riesling. It's why we love it with a heart almost childlike, one we hardly know we own. This is sleeker than most recent vintages – a "mere" 87° with 10.8g acidity, which is not unnoticeable, but the slightly arch charm is beautiful for its angularity, and the wine shows absurd length.

2010 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese

GAD-042

SOS : 2 // ++

50% botrytis, and a BA-flavor enters the picture, which you'll love if that's the taste you love! The high notes of fruit really lift this out of the generically "rich," and makes the wine animated and vinous, though it's still baroque.

2010 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Auslese

12/375ml // GAD-046H

SOS : 3 // +

50% botrytis, and a BA-flavor enters the picture, which you'll love if that's the taste you love! The high notes of fruit really lift this out of the generically "rich," and makes the wine animated and vinous, though it's still baroque.

2010 Dhron Hofberg Riesling BA

12/375ml // GAD-047H

SOS : 4

Honestly, I couldn't see into this massive young sweet wine, so I will spare you my words. Judged on clarity and containment, and on the grower's track record, I'm comfy to offer it.

Reuscher-Haart

Mosel // Piesport



vineyard area // 6 hectares
annual production // 4,200 cases
top sites & soil types // Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr,
Falkenberg, Günterslay and Treppchen (blue devonian slate)
grape varieties // 90% Riesling, 5% Regent, 5% Riavner

These old-school wines need a lot of time, so I'm glad to still have '08s to offer. They also dramatize the contrast inherent in the '08-'09 tandem. On the other hand, the 2010s here are ludicrously good. Everything about the vintage is good for this grower. The high acid gives the wines a shapeliness and outline they sometimes lack, the fruit ripeness doesn't run toward their usual exotic direction but remains green-appley, and most of all the density of the vintage gives these wines a marvelously swollen mid-palate that I really don't recall since the '90 vintage.

We had a talk about ripeness, because I have often found Piesport at its best in less ripe vintages, when its voodoo fruit is more anchored to some tangible structure. This came up because the father Hugo Schwang can remember periods when underripeness was the norm, whereas his son Mario can not. "Do you ever think yields may have gotten too low?" I asked.

"Perhaps," said Hugo, "But I think even more important is the trend away from the old heart-binding we used to do here on the Mosel." (n.b. this binding method can still be seen; it consists of two stalks curving away and back toward the trunk from opposite sides, in the shape of a Valentine-heart.) He went on; "The new system keeps more leaves, which increases assimilation."

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. These are Piesporters as Justen might

make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn't do the casktasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these wines aren't really made for our frantic world. SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more attentive mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to notice stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured yeast wines can display.

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!

2010 Piesporter Riesling

1.0 liter // GRH-067L

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Quite a nice fragrance! Has the brassica of '10 and more fruit than this normally shows – actually this is the best it has *ever* been, appley and long, perfectly balanced and delightful

2010 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett

GRH-068

SOS : 2

Atypically compact and focused; the acidity is prominent but not blatant, and we are into some serious apple action here; cherry blossom nuances and a stern, salty finish.

2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett

GRH-061

SOS : 2 (5-17 years)

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.

2010 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese

GRH-069

SOS : 2 // +

Smells like an entire apple cellar. Remarkable density, and below the tightly coiled malic fruit is equally tightly coiled malic acidity. The '10 saltiness is very strong here, and it has that uncanny paperweight density.



Carl Loewen / Schmitt-Wagner

Mosel // Leiwen



vineyard area // 12 hectares
annual production // 8,300 cases
top sites & soil types // Leiwener Laurentiuslay and Klostergarten;
Thörnicher Ritsch (grey slate); Longuicher Maximin Herrenberg (red slate)
grape varieties // Riesling

Our hero's on the move again. This time he's removing all village names from his labels, so that "Thörnicher Ritsch" will become, simply, "Ritsch." With abject apologies to my colleagues who do label-compliance work, I do think removing superfluous words from labels is a good thing.

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, sponti-type wines made in Fuder, old-school Mosels, the way I adore them.

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.

Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands "among the best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the flurbereinigung was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls." Another great site, he says, is the Thörnicher Ritsch. Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prowl for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer's 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."

I'd have to say the 2010s coincided with a regrettable tendency toward making more and more dry wines here.

Carl Loewen/Schmitt-Wagner 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" chalkymineral 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.

I'd just come from another estate where I'd enjoyed many of the dry Rieslings, so I know I wasn't off my Trocken oats. Karl is a self-stated lover of light delicate wines, but the herd-mentality for dry-at-all-costs within Germany is pulling him toward what he can actually sell. And in a massively endowed year like '10, this makes for some decidedly odd wines.

I had much the same impression of his Longuichers. I don't at all mind that Karl's wines are bigger than Bruno's were – I miss that nearly extinct light style, but times

change and everyone's wines are bigger now. But you can't just pick them riper and have done with it. If the raw material is markedly more intense than every other aspect of the wines must change along. Where Bruno's wines had a delicate licorice note, Karl's have a peppery intensity. I'm going to offer one I don't think is ideally balanced, because this may be a quirk of mine and you might find the wine electric and sensational.

I'm also going to make a kind of legacy offering of some back-vintages they still have at Schmitt-Wagner.

2010 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett

GCL-068

SOS : 1 // +

CORE-LIST WINE. I took the less sweet of two versions offered because it was sleeker, clearer, more playful and animated; mussels and peonies; the wine has angles and curves and complex malic fruit; the coolness and sorrelly green richness, focus and grace are delightful; this is 2010 at its most winning. And you *barely* taste the 48 g of RS.

2010 Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

GCL-069

SOS : 2 // ++

DO NOT MISS THIS WINE! The 2009 was one of the five best wines I offered from that vintage, and this was on the short-list for wine-of-the-vintage this year. It is that good. In fact it is so masterly I wonder that it's still such a sleeper. It isn't expensive. If it said "Wehlener Sonnenuhr" people would be talking about de-throning J.J. Prüm.

The palate is on the dry side based on the buffering of gigantic extract. A massively fascinating fragrance, a witch's brew of greens and yellows and *pulsating* slate; the palate is drenched and charged with density and sheer flavor, with the electric charge of great wine. The swell and undertow and length are mind-bending. I consider this a monument to Riesling at its most resplendent, profound and beautiful.

2008 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese

GCL-062

SOS : 2 (7-22 years) // ++

The last two Ritsch wines were alas dry – or Auslese. Welcome to Germany. So I dug back two years so you could see this insanely great vineyard in the form of an everyday wine, in its most perfectly complex and incisive form. Chartreuse aromas, extraordinary animation and brilliance; pointed acids are overcome by lime and spearmint; the wine is spastically alive, every scintilla of flavor jerking and twitching – no repose in this baby!

2010 Ritsch Riesling Auslese

GCL-070

SOS : 3 // ++

Oh man, a sizzling lurid orgy of green. Greengreengreen; lime, balsam, verbena, wintergreen and chartreuse, and the palate actually runs *cool* and silvery despite its massive richness; this wine is in '05 territory with its density and *loving* botrytis.

Older Vintages of Carl Schmitt-Wagner Wines

Bruno is liquidating his cellar, at least in lots large enough to offer you. These range between five and ten cases, sometimes a little more. They are priced to *move*, as it were.

The questions are these. One, how much do we really care to offer our customers wines that are no longer infantile, or does “the newest vintage” trump all other concerns? The second and for me deeper question is, what will happen to the world when wines like this are gone? For they will be, within the next generation and maybe even sooner. And then what? A whole community of wines like display pieces? They look cool on your mantle but they have no actual *use* except to look cool?

Yes, a few holdouts will swim against the tide – if they can compete – but I want to pause here just a minute and enumerate these endangered virtues.

Tact. The idea that a wine exists in order to *assist*, to keep you company and wash your food down and make people happy *without* having to be the center of attention.

Delicacy. The quality of flavor is apart from the amount of flavor. Lightness is a virtue to be cherished. It is not an excuse for lack of ripeness or overlarge yields (as if 115 year old vines could provide them!).

Harmony. Specifically the kind of harmony where you don’t attend to sweetness because the wine is such a perfect entirety you don’t need to fuss over the pieces.

These wines are disappearing along with the generation who gave them to us. The world will be a poorer place. More entertaining for sure, but the soul doesn’t feed on entertainment. So here are a few voices from a civilized and gentle era. As I tasted them all I kept writing was the word: *perfect*.

2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese

GSW-042

SOS : 1 // +

Leif Sundström writes:

“So pure, clear, clean, like spring water bathed in by nympho nymphs. Aromas with hints of pine and carob and sweet herbs and flecks of white chocolate. But this doesn’t mean rich – it’s light, clean, with some gentle phenolic grip supporting a lovely texture and the surprising subtle strawberry confiture tones. Awesome! 2003 haters will be shown their foolish pride soon enough.”

Perfect example of how we mis-read this vintage; in perfect shape, totally sassafrassy, a drink-me-you-dog! wine.

2004 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese

GSW-045

SOS : 2 // +

A juice-bomb, so easy and loveable, bright and greeny and vivid and by no means too “sweet” – certainly many modern Späts (and more than a few Kabinetts) are as sweet or sweeter.

2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

GSW-060

SOS : 1 (6-22 years) // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

High-toned and sleek, more overtly salty, lacier and precise; an articulate wine of elegant diction, girlish, a gamine of piquancy and mischief; spearminty and flinty—could almost be a Bernkasteler; in all another archetypal Mosel of the old school, the fine handsome old school; blessings on it. May it never die. Drinking like a dream right now.

2007 Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese

GSW-070

SOS : 2 // +

Not a misprint; this is actually a higher section of the vineyard called simply “Herrenberg.” The wine’s in mint condition and will be perfect at the table. It’s fuller and richer and shows less caraway than the Maximiner.

2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese

GSW-061

SOS : 1

All I wrote was "This is fun!" So, this was fun.

1995 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese

GSW-072

SOS : 2

It's a rather dry Auslese, with the botrytis and fruit of the vintage. Certainly a food-wine. Almost ready (!).

2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese

GSW-071

SOS : 2 // ++

Leif Sundström writes:

"Bright silvery acidity - in the lime oil and lemon essence camp. Aromas of delectable, gilded meyer lemon and subtle orange blossoms. SO primary the acidity, such greenness - but not hard - in the silvery camp with hints at green tea and a wonderful (actually) BRIGHT finish of lime zest, that leaves the palate coool and salivating."

Just five cases here. It's rich and classic, still by no means so sweet as to preclude savory dishes; developing ideally. Reminds us why the vintage was deemed a classic.

Trust me, you need a head start on these. The wines are dauntingly ageless. A month ago I tasted, among other things, an 85 *Kab* (still tasting young at 26 years), a 66 *Spät* that tasted like a 79, an astonishing 61 *Spät* (50 years old and still almost boyish!). And I think of the money being spent on White Burgundies that taste oxidized in 3-4 years!?



von Othegraven

Saar // Kanzem



vineyard area // 16 hectares
annual production // 5,500 cases
top sites // **Kanzemer Altenberg** (devonian slate); **Ockfener Bockstein** (grey slate);
Wiltinger Kupp (slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

It was quite a day last year; the tiny little beads of snow drifting down in little vertical necklaces, the gray day and the busy birds. Easy to drop into the spell on a day like that, and easy too, to overrate the wines. But, I didn't. The wines remained what they were, whatever my mystic rapture. And this year, we arrived on a clearing mild day after driving three hours from Champagne. So I was buzzed and jangly and not even slightly mystic, and still the wines spoke their lambent spell.

Continuity will be guaranteed by cellar master Andreas Barth, who stays contentedly on, and who has been making extraordinary wine.

I believe deeply that wine carries an echo of the place it was grown. Call it a *context* if you're less mystic-minded than I am. The Saar valley is singular in many ways. Close as it is to Trier, it seems entirely removed. Unlike the fjord of the Mittelmosel, the Saar is more open country, and vineyards mix with forests and pasture. It is deliciously relaxing. Quiet and verdant and birdy. In massage they talk about the cleansing breath, the exhale that sends the tension away. Coming to the Saar is like taking cleansing breaths, one after another.

And so when I taste the wines, something in them speaks of this place where they grow, both its serenity and its drama. It can't be helped, or at least I can't help it. At the same time, though, I am evaluating each of them as wine *qua* wine. However much I may love it because it speaks to my soul, the wine has to work by itself, has to have something convincing to say to you in your shop or restaurant, and to *me* when I taste it months later in the throb and crash of a trade tasting.

It's the only way I know how to respond – how to be alive – by combining a strict professional appraisal with

whatever arises spontaneously from within, impulses or impressions or dreams or just emotion. I can't transfer that to you, but we're both human beings and I want you to know it is there. Something is there. These wines offer an opportunity to pass through a curtain.

Hugh Johnson says that great wine demands to be talked about. I used to agree, but now I'm not so sure. Something of the miracle of great wine is amplified in the echo-chamber of conversation, among people who share this love and are fond of one another. But I am really beginning to wonder about the experience of drinking wine by oneself, alone and calm, answering to no one, no need to produce affect or to "contribute" to a conversation. This I think is valid too. Not always, and maybe not even very often, but just as a way to sound the inner voice from time to time.

I also think there are gregarious wines and also introspective wines, and I love those autonomous little beings who don't look up when you enter the room. I have an amazingly clear rapport with wines like that.

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

von Othegraven at a glance // Venerable estate on the Saar, making intense soil-imprinted wines which are true Saar-archetypes.

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.

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 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

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 Josmeyer 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 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. 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.



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. Niewodnicanski came on the scene at Van Volxem and really shook things up, opting to make extremely dense, concentrated old-school wines mostly chewy and

2010 “VO” Riesling

GOG-022

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

That first sniff of Riesling after a week in Champagne was a delectable homecoming. I couldn't help but sigh. This is the basic calling-card wine of the estate, on the dry side but – bless them – not legally Trocken. The *fülle* of '10 takes this dry-enough wine into realms of hedonism, and we get a lovely juicy wine with a light sorrel and brassica note leading into a smooth finish of quince and verbenä. Best served quite cool but not iced.

2009 Bockstein Riesling Grosses Gewächs

GOG-021

SOS : 0 // + // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This is an absolutely *beautiful* dry Mosel wine; like Selbach's amazing '09 Schmitt Trocken, it proves both that it can be done and it makes you less tolerant of the many times it isn't done. *First offering*, and it's smoky and juicy, complex and mineral, and even gulpable, with no holes or missing pieces. Compared to the more starched and stony Altenberg, this has a more delicately dusty minerality beneath the marvelous quince-y fruit.

2010 Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage

GOG-023

SOS : 2 // ++

Oh this is just *insanely* gorgeous! Have I ever tasted a prettier, more archetypal Saar Riesling? Quince, ginger, wintergreen, it was acutely painful to spit. Lavender and wisteria and spice, and a firm, minty-mineral finish.

2010 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage

GOG-024

SOS : 2 // ++

CORE-LIST WINE. More exotic than the Bockstein; more solid too, it stands up straighter (whereas the Bockstein just dances); maple-cured ham aromas, but with air this swells and broadens, and is just a stone's flick from perfection; a glorious counterpoint of salts, minerals, fruits, dramatically saltier and more explicitly dialectical than Bockstein – longer also. Just perhaps not quite as adorable.

2010 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben Erste Lage

GOG-025

SOS : 2

Botrytis appears, and it's an open question how it will eventually integrate. Right now it's riding atop the fruit, not melted through. That said, it's a clean botrytis and it gives a huge saltiness and an agreeably gingery snap, slightly bitter note.



Reference

EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED

2009 is turning into the mannerly, attractive and substantive vintage I thought it would. Its only visible problem is the ladybug-band stretching east-west from Nierstein into some of the Nahe, and you won't think it's a problem if you like grassy wines. The vintage is so sanguine and even-tempered it's easy to underrate it, as I suspect I might have a year ago. It does not assert itself, but instead feels relaxed and confident. I think its fruit will head in the beeswax and chamomile direction over time, much as the '99s did – though '09 is far better and more concentrated – and much as the best '03s have done. A handful of Pfalz wines can seem somewhat heavy-footed, but overall this is a graceful and articulate vintage. After 2007, it's the most reliable year of the past decade.

2008 is only just now being reviewed by the leading journals. In the last decade the vintage takes its place among the “smaller,” but in the '90s it would have stood among the best and in the '80s among the very best. It's a Riesling-lover's vintage, less of a crowd-pleaser than '09. For drinkers on the delicate silvery wavelength, '08 gives a pleasure that's growing all the more uncommon.

In our topsy-turvy climate, we have to ask when we'll get another true “Kabinett” vintage, exactly the inverse of twenty years ago when it was *Auslese* that was scarce. I remain certain that '08 will offer lovely earlyterm pleasure. That said, my instincts regarding its aging curve are to expect periods of leanness and asymmetry between the end of the primary phase and the start of the tertiary. I have another notion I can't explain and couldn't begin to defend, that 2008 will drink fantastically when it's *really* old, i.e., 30–40 years old. I gleam a germ of complexity in these wines that's buried under their young energy.

THE BEST OF THE LAST DECADE

Looking at the period 2000–2010, it seems to me the very best German wines are the *2005 Mosel and Nahe wines*, which remain a highwater mark of my entire life with these things, bearing serious comparison with the great 1971.

A close 2nd are the *2001 Mosel and Nahe wines*, which are aging classically and justifying their early promise.

The best vintage overall is *2007*. If it failed to reach quite the gleaming summits of the best of '05 and '01, it was a vintage with no weaknesses and with the highest average level. The most misunderstood vintage was, of course, *2003*. There were lots of flabby wines, I know, but the best '03s are monumental and will age as splendidly

as the '59 Spätlese I drank last week in the Rheingau. I think we insisted on misunderstanding this vintage because we were loaded up on '01s and '02s and were looking for reasons not to buy. Or maybe we were just inexperienced, or obtuse. I sometimes wonder what room there really is for *profundity* in these times. It seems to almost annoy us. It is too demanding. No matter; the best '03s will have the last laugh.

The most perplexing vintage seems to be *2002*. It seemed to be the smaller sibling of '01 at first, or '01 was mammalian and '02 was avian. We knew '02 was better in the Saar, Ruwer and Rheingau, and arguably better in the Pfalz. As time passed and '01 went into its retreat, '02 came ablaze; it was certainly the most exquisitely *fragrant* family of Rieslings I could recall. But then '02 underwent a sudden gain in color and began to show secondary flavors sometimes botrytisey and sometimes varnishy, and at this point all I can say is it's a fascinating changeling.

2000 and *2006* were marked by vineyard challenges mostly having to do with mildews, rot and vinegar. The many fine wines actually made in those vintages were testament to the skill and determination of the growers. *2004* was relatively light and often vividly green, which you either like or dislike.

What's becoming clear is that modern vintages favor the more northerly regions. The Mosel and Nahe haven't had a difficult vintage in at least a decade, whereas the Pfalz had tough times in at least three of the last ten years, and was the weak sister in a few others. The northerly trend makes me personally happy because those regions are not so hostile to wines with sweetness. And curiously, those vintages where the Pfalz shone were also good Mosel years, such as 2002, 2007 and 2008. Armin Diel told me (perhaps facetiously) that I had too much Mosel wine in my portfolio (which led one Moselaner to riposte that I had far too many Nahe producers in an area much smaller than the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer), but I'd favor the Mosel even if it weren't the most popular region over here, because they haven't abandoned the endangered virtues of balanced sweetness and low alcohol – yet.

HOW GERMAN WINES AGE

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. It’s not an abrupt demise, but rather a deliberate twilight slide. That said, I have in mind a 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.

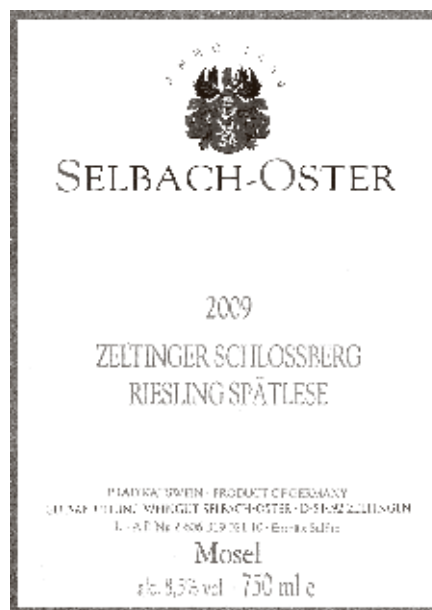
TBA: I know you’ll hate to hear this, but these wines aren’t designed to fit into a human lifetime. Unless you started buying TBA when you were, like, seventeen, every bottle you have will outlive you. I drank a bunch of 1953 TBAs in 2003 (in honor of my ghastly birthday) and several of them had more 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.

LABEL BASICS



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

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

when it comes to specific gravity of grape must. It's there or it's not.

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

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

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

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

The Germans have lurched backward from their acidobsession. 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 rapports 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 and 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 wine tastes as if it should have 70. For some growers *feinherb* are their dryish 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.

Süsserserve: It was striking how many times I wished there was some *dosage* with which to fine-tune the wine I was tasting. 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 coops. 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.

Core List Wines

Hard Core List

2010 Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken // 1.0 liter // GDD-050L	19
2010 Messmer Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb // GMS-164	25
2010 Geil Silvaner Trocken // GGE-047	42

Core List

2010 Eugen Müller Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett // GEM-118	21
2010 Messmer Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb // GMS-163	24
2009 Messmer Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb // GMS-157	25
2010 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett // 1.0 liter // GDR-204L	29
2010 Darting Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett // GDR-199	29
2010 Strub Riesling "Soil to Soul" // GST-159	35
2010 Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett // GST-160	36
2010 Strub Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese // GST-161	36
2010 Geil Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz Scheurebe Kabinett // GGE-046	42
2010 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken (Demeter) // 1.0 liter // GGY-089L	44
2010 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken // 1.0 liter // GGY-093L	44
2010 Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett // GGY-091	44
2010 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" // GHX-067	56
2010 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett // GKF-157	59
2010 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese // GKF-161	59
2009 Schlossgut Diel Riesling Kabinett // GSD-097	63
2010 Leitz Eins Zwei Dry Riesling "3" // GJL-181	67
2010 Leitz Dragonstone Riesling // GJL-177	68
2010 Leitz Rüdesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese // GJL-179	68
2010 Spreitzer Riesling "101" // GSP-070	71
2010 Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett // GSP-072	71
2010 Selbach Riesling Dry (Fish Label) // GSZ-036	78
2010 Selbach Riesling Kabinett (Fish Label) // GSZ-037	78
2010 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett // GSO-362	82
2010 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese // GSO-366	82
2010 Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett // GJU-124	87
2010 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese // GJU-123	87
2010 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese // GME-178	90
2010 Christoffel Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett // GJC-189	96
2010 Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese // GJC-192	97
2010 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett // GKE-133	99
2010 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese * (Artist Label) // GKE-134	99
2010 Loewen Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett // GCL-068	109
2010 von Othegraven Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage // GOG-024	114



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