

terry theise estate selections

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“First of all, everything is unified, everything is linked together, everything is explained by something else and in turn explains another thing. There is nothing separate, that is, nothing that can be named or described separately. In order to describe the first impressions, the first sensations, it is necessary to describe all at once. The new world with which one comes into contact has no sides, so that it is impossible to describe first one side and then the other. All of it is visible at every point . . .”

- P.D. Ouspensky

“Either Nature has a kind of consciousness, and therefore a purpose, or it does not. In our present state of development, there’s no way to know. It’s my experience that Nature – whether metallic (like my car) or organic (like a plant) or neither (like the wind) – behaves differently if one relates to it as though it is conscious; many have experienced consciousness in rocks, flora, fauna, and objects, but our subjective experiences are difficult to demonstrate and impossible to prove. If Nature has no consciousness or purpose, I don’t see how humanity can, so I choose to believe we all do. That’s my sense of things. Again, impossible to prove, especially when the evidence appears to point the other way.”

- Michael Ventura

Front Cover Photo: *The beautiful and magnificent Steiner Hund vineyard at Nikolaihof-Wachau.*

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Introduction

This year I thought I wanted to see what these people and their wines really had to give. It's been twelve years since I made my first offering of Austrian wines, and twenty one years since the glycol scandal. It isn't a *story* any more, that Austria emerged far the wiser from the cataclysm; we know this, it's yesterday's news. Austria is established now. She is a Player. But what does she bring to the game?

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

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

Austria remains a youthful wine culture, and for every grower entering his thirties there's another 20-something coming along. All the Wachau "names" have grown-up sons working at their sides. A new wave of growers is invigorating the Weinviertel. In contrast to Germany, where many things still seem (charmingly, delightfully) *removed*, Austria feels more connected to the international wine-fraternity. You drive through a town that's like an architectural diamond of the 17th century and arrive at a 21st-century tasting room; you meet a man who can tell you jokes in English and who just came from a tasting of twenty three vintages of Grange-Hermitage. But when you taste his wines, you taste something quite specific and seemingly eternal. It's a little dysphasic.

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

If German wine is mystic, Austrian wine is corporeal, even sexual. That is perhaps because Austrian wine is more than "merely" Riesling (her Rieslings are about as celestially mystic as the variety can ever be), and it might also be that these are the most graceful high-alcohol wines

on earth, hence you drink them *as if* they were medium-alcohol wines and pretty soon you get sorta dazed.

It's quite pleasing to see more worthy growers finding American importers. I'm happy to have help raising the tide. The market is healthy but interest is polarized, very strong on the coasts (and in urban restaurant-driven markets everywhere), and still skittish in the less, um, *alert* markets. You know, markets driven by passive retailers who wait for the "call" to create *itself* because they can't, or won't be bothered. So, to any stubborn holdouts, here's the skinny:

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

- Competitive, snappy, vigorous dry whites at the low end of the market.
- The best values on earth for monumentally structured dry white wines.

- World-class dry Rieslings redolent of soil, unmanipulated, tasting entirely *at home*, and presenting flavors more curly, baroque and slavish than Alsatian wines.

- World-class Sauvignon Blancs along Loire lines, with even more mineral and a sweet-grassy fruit which never spills over into bubble-gum.

- The world's best Pinot Blancs; depth, complexity and age-wor-

thiness without parallel elsewhere.

- Unique red grape varieties such as Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent, from which medium-weight, **food-friendly** wines are made, with rare and wonderful flavors.

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

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

- Your fear of the German language . . . *Keine angst!*
- Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.

- The market's preference — abetted by lazy wine merchants and middlebrow journalists — for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can *engage*.

- The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes



it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.

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

Even more: I feel there's a sort of yearning among many of us for experience that isn't vapid. People want to participate in constructive, enriching experience. Given the choice between a wine made in a factory, made by marketing nabobs and technocrats, with all manner of extraneous flavors *added* in the "production" process, or a wine made by a family who maintain an intimate connection to their land, and whose land *expresses itself* in the taste of the wine, which tastes *purely* of the land and the grape, many people will choose soul and the human touch over a sterile "product." Some of these drinkers are people my age, starting to feel their mortality, wanting richer experience in the time remaining to them—to us—and some of them are young drinkers who don't know "better." Whoever they are, they're out there, and they need what you can teach them, if you choose. Or you can wait till they find you, and be willing to be taught. Put your head in the sand and all you see is dirt.

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

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

I approve of a wine culture with an aversion to confecting, but this is an early stage of maturing into a culture which knows when to be rigid and when to relax.



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

After all, it stands to reason that if there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. I appreciate the dryness of Austrian wines, and I suspect it's how they show their best. The issues are two: 1) degree, and 2) flexibility. Most of our palates will not discern sweetness in a typical Austrian Riesling or Grüner Veltliner below 8-10 grams-per-liter, unless we've just tasted thirty wines with zero, in which case we'll notice more *fruit* in the "sweeter" wine and wonder why. A dash of salt in your soup isn't to make it taste salty; it is to awaken flavors, to make it taste more like *itself*. A similar dash of sweetness in a wine both enhances flavor, extends fruit, provides another voice to the dialogue of nuances, reduces alcohol, and in many cases makes for a more elegant finish. To reject such things in order to be "pure" seems puritan to me.



Weingut Prieler's Goldberg Vineyard.



Close-up of vine at Schloss Gobelsburg.

Of course these are matters of taste, or they ought to be, yet often I suspect there are several too many shoulds and gottas going on before the fact. My friend Peter Schleimer is one of the few who comes by his conviction honestly; he simply prefers his Austrian wines dry. But for each guy like Peter there are dozens of people who cling to the *Idea* that sugar is evil, sugar is pabulum, sugar is how bad wines are disguised; therefore sugar is to be avoided on principle *unless it can't be*, in which case you invoke the even more prevalent principle that wines shouldn't be manipulated. In other words, sugar's OK but only when you can't help it. Well, sigh. This is the kind of thing seductive to wine writers but somewhere oblique to the truth.

We sold a ton of Heidi Schröck's 2004s. People loved them. Not a single person found them sweet. No one objected to them on any level. The Austrians liked them too, from all accounts. Most of them were technically off-dry (at around 11g.l. residual sugar), which had the usual benefits: extending the fruit, reducing alcohol, adding fragrance, adding nuance, adding charm, making them more flexible at the table. It seems to me these things are more important than to insist on some Platonic form of "purity".

I just read a bunch of tasting notes on '05s in an Austrian wine magazine and noted one writer's use of the term *Trinkspass*, which loosely translates into "joy-of-drinking", and this was a first. Till recently everyone



Hillside vines at Nigl.

wrote of the usual things, power-intensity-mass-density-etc, but very few ever asked whether, at some point, wine could also be, could be a *joy* to drink. When I finished the work last week, I took myself to the mountains for a couple days to clear my head. Jamek had given me a bottle of Muskateller he saw I adored, and one evening I sat on my little balcony admiring the Alpenglow stealing over the peaks and the fog forming in the valley and even though I had a glass I drank that Muscat straight from the bottle, and every swallow told me, not that the wine had -X-number of "points" or that I was a hotshot because of all the adjectives I could drudge up, but simply that *life was good*, and we humans are meant to be happy.

Austrian wine is making me happier all the time. It is palpably in the process of learning its identity. Please note how I said that. Not "creating" its identity, but rather knowing and understanding the identity *inherently there*. An apogee of experimentalism was reached in the late 90s, when white wines were tickling 15-16% alcohol and red wines (from many fashionable international varieties) were struggling to attain ever-more malevolent degrees of color and tannin and oakiness. This hasn't disappeared entirely — Erich Sattler told me his customers still expected saturated almost black color from his wines (in response to my complimenting him on the clarity and elegance of color in his '04s!) — but commentators have noticed the growing number of wines embodying the idea that the "how" of taste is *far* more important than the "how much".

You know what I mean! When we're starting out we often ask "How *much* flavor does this have; that way I'll know how much I like it (or how many *points* I'm supposed to give it)", but as we gain more experience we start asking "How beautiful does this taste, how fine, how haunting?" And when we finally learn to relax with wine we barely think abstractly about it at all; we just know when our bodies and senses transmit the joy-signal.

And just maybe we quit the useless quest for "perfection" and all the blind alleys down which it takes us. When you make love to another human being, you bring your fallibilities and flaws to hers (or his). Maybe you feel fat, or achy, or preoccupied, or maybe you feel wonderful, but the point is *you can't predict how you'll feel*, and you damn sure can't predict how *she'll* feel, but in this collision of imperfections something valid occurs. Alternately you could watch a porn DVD: it's always perfect there, and you can rewind and watch your favorite parts over and over, but you are ineluctably *separate* from the images on the screen. No, it isn't perfection we need to look for; it is imperfection, because the assumption of imperfection is the precondition for the miracle.

Speaking of miracles . . .

The 2005 Vintage

No one talked about it. I had no idea what to expect. This is very odd; growers are always sending you their vintage reports, and friends are always calling to report the new wines they've tasted, but the silence around the Austrian '05s was almost ominous, as if no one *wanted* to talk about them. So I arrived a little wary.

I was bemused by the first wines I encountered, two '05s I drank with Peter at dinner the first evening, and the collection of the first grower I visited. The wines seemed adamant and unyielding and I thought "I'm in for a long eight days . . ." but I couldn't have been more wrong.

In essence the 2005 Austrian vintage boils down to rain, specifically that which occurred in September. It was over-plentiful, and did damage, some of which could not be mitigated by the perfect "golden October" that followed. Ironically, the rain was most damaging to the best grapes, i.e., to those most ripe when it fell. There were frequent reports of red grapes literally exploding; waterlogged thin-skinned berries simply came apart from within. More ominous were reports of red grapes *rotting* from the inside, in the juice, sometimes invisible from looking at the skins. Other reports described a dilemma faced by white-grape growers, whether to pick before physiological ripeness or risk rampant botrytis by waiting. All in all it looked like the kind of strugglesome year after which one has lots of new gray hairs.

On day-2 I saw my first collection of absolutely delicious wines, and heard my first reports of a vintage not only "managed", but indeed absolutely superb. And as the days proceeded I became more impressed, and at the end I saw wines the likes of which I have never seen.

Among the whites are many wines so uncanny as to compel thoughts of miracle. First, they are gorgeously *creamy*, and yet also amazingly *detailed*, mineral and herbal. When was the last time you ever saw those two facets in the same wine? Normally a creamy texture goes with overripeness, lack of structure; normally a detailed articulation of mineral-herbal nuances goes along with a vigorously bright, acid-driven structure. 2005 unites them both. *Mineral-meets-cream!*

But you needed steel nerves, or unerring canopy work, or relentless bunch-thinning, or all of the above, and at the end you didn't get much wine. No one who's any good got much wine.

I was truly convinced the reds would be diluted and possibly even unclean, but what I tasted was completely *lovely*, though I can only cringe at the effort and sweat required to make them. Not to mention the mingy yields. But again, elegant, charming, substantive and clean.

Oh those words again. "Elegant" . . . are there still any holdouts who still think this is a euphemism for undernourished? I promise *I* don't use it that way. Elegance is not the absence of substance; it is the presence of grace, form and proportion. Similarly, *charm* isn't the absence of "seriousness"; it is the presence of *deliciousness*.

Riesling and Veltliner fared about the same, and I can't claim a preference. For each grower whose Veltiners prevailed, his neighbor made better Rieslings.

These things were extremely grower-specific, and more to the point, weather-specific, as storms were selective where they struck. I saw this with my own eyes standing in a violent hail-storm (marble-sized hailstones fell for five entire minutes) in Mautern, whereas no one more than two miles away reported any hail at all. Tempting as it is to scoff when anyone tells you "We got the rain but the next village didn't", the inconvenient fact is it's sometimes true.

Botrytis is a theme of the '05s, but it's cleaner and more integrated than the sometimes-mushroomy flavors it bestowed upon certain unfortunate '04s. Indeed the vintage more than once called to mind 1998, and showed me *how far* the growers have come since then. Because 2005 is neither overripe nor unclean. Apropos 2004, now that it's behind us (and trust me, in Austria the year-old vintage is *history* in that white-hot market) I was able to speak candidly with several growers about the thing I couldn't fathom: how they said they selected obsessively but the wines still tasted botrytisey. I told them my theory that botrytis could create in effect an *ambiance* in a vineyard which would show in the wines even if optically detectable berries were discarded. This was confirmed. One grower



Harvest at Nikolaihof.

said "Even if you throw away the grapes you can see, there's still botrytis on the leaves and stems, and sometimes it's in the juice even if it's invisible on the skins. Imagine, if you have it on the stems then you have it throughout the harvest buckets even *after* you green-harvested and "selected;" that's why it's so important to use small buckets you empty more frequently."

After the amazing success among the "little" wines in '04, I had the strong sense the growers tried hard to repeat. Some of them succeeded. It is touching to see them go to such lengths in a short vintage to ensure the everyday wines will be so delightful. It means even more than their brilliance at the level of the stellar.

Speaking of stellar . . .

WINERY OF THE VINTAGE

Can't stop at one. They are **Schloss Gobelsburg**, who are starting to exhibit a Midas-touch across the range, and **Nikolaihof**, who confounded the mighty odds against a biodynamic estate in a botrytis vintage and produced an astonishingly meditative collection; if Gobelsburg embodies *brilliance* then Nikolaihof embodies *wisdom*.

GRÜVE OF THE VINTAGE

A toss-up between **Hiedler's** *Thal-Novemberlese* and **Gobelsburg's** *Lamm*.

RIESLING OF THE VINTAGE

Not a scintilla of doubt: **Alzinger's** *Steinertal*. Strong runners-up include:

Berger *Steingraben*

Hirsch *Gaisberg*

Bründlmayer *Heiligenstein "Lyra"*

Nigl *Hochäcker*

Alzinger *Loibenberg*

THE WINE OF THE OFFERING IS - WITH NO DOUBT WHATSOEVER:

Nikolaihof: 1991 *Grüner Veltliner Vinothek* (fifteen years in cask!)

THE BEST VALUE OF THE OFFERING

Schloss Gobelsburg "Gobelsburger" *Riesling*

All in all 2005 is a pleasure-giving vintage, just unpredictable enough to be interesting, full of supernal wines, the best of which unite typically disparate elements; digital articulation of mineral and herb along with lush creamy textures. I like its best wines more than any vintage since 1999.

Cork

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

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

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



The entire production at Weingut Hirsch is bottled in screwcaps.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Corked.

First Among Equals

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

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

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

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

GRAPE VARIETIES

Grüner Veltliner

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

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

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

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

Start with this: if Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc had a baby, it would be Grüner Veltliner. Think of all the things you associate with those two grapes, exotics, flowers, grasses, flint, melon, veggies and . . . read on.

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

Frankly, if you like it at all, it'll end up in your life in a big way. I guarantee you, within three years of discovering GrüVe you'll be grabbing for it so often you'll say to your drinking companion "What did we used to drink before we knew about this stuff?"

Tasting terms: like Chardonnay, Grüner Veltliner

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

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

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

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

Aging Grüner Veltliner: you gotta be patient! I know of no variety other than Chenin Blanc (in the Loire, of course) which takes longer to taste *old*. All things being equal, Veltliner lasts longer than Riesling, and it never



goes petrolly. What it can do is to take on a dried-mushroom character that becomes almost meaty. Mature GrüVe has been a revelation to every taster I've seen. It's a perfect choice for a rich fatty meat course when you prefer to use white wine. Don't think you have to drink them young—though if you catch one at any age short of ten years you are drinking it young. Think of young GrüVe like fresh oyster mushrooms, and grownup GrüVe like dried shiitakes.

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

Riesling

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

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

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

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

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

Pinot Blanc

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

Muskateller

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

Rülander

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

Sauvignon Blanc

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

RED VARIETIES

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

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely

competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first of these is **SANKT LAURENT**. This is a très hip grape, folks. It's Pinot Noir-ish with a "sauvage"

touch, and it can do nearly all the things fine Pinot Noir does, but with added bottom notes of sagey wildness. More growers would plant it, but the vine itself is prone to mutation and it can rarely be left in the ground for more than twenty years or so. It won't flower unless the weather's perfect. It produces a tight cluster of thin-skinned berries, and is thus subject to rot if conditions aren't ideal. "You have to be a little crazy to grow this grape," said one grower. Yet such vines become litmus tests for a vintner's temperament; like Rieslaner, when you see it you know, ipso facto, you're dealing with the right kind of lunatic. And all kinds of growers are stepping up to the challenge; St. Laurent has become the trendy grape, and I gotta tell ya, I absolutely love it. If



Blaufränkisch grapes

you love good Burgundy but can't afford to *drink* good Burgundy, this variety will satisfy you all kinds of ways.

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

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

Austrian Wine Laws

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

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

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

Such are the terms of the debate!

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

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

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

Austrian Wine Culture

For a while it seemed to mellow; Germany's economic doldrums dried up the major export market for Austrian wines, and the market relaxed. Then came the teeny '05 vintage, and Germany woke up, and now it's a seller's market again. I got to Austria April 24th and was distressed to see wine lists already full of '05s. "But Terry, you forgot," Peter Schleimer told me, "The wines have been on lists since *January*." Sadly, this is true. One fashionable grower told me his customers start asking in *late NOVEMBER* when the new vintage will be available. Come December, he *cannot sell* the current one. December! Small wonder some of the growers simply can't comprehend the challenges we still face marketing this "difficult" category (difficult-by-dint-of-umlauts is how I like to put it; the same wines from any other country would be demanded like Viagra), and I try and balance the obstacles of buying AND selling the wines, and believe me my legs weren't meant to bend that way.

But there *is* a kind of steadiness that's more sustainable — and agreeable — than the overheated climate of yore. Icarus, one might say, is cruising at a sensible altitude.

It can be odd to deplane into this lovely country for the first time, climb into your car and head off to your first winery. Along the way you are deep within old Europe in all its stately handsome antiquity, yet when you ring that first bell you're entirely likely to meet by a dashing young person who speaks fluent English and knows more California winemakers than you do. His office is chock-a-block with gizmos, he's using a rabbit corkscrew and fancy stemware and his cell phone is programmed to ring with Chris Cornell's voice. But as soon as you taste his wine you're immersed again into a kind of abiding Good. They are "wines as they've always



been, only with better machines". They begin with soil, to which they are determinedly faithful, and they eschew confections at all cost. It is quite stirring, these slow, deep wines coming from such cosmopolitan creatures. It is even more encouraging to catch the occasional glimpse of the deeply anchored values which lie below the surface. It says, we don't have to give those up in order to be 21st-Century men and women; it says maybe we can figure out how a person should live.

There are other reasons to be encouraged. A few growers are taking principled stands against this silly faux-urgency whereby a vintage is kicked off the stage while the new one is still fermenting. More of them are doing what Hannes Hirsch began three years ago, and holding (at least some of) their wines back until they're *ready* to taste and sell. This takes *huevos* of brass my friend. There are risks. First you diminish your cash-flow; you could easily have sold that wine between April and November, but you're waiting 9-12 months to release it. When you finally do, will customers still want it? After all, there's an even *newer* vintage already soiling its diapers. Last, how much disappointment will your customers accept? Will they come back after you tell them "Sorry, that wine isn't for sale till January of next year?" That growers are willing to contemplate this at all is an immensely healthy sign. We should applaud the idealism that does what's best for the wines, and assumes one's customers have long attention spans.

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

This is a slippery matter in any case, because all ripeness isn't equal. A Wachau wine at 11.5% can taste undernourished. Its Kamptal counterpart tastes just fine. Certain Kamptalers with monster-ripeness (14% and up) can taste scorched, but many Wachau wines carry such alcohol in balance. The wise sage of Nikolaihof, Nicolaus Saahs, feels that "wine is a food-stuff and should be above all comely." He also believes by farming biodynamically his grapes are physiologically ripe at below 13% potential alcohol, and many of his masterpieces have 1.5% less alcohol than wines from Hirtzberger or F.X. Pichler. "There is a difference between wines you *drink* and wines you *taste*," he adds. Haven't you also noticed the difference between what you professionally evaluate as "great" or whatever, and what you *actually enjoy drinking*? My cellar is full of wines whose flavors I enjoy and which accommodate my meals and don't pall. I'm too old for all those big flavor-jerk-offs that leave me feeling hollow.

When to Drink the Wines

Wine Spectator often raises a chuckle among Austrian wine lovers with its frequent "drink now — 2009" suggestions. Bruce Sanderson (who's a truly good guy) tells me he hesitates to indicate when the wines will really be ready to drink for fear people will be intimidated and *won't* drink them. Well, let's see. Tell me if your blood runs cold.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Styria, Interruptus

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

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

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



Map of Austria



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

hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

Storing and Handling

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

The Assortment

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

Leo Hirschmann makes the La Tâche of pumpkin seed oil. It has amazing polish and complexity.

Bottle sizes

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

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



weingut prieler

neusidelersee-hügelland • schützen

I love Silvia Prieler, and not only because she served me unlimited schnitzels. (And didn't deride me when I ate, like, five . . .) She told me a remarkable fact about their 2005s; the grapes were physiologically ripe before they were sugar-ripe. No one could remember that happening ever before. So naturally I asked Silvia how it happened. "We don't know!" she answered. And for that answer, for its honesty and friendship, I loved her. The schnitzels came later.

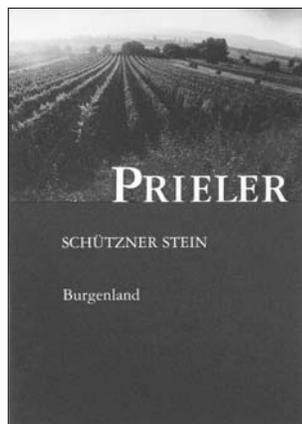
Silvia's really settling in, with her baby and her baby-brother Georg. Considering they are one of the red-wine *names* in Austria, the whole family is wonderfully down to earth and sweet.

Consider this: Austria's leading wine magazine VINARIA reviews and ranks wines, and their leading accolade is three stars. When any *one* writer "nominates" a wine for three stars, all

the nominees are collected and the entire staff tastes them blind. I'm not sure what percentage of tasters have to agree that a wine warrants three stars, but I do know that when the group is unanimous (which is rare), the wine receives three *gold* stars. Three gold stars is like a Parker-100. And Prieler's Blaufränkisch Goldberg '03 got the gold stars. And still there were unlimited schnitzels.

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

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



35-year-old Pinot Noir vines, and which Silvia successfully convinced him to leave to her diabolical intentions.

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

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

First she wanted Pinot Noir, after a practicum at Domaine Dujac. Right! Papa demurred, but it so happened he's purchased a half-hectare parcel intended for another purpose entirely, but which was planted with

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

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

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

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

Prieler at a glance:

An estate both admired and beloved within Austria, for hearty yet focused whites and sumptuous deeply structured reds, both of which are undergoing certain deft transitions; the whites more primary (i.e., less malo) and the reds more succulent (i.e., fewer gravelly tannins).

- AEP-037 **2005 Pinot Blanc Seeberg**
Hello old friend! I've tasted this wine in every vintage since 1991, and this joins the family of the most elegant and classical; it has an outdoorsy sea-air fragrance with sweet hay and sweet lees (they do it in stainless steel with much *batonnage*) but lately they've been avoiding malo, so there's also an apple-skin note; all in all it has both snap and the doughy fullness of fine Austrian Pinot Blanc.
- AEP-036 **2005 Chardonnay Ried Sinner**
I seem to remember when excellent Pouilly Fuisse tasted like this, before it got all oaky and 90-pointy. In any case there's a hint of belon oysters in this beautifully focused articulate wine, yet as detailed as it is there's no sharpness or coarseness at all, just a leesy thickness leading to a charming spicy finish. Again all steel, no malo and lots of lees-stirring.
- AEP-038 **2004 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe**
The tenderest most charming bottling yet of this entry-level Blaufränkisch; finely *blue* and sappy; high toned, spicy and significantly long for its body, though at 13% alc it's hardly "light" — all it is is crammed with spurting fruit, soft ripe tannins and a puppy-eagerness that you be delighted and happy.
- AEP-039 **2004 Schützner Stein** +
As always 85% Blaufränkisch and 15% Merlot, but this '04 contains the Blaufränkisch from the *Goldberg*, which somehow wasn't good enough for Prieler's to bottle.
- I respect that they only bottle their prized Goldberg in "deserving" vintages, but I asked whether a lighter vintage might show the site's mineral characteristics even more clearly, i.e., whether Goldberg might have *differently* valid dialects of expression. But no, they want it powerful and profound. So in '04 it went into here, and as you'd suppose this is some kinda wine.
- It too is succulent, and I like succulent wines as long as they're not all fake-tits-and-eyelashes; this is markedly long and complex; the Goldberg mineral is important, and there's a massive upswell of cherry and violet with almost a Riesling stoniness below; it really expands in the finish, which unites a Sangiovese-like firmness to a carob-y richness.
- AEP-040 **2004 Pinot Noir**
Though I like the wine very much I saw it at an awkward moment; I had to pierce through a veil of tannin to find the remarkable fruit and complexity below; it's far less oaky than was the '03, cooler, with a Volnay *Champans* sort of fruit, sleek and flowery; Silvia tells me the tannins will recede by bottling as the wine goes through the summer.
- AEP-035 **2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Goldberg** ++
It's the three-gold-star wine. We drank the 2000 at dinner, which had almost two hours in the decanter and tasted like it needed two *days*. Without a doubt one of Austria's red-wine monuments, and a great testament to terroir, this hails from a high hillside on slate, and even now the wine shows a stunning nose, though the palate is an inscrutable mass of power and inference; huge minerality and almost a Brunello iron; there's fantastic spice and length—it's like a candy cane of rock, mint and violet, and the minerality just doesn't quit. When the fruit emerges, even two "plusses" might seem stingy. Given the many Austrian reds which affect profundity and don't achieve it, this is the Real Thing.
- In fact it reminds me of those amazing old vintages of Monsanto Il Poggio; deep, bricky roasty almost salumeria aromas, mountain salamis; the palate is really wickedly spicy and keen — if you could squeeze blood from a stone it would taste like this.

weinbau heidi schröck

neusiedlersee-hügelland • rust

We had a little while before our appointment with Heidi — imagine; *us*, early — so Corrie and I sat in a little churchyard in Rust and looked at the storks and at the many flowers. It was nice being still. Then we strolled over to Heidi's house through the swarms of tourists; it was Monday of a 3-day weekend and the picturesque town was crammed with thirsty humanity. Heidi walked out to meet us half a block away. I was incredibly happy to see her.

If you've ever met Heidi you'll know why. She makes it look easy. Much easier, in fact, than it has been for her. But that's how it is with certain people, and Heidi's one of them. Though she's as lusty and earthy as anyone I know, she doesn't seem to know how not to be graceful. It can't be easy being mother to two fledgling rock stars. The twins, now eighteen, are 40% of a metal

quintet called Fuel For Hatred, but sitting at dinner with the family all I saw was affection. Mostly we talked music; Heidi has learned more about grunge and thrash than she ever expected to know. A couple nights later we went to dinner in Vienna, just the two of us, and drank (among many other things!) a bottle of '61 Quarts de Chaume to celebrate Heidi's birth year. At the restaurant everyone seemed to know her.

Heidi is one of those very few people who appear to have figured out how to live. She possesses an innate elegance and sweetness. I have no idea what effort this might entail—none, I suspect—but she is naturally conscientious and thoughtful without being at all self-effacing. She invites affection with no discernible effort. Because all she has to do is offer it.

2004 was a big year for Heidi. She was Vintner Of The Year in *Falstaff* magazine, which is kind of like our *Food & Wine* but with much more serious wine coverage,



Heidi and the rock stars
PHOTO BY NIKI LACKNER

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

and had her glowing picture on the cover and got a green minivan with "Vintner Of The Year" painted on the side to drive around in, and you know how press is; once anyone wants you suddenly everyone wants you and it was the year-of-the-ink for our heroine. Who kept her delicious sense of humor about it all, and made the best wines she'd ever made.

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

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

Says it all, doesn't it.

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

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

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

Heidi belongs to two girl-vintner groups, one of which I think she founded. She doesn't make a huge deal about it; it's largely a matter of creating a matrix for mutual sisterly support. Yet another guy I represent regaled me with a story of how he gave her a hard time. What about all the women who work hard with their husbands, and who are every *bit* as crucial to the making of wine as all these marquee females with their groups and their brochures? Who's speaking for *them*? Not an unreasonable point (and bless him, the guy's loyal to his wife!), but it points out an adage I'm about to coin: it doesn't matter what you do, you'll piss somebody off. Hmmm, not bad, but I can do better. How's this; no matter how good you try to be, someone will hate you. That's more like it. You read it here first. Or, maybe . . . They'll hate you anyway, so you might as well be bad. This is fun! Maybe if the wine thing doesn't work out I can get into the fortune-cookie business. "Even if you put the seat down you still won't put it down *right*." "The food on your companion's plate always looks better."

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

Leaving must-weights aside, as I understand it, Ausbruch isn't intended to have the golden sheen of the "typical" BA or TBA. It used to be made by taking the dehydrated grapes and kick-starting fermentation by adding some fresh grapes to the must. Then the fermented wine was aged in wood until it began to develop a slightly Tokay-like, "rancio" character. These days tastes have evolved away from that kind of thing, though I'm told vintners who make Ausbruch are a wild and crazy bunch, and no two of them make their wines precisely the same way.

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

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

Heidi's '05s are, in sum, about as good as her lovely '04s, but different ones are good and all of them are good in different ways. Like all '05s, these are scarce — in fact one of them is *already sold out* as I sit here on May 7th. Sheesh.

2005 Weissburgunder

(Due to very limited quantity, this item is no longer available.)

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

Well, this is going to impress people, at least those who can *get* it anyway, since every case we can get is already committed to. If you own it and desire the dubious benefit of my tasting note, the wine has lots of thrust and power, spicy, almost Veltliner aromas, a little botrytis, and flavors of mussels and white pepper.

AHS-075 **2005 Furmint** +

I ADORE Furmint. And if Loire Chenin is high on your list-o-goodies then you'll adore Furmint as much as I do. Indeed with wines like this it's as if Mosel Riesling and Vouvray were blended in your glass. The variety, famous of course for Tokay, was reintroduced to Burgenland (once a part of Hungary, after all) in the early '90s by Heidi and others of similar mind. It ripens late and holds onto its acidity and is as graceful as storks in flight and as evocative as the nightcalls of strange birds and frogs wafting darkly over the reeds.

But it's a sensitive creature, the Furmint. The '04 went into and out of the shadows, showing extroverted one week and aloof the next. The '05 has the prettiest fragrance of any vintage thus far; dewy and sappy, wet hay and white lilac; palate is ultra-spicy, burning leaf, a little char of botrytis and blown-out candle; the finish is all quince and mutsu apple.

AHS-073 **2005 Muscat** +

OK, so I'm in New York with my then 18-year-old who was looking at colleges, and instead of taking him for the usual pizza or whatever I thought I'd buy him a "nice" meal. The place I took him had Heidi's '04 Muscat, so we ordered it. I figured the staff could taste whatever we didn't finish. Because Max isn't any sort of wine drinker — not *yet* anyway. So imagine my surprise when the bottle was tipped over to pour us the last drops. "Dude, you really held your own," I said to him. "So?" he replied. "Well I've never seen you drink so much wine," I insisted. "That's because they don't always taste this good!" he sensibly countered.

"Muscat" isn't a grape variety in Austria; those are either Gelber Muskateller (a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains*) or the more come-hither Muscat-Ottonel. Heidi uses "Muscat" as a brand-name for a spicy wine which in '05 (as in '04) consists of 60% Gelber Muskateller and 20% each of Ottonel and Sauvignon Blanc.

The '05 smells of the Ottonel, but with air it's the Sauvignon which emerges. It's a lavish and flowery wine; the palate is dry and creamy and in the best sense *sharp*; there's a sweet grassy cut and there's a tactile solidifying on the mid-palate, into a mineral stony backbone. It takes you somewhere, this kinetic little wine.

2005 Ried Vogelsang

(Due to very limited quantity, this item is no longer available.)

It turns out someone else had registered "Vogelsang" as a trademark, so Heidi's choices were either to call it "Ried Vogelsang" (i.e. "Vogelsang-vineyard") or to invent another name. At least this year there's a noisesome little bird yapping away on the label. Vogelsang means bird-song. The '05 is Halbtrocken and it is *massively* yummy; 25% each of Welschriesling, Pinot Blanc, Gelber Muskateller and Sauvignon Blanc; it's almost like a Pfalz Riesling; corn cakes, ginger and hedge-flowers; this is infinitely good wine, with more charm than Fenway Park and as much length as a Manny Ramirez homer. It's also *already sold out...<sigh>*

AHS-078 **2004 Grauburgunder**

Pinot Gris of course. I'm starting to wonder whether Pinot Gris and not Chardonnay is the white variety best suited to oak, because the last three vintages of this wine have all *worked*, and I love serving them to people who imagine I detest any wine with oak, whereas in fact I simply detest vulgarity and affectation and falsity. Now, this is a high-alcohol wine (over 14%) and I do rather wish it had contained 12-15g.l. of RS and correspondingly less alcohol. But the nose is nothing less than *stunning*; incense, dried porcini, leather; it's like a votive candle of narcissus; the heady palate is extravagant, sultry and baroque, and you'll love it even more than I do if you accept high alcohol.

AHS-079 **2004 Zweigelt Kräftn**

We tasted all three of Heidi's reds (a Blaufränkisch and a St Laurent too), which have grown less obdurately tannic over the years, for which I complimented Heidi. I always wanted to offer her reds, they smell so good. This group was in fact on the tannic side, but I worked them, until finally this Zweigelt proved irresistible; it's strikingly fragrant even for Zweigelt, and while it starts out a little dusty, by the 2nd sip it's overcome with mid-palate juiciness and simple *class* — calm, unfussy class. Though it craves protein it keeps coming on, unusually multi-faceted for the variety.

AHS-077H **2005 Welschriesling/Weissburgunder Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**

Welschriesling and Pinot Blanc; it's very much the botrytis-wine and you'll love it if you love botrytis; there's pineapple and orange-blossom, and a toasty honeyed fruit arrives in the middle and lingers into a complex sexy finish.

AHS-080H **2004 Ausbruch "On The Wings Of Dawn," 12/375ml**

This is becoming in effect the "basic" Ausbruch, from a mélange of varieties; an opulent seductive aroma of *tilleul* honey leads to a palate like French toast and maple syrup (!) and candied lemon and *pêche-de-vignes*; it's fiendishly long and leaves an awfully pretty lemon-pudding finish.

AHS-081H **2004 Ruster Ausbruch Turner, 12/375ml**

++

This single-vineyard 100% Furmint wine is *hors classe*. I struggle delineating the detail of such massively sweet wines (I almost used "unctuous" but hasn't Parker, like, copyrighted that word or something?); in any case it has a *hugely* intense fragrance — the wine is nearly overwhelming, yet it remains miraculously *fruity*; I think it's Heidi's greatest-ever dessert wine; it is so essential and so tender despite its swollen mass.



weinbau sattler

neusiedlersee • tadten

These were the last wines I tasted. Erich Sattler very graciously saved me the tedious and lengthy drive around the lake from Rust to Tadten, so we sat on my small balcony on a cool morning listening to the blackbirds and thrushes and watching a sleek graceful stork fly by with a plump meaty frog in its mouth. Stork babies, man; they get hungry. I thought to ask Erich to explain a vexing mystery — if the stork brings the baby, who brings the baby stork? — but he didn't look like he'd know.

Sattler is one of the few young growers I know who isn't out to *get your attention* but instead seeks merely to bring you pleasure. I love these kinds of wines, as you know. You take the first sip and think "Well sure, OK, it's clean and pleasant and all, but . . ." and then the glass is suddenly

empty and you barely know why. I could tell you why: it's because the wine *tastes* good and invites you to keep sipping.

Erich Sattler is emblematic of the new generation of Austrian vintners, a wine-school grad, 4th generation in the family, taking over as recently as 1999. "We make wine as my grandfather did," he says, "only with better machines." My colleagues discovered him at the ProWein fair in February 2004 and brought me samples,



which unfortunately traveled through Europe for three weeks in the trunk of my car by the time I tasted them. So we asked Erich to meet us in Rust with his wines.

We got better acquainted and I also got to meet brother Kurt, whose wife is

American and who lived in L.A. for awhile plying his trade as an architect. In many ways it was like seeing the wines for the first time; I got to taste the (promising) whites and found to my great surprise I liked the Zweigelt even more than the St Laurents. I was explaining the latter variety to a colleague traveling with me, saying how hideously difficult it was to manage, when Erich chimed in, saying "Yes, it's a diva, but we wouldn't love it so much if it weren't such a bitch to grow."

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



Erich Sattler

AST-008 **2005 St. Laurent**

He bottled his '05s at the end of March, but this one didn't seem sick at all! I mean TAY-STEEL juice here; a fragrance like dark Belgian chocolate and *Boeuf Bourignon*, a really generous being; the palate is juicy and blueberried; soft but not flabby; a lot of fun is what this is.

AST-007 **2005 Zweigelt**

This one did seem bottle-cranky, but there's an incipient inner perfume that threatens to bewitch; palate is firmer, even a little tannic, raspberries not plums; the fruit is cheerful and spicy; textbook Zweigelt.

AST-009 **2004 St. Laurent "Reserve"** +

12 months in French barriques of which 30% are new. The wine smells wonderful, a prototype of the variety; palate is really sumptuous and plummy, with a milk-chocolatey finish; I love its generosity and elegance, and the oak is present but well-behaved.

AST-010 **2004 Zweigelt "Reserve"**

Again 12 months in barrique but this time 60% new; this may be the cuddliest of all the wines; a well turned-out lady, a wine to *canoodle* with. Can you resist the charms of the raspberry fruit and leathery-soft firmness of texture and structure? Even if the oak's somewhat more front-&-center? I didn't think so.

AST-012 **2004 "Cronos"**

Here's the "super-Tuscan" which every Austrian red producer seems to insist on having. I quite like this wine, but am bemused by the phenomenon. Perhaps we should have really evocative names for some of these monsters. *Cuvée Armageddon*, or *Cuvée Egregia*. The new vintage is 50% St Laurent, 35% Cab and 15% Syrah (it's like having Burgundy, Bordeaux and northern Rhône in the same glass...) and once again it's a good version of the Thing; it recalls a Pomerol in fact in its iron-y thickness; curiously it's the least "sweet" of these wines — an old professor who is not often pleased — but it's hardly austere, just exceptional in this grower's idiom.



weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

Paul was full of beans when we visited. He had an opinion about everything, and we compared our various terms of derision for the popular kids — his was “Cabernitis” and mine (as you know) is “Chard-ennui”, which he approved of. He said “If you haven’t learned independence in your thirties you’ll never learn it,” and he railed, as he often does, against the kinds of wines we both despise.

When I first selected Lehrner, I’d staged a tasting of six or seven of the top estates in Mittelburgenland, among whom Lehrner’s were my favorite. There were bigger wines in the room, darker wines, wines with more “points” in store, certainly more ostentatious and tannic

wines. But there were none as adult, as balanced and as elegantly graceful as Paul Lehrner’s. <Sigh>, I figured . . . yet again Terry selects the second-“best” wine.

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

Thank God for an honest man. And with Lehrner it seems less like a choice he makes than an imperative of his temperament. He makes wine of candid fruit without embellishment, and he talks to me about them candidly and without embellishment. So when he says he’s happy with his 2005s, I know he means it, and I know *what* he means. Lehrner’s style doesn’t *require* super-saturated ripeness. It’s an adult style of red wine emphasizing fruit over tannin and structure over everything else.



Paul Lehrner

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

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

want to get the hell away. Wines which speak in moderate voices immediately compel my attention. All of which is to say I am very happy to have discovered Paul Lehrner and his wines.

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

I really like Paul. He’s so much of what I love in a vintner, giving us beaming honest wines at modest prices, and I really hope you buy the hell out of these.

Two final points. It’s somewhat misleading to call these wines “light,” as in fact they have considerable depth. What they are *not* is inky, tannic obsidian dragons which bellow 600% new oak at your schnoz. They have a sort of black-belt surety, a calm contained power that doesn’t have to be *demonstrated* every five minutes. Second, Lehrner’s wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from 2004.

Lehrner at a glance:

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

APL-047 **2005 "Claus"**

This is a field-blend of roughly 80% Zweigelt and 20% Blaufränkisch, intended for early drinking while it's at its sappy best. The '05 has a nose of violets and aluminum and just the *juiciest* palate; it seems "bluer" than usual, almost more Chianti-like; tasty but not roasty — or not yet anyway; often this wine fleshes out and gets tres seductive with six months in bottle.

APL-048 **2005 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfänger**

One year I showed this wine to Andrea Immer, with excuses for the "lightness" of the 2001 vintage. "I don't think this is light at all," she said. Nor was it! It *is*, though, a classic example of the supreme aesthetic virtue of *persistent soft-sell*. Always a Claret-like Blaufränkisch, aged in large old wood, this '05 smells almost primally sappy and honest; tobacco-y, direct and dense; it's not as sweet as the 02 or 03 but it's utterly direct in a right-bank Claret way.

APL-049 **2004 St. Laurent**

Three weeks in bottle when I saw it; 20% new wood now; lovely sweet aromas of damson, Black Forest ham, strawberry and juniper; palate is sappy and *cool*, but this will start out Barbera and end up Burgundy; it has a solid, smoky dried-porcini finish.

APL-045 **2004 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker**

The '04 marked a dramatic step up in the range; full of charm and physio-"sweetness"; spicy, caroby, lamb-y and delightful. A year later it's still sweet and euphorically perfumed; juicy and yummy, like really good lamb chops with roasted maters and herby green beans.

APL-050 **2004 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche"**

This is a brand-name denoting the top "reserve" quality. We were talking about harmony, specifically as related to a 2000-vintage of this we opened to see the effect of bottle-age, and Paul said "Wines cannot become harmonious if they don't start out that way. I've not seen this miracle myself, and I wasn't alive in the time of Christ!" I think what I love most about this wine is its seamless weaving of power and symmetry. Yet again I tasted this wine with 3 weeks in bottle. It does 18 months in barriques, some new, but what's so encouraging here is how much *Blaufränkisch* comes through, with its spit-roasted herb-rubbed meatiness; sweet and spicy and as always, recalling new wave Cahors (e.g., du Cedre). I'm certainly underrating it, but gotta be faithful to the truth on the day . . .

APL-051 **2004 "Cuvée Paulus"**

65% Blaufränkisch, 15% Zweigelt and 20% Cab. In bottle ten days, but there's a lot blasting through here; plummy, almost bloody Blaufränkisch aromas, emerging cherry and a bit of dustiness; the palate just blazes and blasts with spicy violet and cassis notes; this is the most layered and detailed vintage yet, in both flavor and texture. This is how to do big wines *right*. +



weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

These are the wines — the only *kinds* of wines - you actually want to drink after a big day of tasting. They're as soul-satisfying as a steaming bowl of spaghetti; they seem to offer unconditional love. And they're cheaper than therapy!

Walter Glatzer's doing a smart thing: holding stocks back so as to have 18 months worth of wine in the cellar, which in most cases means two vintages. This is especially good for the reds, which always bulk up with a year in bottle — even the “wee” ones. I discovered a low-fill bottle of Glatzer's '97 GrüVe Dornenvogel buried away in an out-of-the-way case, and thought I'd better drink it. The wine was *wonderful*, and now I wish I'd kept it! One gets used to seeing Glatzer as a supplier of “useful” white wines to be pounded through and hardly thought about, but this

'97 was every bit as good as an entry-level Smaragd from the Wachau—at a third of the price.

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

I also want to sing a paen of praise to this man's red wines. He makes them to be drunk and loved, not admired and preened over. He could easily make each of the prevailing mistakes: too much extraction, too astringent, too tannic, too oaky, reaching beyond their grasp. But year-in and year-out these are absolutely *delicious* purring sex-kitten reds.

He is the son of the mayor of his village, which perhaps accounts for the poise and easy manner in which he articulates his every notion of grape growing and wine-making. He's installed two fermenters, one for reds and one for whites, the second of which is kept underground in a newly-built cellar in order to keep fermentation temperatures down. He has 16 hectares of vineyards, from which he aims, like all the young lions, to grow the best possible grapes. He'll green-harvest when necessary, not only to increase dry extract but also to guarantee physiological ripeness. Glatzer does all his harvesting by hand, though he could, if wished, work much of his land by machine.

He's one of those people who wants to make *sure* you're content. “All the prices O.K.?” he kept asking. “Is everyone having a good time?” he asked me during a group's visit. “You bet,” I assured him. “There's enough food, isn't there?” he persisted. “Oh, plenty!” I replied. “There isn't **too much**, is there?” he wanted to know. “No, there's just EXACTLY THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD, WALTER. *Relax*, man! Everybody's in the pink.”

There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tast-

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

ing notes. Yet in a sense these hardly seem necessary; to delineate the minute vintage-variations of wines which are always varietally True and scrupulous is more trouble than it's worth. I'd much rather flirt with Priska and make goo-goo eyes at the baby. And, I can now proclaim, after truly painstaking diligent research, that Blaufränkisch is better than Zweigelt with Schnitzels.

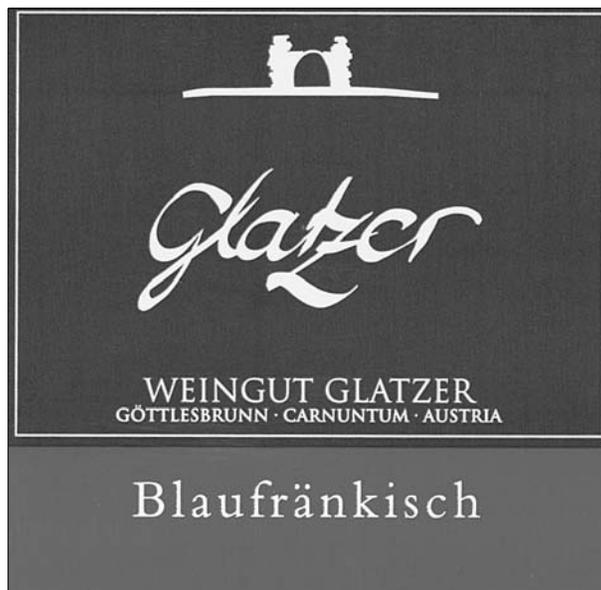


Glatzer at a glance:

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

- AGL-098 **2005 Grüner Veltliner**
It's truly the tabula rasa for GV, this wine, which seems to improve each year. The '05 is another creamy-peppery wine of this remarkable vintage, full of a smoky-stony charm.
- AGL-099 **2005 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"**
"Dornenvogel" (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots, because these marauding lil' tweeters like to eat the ripest grapes. It's regularly the best-value GrüVe I offer. I think I'll just repeat that: THIS IS ALWAYS THE BEST VALUE GV IN THIS OFFERING! The '05 smells for all the world like Alzinger's Mühlpoint Smaragd (costs rather less . . .!) and the palate is peppery like Tuscan olive oil but also showing a clear vein of stone and lees; full of fine *specific* nuances.
- AGL-102 **2005 Weissburgunder "Classic"**
This is more Alsacien than usual for Austrian Pinot Blanc in its melon-y aromas, but the palate is the usual mussel and lees and toasted rye; it's sort of firmly plump!
- AGL-100 **2005 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée"**
Gotta be preliminary as the wine was just blended and hasn't seen a scrap of wood (yet), but there's *wonderful* fruit and a marrowy tenderness; it's tight but not constricted, with grip and not *without* depth and length. Much of the fruit from the best sites went into it in '05, such were the problems with the harvest. I remarked to Glatzer that it tasted nothing like a wine from a "troubled" vintage and he said "Oh no, the wine is fine, I'm very happy with it; it just took a miserable amount of work to make it!"
- AGL-101 **2005 Blaufränkisch**
Again preliminary. The nose is seriously spicy, "twiggy", marjoram and eucalyptus; the palate is very *Dolce* (why don't they make Dolcettos like this any more?), full of campfire and mint. In a way it's like a red GrüVe.
- AGL-091 **2004 Zweigelt "Rubin Carnuntum" +**
This is a region-wide concept to create something typical and essential. Here it's a sizeable step up from the basic Zweigelt; bacony aromas (a lot like Dan Phillips' Gattion farms secret smokehouse blend), and here you really see the sweet-Syrah side of Zweigelt; great charm, length and spice and the palate is all maplewood and bacon-fat; lush, fine, useful wine.
- AGL-092 **2004 Blaufränkisch "Reserve" +**
Again the almost hyper-expressiveness of BF in '04 is on display; taut-feeling acidity gives serious grip; palate is dark, plummy and inky; no harsh tannin but tight and adamant, like some cross between basic Chianti Classico and (modern) Cahors. A year later this has grown gorgeously smoky, almost Mourvedre-like.

- AGL-093 **2004 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”** +
 Inky; black-cherry notes on the extremely dense nose; blackberries, bacon, bread, sweet smoke; what a track record this wine is establishing; this `04 is more “blue” than the “deep-red” `03, but just about as dense and concentrated.
- AGL-094 **2004 St. Laurent Altenberg**
 Here’s the bricky Mourvèdre face of St. Laurent; this is in the best sense gritty and grippy; spicy and high-toned, not smooth but rather gravelly, as if an old-school Nuits St.-Georges; perhaps it’ll become more *comme il faut* after bottling, but who says St. Laurent always has to be *sumptuous*?
- AGL-103 **2004 “Gotinsprun”** +
 This is the archaic name for Göttlesbrunn, Glatzer’s home town, and it’s his brand-name for his top reds, in this case a blend of mostly Blaufränkisch, a bit of Syrah, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Merlot and the balance St. Laurent. It is all done in (double-gulp!) *new wood*. But this is a very RARE example of a show-off *oakster* that works; you’re paying three times more for Priorat that’s no better than this - rather worse! I like this rather more than the very roasty `03; it isn’t so plump and bloody, but instead more detailed and spicy and transparent; it’s still *dense* and packed but it seems to somehow *s-t-r-e-t-c-h* more; it’s a rural wine of sun and bricks and leather.



A Little Essay About Nothing Much

As a junior in high school I took honors-English. Figures, right? I must admit I had no great love of reading; I rather had great love for the young woman who taught honors English, Jane Stepanski. Every year I realize how much Jane forgave us, and every year it seems like more.

I wasn't actually a nerd; I was a freak exactly two years before everyone else was. It was painfully solitary for awhile, and I craved a pack, any pack, and honors English helped satisfy the craving. Oh I read some, but mostly I was earnest and clueless. I recall a time when my classmates were especially derisive at what they called "truth-and-beauty poems." I went along with the prevailing contempt; truth-and-beauty poems: *pfui!* Only ignorant clods liked those. What kinds of poems did I like? Um, er, ah . . . well—*ahem*—um, y'know, all kinds of poems as long as they are not truth-and-beauty poems.

It might appear as though I look back on all this with disdain. Far from it. I see it as pitiable; we were so needy, we hungered for any scrap of certainty, any piece of solid floor we could stand on. And so we struck our fatuous attitudes and somehow Jane Stepanski didn't spit at us.

I got into wine as a man of twenty five. I was like every fledgling wine geek; it consumed me every hour of the day. Alas it also consumed anyone in my proximity for a couple years, for I was as great a wine-bore as has ever trod the earth. But I was greedy for knowledge, or rather for *information*, and I did as every young person does: I sought to subdue the subject by accumulating *mastery* over it. Ignorance was frustrating, and uncertainty was actively painful. And lo, there came a day when I felt I had at least as many answers as I had questions. I started, mercifully, to relax.

I was amazingly lucky to get my basic wine education in Europe, where I lived the first five years of my drinking life. It gave me a solid grounding in the "Classics" of the wine world. I still believe it does the novice nothing but good to drink somewhat aloof, cool wines to start. (S)he is thus encouraged to approach a wine, to engage it, to have a kinetic relationship with it. This is substantially less possible (If not outright impossible) with most new-world wines, which want to do all the work for you, which shove you prone onto the sofa saying "You just watch, and I'll strut my stuff."

Eventually, I came to see wine as the mechanical rabbit that keeps the greyhounds running along the track. No matter how much "knowledge" I hoarded, the ultimate target was the same distance away—if not further. The "truth" of wine, it seemed, was a sliding floor . . . and even then you had to first gain access to the room. This frustrated my craving for certainty, for command, for *mastery*. And for a period of time I was angry at wine.

Now I rather think wine was angry with me. But, as patiently as my old honors-English teacher, wine set about teaching me what it really wanted me to know.

First I needed to accept that in wine, uncertainty was an immutable fact of life. "The farther one travels, the less

one knows." There was no sense struggling against it; all this did was retard my progress toward contentment. But it is a human desire to *know*, to ask why. Would wine always frustrate that desire as a condition of our relationship?

Far from it. But I was asking the wrong *why*. I was asking *why* couldn't I know everything about wine? I needed to ask why I *couldn't*, why none of us ever can. The essential uncertainty exists ineluctably, or so it seemed, and the most productive questions finally became clear. *What purpose does this uncertainty serve? What does it want of me?*

One answer was immediately clear: there would be no "answer." There would, however, be an endless stream of ever-more interesting questions. And questions, it began to seem, were indeed more interesting than answers. In fact it was answers which were truly frustrating, for each answer precluded further questions. Each answer quashed, for a moment, the curiosity on which I'd come to feed. It seemed, after all, to be questioning and wondering which kept my *elan vital* humming.

The less I insisted on subduing wine, the more of a friend it wanted to be. Now that I know that wine is an introvert which likes its private life, I don't have to seduce away its secrets with my desire to penetrate. The very uncertainty keeps it *interesting*, and wine has grown to be very fine company. I'm inclined to guess that the uncertainty wants to remind me to always be curious, always be alert to the world, always be grateful that things are so fascinating, and to remember to be grateful for the hunger. Because the hunger is *life*. Accepting the irreducible mystery of wine has enabled me to immerse myself in it more deeply than I ever could when I sought to *tame* it.

Immersion has come to be the key. I am immersed in the world, the world is immersed in me. There are filaments and connections, always buzzing and always alive. The world is not a commodity destined for my use; its cells are my cells, its secrets are my secrets. And every once in a while, usually when I least expect it, wine draws its mouth to my ear and says things to me. *Time is different than you think. A universe can live inside a spec of flavor. There are doors everywhere to millions of interlocking worlds. Passion is all around us always. The earth groans sweetly sometimes, and small tears emerge, and tell us everything. Beauty is always closer than it seems. When you peer through the doorway, all you see is desire.*

You hear these words and it all sounds like gibberish, a stream of sound which doesn't amount to anything and only confuses things more. But if you've ever held a restive infant, there's a little trick you can do. Babies like to be whispered to; it fascinates them. They get a far-away look on their little faces, as if angels had entered their bodies. And so I do not need to know what wine is saying to me; it is enough that it speaks at all, enough that it leaves me aware of meanings even if these don't fall neatly into a schemata, enough how sweet it feels, the warm moist breath of beauty and secrets, so soft and so close to my ear.

weinviertel

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

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

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

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

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

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



weingut h.u.m. hofer

weinviertel • auersthal

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

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

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

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

The wines have a quality of moderation and intelligence; they are clear and reasonable. In “normal” vintages such as ‘02 and ‘04 they are exceptionally deft and even charming. In warm years they can flirt with extravagance. They have a kind of firm smoothness that’s cool like marble. I was quite enraptured with the ‘04 Rieslings — with his ‘04s in general — but in ‘05 there was only a single Riesling of 15% alcohol. There are, though, some lovely new reds to show you.

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

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

AHF-011L **2005 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

The first year he was clearly nonplussed when I said I wanted this wine, which he needs for his Heurige and was worried I’d plunder too much. Then he went and actually filled orders several *hundred* times larger than I thought he possibly could, and we’re already nearly sold out of his ‘05!

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

The ‘05 shows a slight almondy note; the palate has his usual polish, though this is drier and more peppery than either ‘04 or ‘03.

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

AHF-012 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg DAC** +

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

But it isn't the same wine as last year's, which hailed from a site called "Vogelsang". In effect he determines *anew each year* which vineyard will give his DAC. This idea makes perfect sense, and everyone will hate it. "Last year there were two wines, a DAC and a Freiberg, but this year they're the *same wine???*" Yes. Because he picks what he finds the most SUITABLE wine for the DAC label, and one year it's this vineyard and the next year it's that. Well, *grrrrrrrrrr*.

Taste the wine, stout yeoman, as it will cure your cholera. It has an almost Riesling-y pitted-fruit fragrance but also with lavish flowering-fields and balsam; the palate begins ripe and seductive but then breaks down into rivulets of herbs, ending with pepper and mineral. Or not ending, as it's *very* long. More than worth the momentary confusion, right? Of course it is.

AHF-013 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Kirchlissen**

It's the "better" wine though less overt than the Freiberg; as always it shows the cool green alternative to its more perfumey sibling, all herbs and grass and subtle licorice, with wonderful peppery clarity. Choose it if you prefer a more studiously serious Veltliner.

AHF-014 **2004 Zweigelt "Vom Kleinen Eichenfass"**

"From little oak barrels." In fact 1 year in used barriques after fermentation (and malo) in steel tank; it's a winning wine; cherry and cherry-tobacco, plums and violets; the oak merely seasons without dominating; the wine is juicy, long and spicy and will kick ass with just about anything grilled.



weingut setzer

weinviertel • hohenwarth

Setzer rescued the '05 vintage for me. I tasted there on the second day, after three other grower visits left me wondering, not whether the wines would be good — they were certainly *good* — but whether they'd give me pleasure. With the first glass of the first Veltliner I knew I'd come home.

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

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

Permit me a short word about Charm. I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic virtues. In people it denotes an effort of behavior whereby you feel appreciated and cared for. In wine or music it creates a response of palpable delight. I find this feeling more pleasant than many other

feelings which seem to have greater *prestige*. Don't get me wrong; there's a place in me for being knocked out, blown away, stunned, impressed, but I find none of these as exquisitely pleasurable as feeling delighted or charmed.

Also, charm is a flexible virtue. Charm can exist in big wines or medium wines or little wines. I also appreciate this virtue because it seems less reducible to recipe: any grower of unexceptionable talent can make *intense* wine. It seems much more intuitive to craft wines of charm, less a matter of formula than of constant attending to tiny details. And knowing all the while that your wine won't be the biggest, boldest, loudest rock-em sock-em wine on the table. But it will insinuate, will crawl inside a certain temperament and sing its siren-song, and this is the pleasure for which we live.

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



Hans Setzer



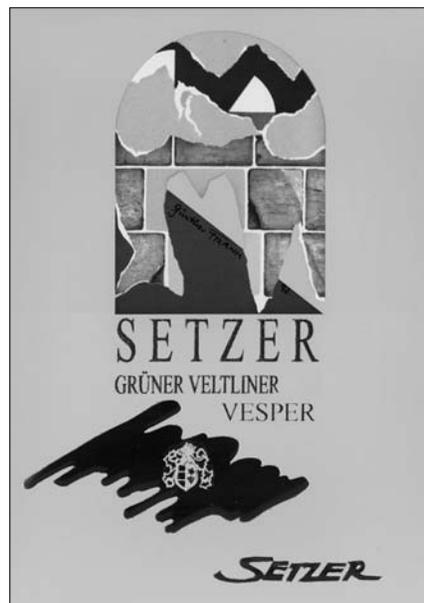
Uli Setzer

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

Wagram. Yet I feel the wines are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his "competitor," bless him) called *Vinovative*.

But I don't want to leave you with the impression this is a "modest" winery producing the kinds of wines that happen to charm me. Indeed, Setzer is serious and Important, having won many accolades (Vintner Of The Year in a major wine magazine, to cite a conspicuous example), and the GrüVe "8000" is about to be given VINARIA'S three stars. It's just that I've come to discern the difference between "appraising" a wine and "loving" a wine, and it's a huge blast when you can do both. These wines are *good company*; you could take a cross-country trip with them.

- ASZ-009 **2005 Grüner Veltliner “Vesper”**
 This was the sweetest and most winsome light GV I'd tasted yet; perfect, lovely fruit, sorrelly, sweet little lentils, balsam and butter; hard to imagine a more *FUN* every-day wine.
- ASZ-010 **2005 Grüner Veltliner “Erste Lage”** +
 Another world here! Creamy, expressive, gorgeously smoky nose, barley and campfire and forest-floor; seductive palate with salty crunch and meat; this is in essence *perfect* mid-weight GV showing plump fruit and firm outlines. The only melancholy thing is how LITTLE there is in the short '05 crop.
- ASZ-011 **2005 Grüner Veltliner “8000”** +
Here's an interesting concept: he's planted the vines exceptionally densely (8000 vines per hectare) but has very few bunches per vine. He attains high physiological ripeness without excessive alcohol, thanks in part to the limestone-rich soil and to the genetics of the old Veltliner material. Fermented with ambient yeasts, the wine is wonderfully convincing. Indeed the '03 was among the top-3 GVs I offered that year, and the '04 didn't miss a trick. All the more reason to cherish the (very!) few bottles of this beauty coming over, and Vinaria's three stars will add even more fever. Oy! This is *darker* and more brooding than the Eichholz, starting out all char and singe, but with air (which it virtually gulps down) it starts to show massive fruit and leaf; sorrel, fennel, potato soup, caraway; at once amazingly thick yet seemingly weightless — a zeppelin of GrüVe!
- ASZ-012 **2005 Roter Veltliner Kreimelberg**
 Been a while since I offered a Roter Veltliner; very few growers make them any more, but those who do are specialists. In essence it's a GrüVe cousin, making a fuller-bodied and muskier wine; young Rot-Ve tastes like 5-year-old GV, or like GV blended with really bell-peppery Sancerre. That said, Setzer doesn't seem to know *how* to make a coarse or blatant wine, and this guy won me quite over: 35-year-old vines; explosive fruit basket aromas; sweet red peppers, banana, porcini and honey mushroom, rhubarb and beet greens and musk; palate comes on spritzzy with secret-sweetness and lavishly generous flavor and with the texture of pearl-pasta. Original, distinctive, and yummy.
- ASZ-013 **2005 Riesling**
 Cool lemon-blossom aromas, peony and orchid; a caressing affectionate palate; pristine and classy with mid-palate notes of lavender; almost absurdly long; fine-textured play among balsam, mineral and white tea.



weingut familie zull

weinviertel • schrattental

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Zull family

Zull at a glance:

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

AFZ-060 **2005 Grüner Veltliner “Lust und Laune”**

Go on and translate it yourself you foul-minded perv.

The wine is meant to be gulped. It may seem *slight* if you micro-focus on it but not if you wash down a schnitzel with it.

AFZ-057 **2005 Grüner Veltliner DAC**

Lentilly and juicy, very much in the fennel-seed direction, with good length and a creamy pepperiness.

AFZ-058 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Ausere Bergen** +

This is perhaps Phillip’s best-yet GrüVe; he fermented 10% of it in used barriques and it’s dripping with class and the creamy richness of the vintage; ten different fragrant leaves, stones and lavender and pepper, with lots of snap and bite on the finish.

AFZ-059 **2005 Zweigelt**

Just yummy! More violet than cherry, but fetching; a wee bit of tannin but all kinds of grip; tastes as if a Chinon were blended with 10% Syrah.



kremstal and kauptal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



weingut erich & maria berger

kremstal • gedersdorf

I confess I was taken aback when Erich Berger said 2005 was “A nearly perfect vintage for whites”. It’s not that I didn’t believe him, I just hadn’t tasted enough. I believe him now.

In fact I’d have to say his collection was the most stirring and exciting I tasted, not because it was “better” than anyone else’s but because it was really a *culmination* of possibility for this producer, a vintage in perfect alignment with his identity. Or what *was* his identity, until the last few years.

Erich and his father always made charming tasty wines, cool, “sweet”, feminine and alluring — never big or show-offy or obvious. Then Erich told me he wanted to make a small change, toward a more overt style, less inferential and aloof and more positive and definite.

I liked these new wines and told him so, but lamented the passing of another proponent of *charm*; there are never enough of these.

What I think happened is the 2005 vintage *compelled* Erich back to the old style. He couldn’t help make creamy charming wines from the ‘05 material. I’m sure he’ll revert to his old-new idiom next year, and I won’t be sad to see it, but for now this gushing group of ‘05s is about as delightful as wine can be.

Look, I am a man with greying temples. I’m in the wine-biz and drink wine very often. For those reasons and possibly others of which I’m unaware, I’m starting to

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



place my highest premium on *drinkability* and *beauty* when I select wines, not just for you but also for my personal sloppin’ down. A few years ago I began to see the occasional dichotomy between what I offered to you as Great Wine and what I actually *bought* for the private stash; what I need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

And I would stake this claim; if you buy wine for **practical** reasons, not simply to have “nothing but 90+!!” on your shelves or wine-list, you *must* pay attention to the *quality*, the *loveliness* of the flavors of the wines you choose. Any clod can buy and sell BIG-ASS wines. Show-

reserves, wines for the tasting room. I want to sell you wines for FOOD and LIFE. Berger’s wines are delightful and affordable. ‘Nuff said?



Erich Berger

how the wines taste:

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

ABG-072L **2005 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

This is by far the best vintage ever of this wine. A *very* pretty fragrance, and the palate is remarkably salty and expressive, in the fennel-kohlrabi direction; lovage and sorrel; there are many non-liter wines in these pages that are no better than this!

ABG-073 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Lösterrassen**

This is full-tilt screaming yummy, maybe the best "normal" GrüVe Erich has made; elegantly earthy, like morels and spring onions; wonderful substance and texture; *pure* Veltiner in the form of a Platonic Ideal.

ABG-074 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Gebling** +

OK Dude, I see your point. These really hit a kind of sweet-spot; the highest common denominator between grace and strength, spice and depth, stone and fruit, complexity and *fun*; a hugely intricate basket of stones and herbs; really fine, ripe serious GV.

ABG-075 **2005 Riesling Steingraben** ++

A perfect 6g.l. RS creates a lovely classic graceful *dry* Riesling; quintessential Austria fragrances of wisteria, quince and lime-leaf; palate is spicy and absurdly long, the entry and mid-palate all spurting juice-o-rama and the back-palate all minty and curvaceous; this doesn't show the n-th degree of Grand Cru expression — it isn't Gaisberg, obviously — but my two plusses are for sheer *vitality*, length and melody.

ABG-076 **2005 Gelber Muskateller**

It's all it should be. Cool, shady, spearminty, honest and vital.

ABG-077L **2005 Blauer Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter**

This is unusually plummy, feinting toward St Laurent; a lot of substance here, even a bit of tannin (which Erich says will soften by bottling time); still, it's a fruity-dusty sort of wine for lovers of Loire reds. The '04 surprised us all with its remarkable reception, and this is every bit as good.

ABG-078 **2005 Blauer Zweigelt Haid**

This one has all the top stuff in it - '05 wasn't suited for the deluxe bottlings so it all ended up here - it's very blue, both ultra-violet and ultra violets; plus blueberry and blackberry and black pepper; palate is wonderfully juicy and spicy with grip and wit, leading to a finish of sun-dried herbs. Lots of fun here!

ABG-079 **2003 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen**

This is the artist-formerly-known-as "Barrique" ; ain't it good he changed the name? It tastes to me like new-wave Rioja. He used both Allier and (Austrian) Mannhartsberg, neither new, with medium-plus toast. The wine isn't so much oaky as malty; leather and plums, generous and seductive. If one accepts an oaky wine in general, the violet and cherry scented Zweigelt often has enough of its own juju to stand up to the sauce.

weingut mantlerhof

kremstal • brunn im felde

I wondered how our hero would fare; botrytis vintages are sometimes unkind to him, unless the botrytis is very clean. I am an admitted (and unrepentant) fussbudget about botrytis, which may have caused me to be uncharitable toward Mantler's 2004s, and so it was with no small relief that I found his '05s entirely enjoyable.

Our hero is a moving target. Having experimented with whole-cluster pressing in '99 and to a larger extent in 2000, he was unhappy with the results and has gone back to stompin' the huevos outa them grapes. The lustier style seems to suit him better.

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

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

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

Mantler himself is a bundle of energy, and his wines

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



Josef Mantler

have the same sense of being jammed to bursting with vitality; they are somehow *untamed*. Like their maker, the irrepressible Sepp, they're full of beans.

Mantlerhof at a glance:

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

world's nicest guy!

AMH-053 2005 Grüner Veltliner Löss Terrassen

Often this is one of the Kamptal's — if not Austria's — best mid-weight GrüVes, and the '05 is extremely pretty and classy and light on its feet with 12% alc; comely aromas of rhubarb, pea shoots and lemon balm; a delectably juicy wine with delicate secret sweetness.

AMH-054 2005 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel

The big boy, top-of-the-line; the '05 is the most *gentlemanly* vintage I can remember, especially compared to the rather garish '04; it has a lovely tact and discretion but is also quite compact and long and wonderfully minerally; I like this enormously and I respect its clarity and specificity.

AMH-055 2005 Riesling Zehetnerin

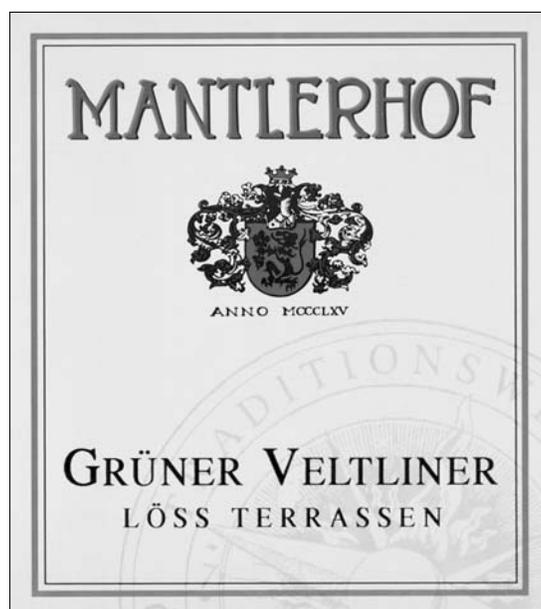
A hugely mineral Riesling with well-integrated botrytis showing like impeccably fresh *parisiens*; the nose is pork-belly and demi-glace and the palate is juicy in the way some mineral wines have.

AMH-056 2005 Riesling Wieland**+**

A stunningly expressive, spicy flourish of Riesling; this is what botrytis is *good* for; spritzzy, with a hint of sweetness but paired with a lip-smacking tart-juicy mirabelle and balsam; in good vintages this is just a glowing, regal Riesling — and this '05 is the real deal.

AMH-057H 2005 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/500ml

Picked December 13th between 4 and 5am — “under a full moon” — after two earlier chances came and went; smells...no, *reeks* of boxwood; the palate isn't hugely sweet (73g.l.) but thus even more transparent; wintergreen and eucalyptus and a wild, feral touch; fascinating!



weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

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

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

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

I always planned Nigl as the day's first visit, but we flip-flopped it this year, just because. I wanted to see what it was like to taste his wines tired in the early evening. We'd done the decathlon at Bründlmayer and Gobelsburg, and I figured I had *just* enough left for Martin's vinous trigonometry.

That was until we arrived, and had an unexpected visitor. *Hans Reisetbauer* was there, toting his collection of *Schnapps*, and I figured what the hell, might as well wipe myself completely out; a bazillion intense, demanding wines plus a big ol' mess of hi-test hooch! So we, or rather I (Corrie sensibly opted to spare herself and her



Martin Nigl

baby-to-be) tasted through the *eaux-de-vies* and I told myself they were sorbets.

I'm actually glad I did it. I'd started becoming self-conscious about my response to Nigl's wines. I needed to see them tired and cranky. They have at times been so celestial one emerges in an altered state, but I didn't want to arrive that way. So I goddamn *tasted* Nigl's 2005s just

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

like they were any other wines.

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

When flavors are so clear and written in such fine sleek lines, rather than lift you up they seem to pull you *in*. And as you go deeper you feel as if you're below the surface, in a kind of cave where the earth-secrets are buried. You have to be available for this experience, and you need to listen very quietly, but it is an experience like no other. It doesn't leave you *happier* but it does leave you wondering, because there is somehow *more* of you on the other side.

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

The Krems valley has a climate rather like that of the

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

Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I once saw—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles are wines with a

high, keening brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate, as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there.

It's all well and good for wines to be filigree; refinement is good. But too much refinement can be arch or precious. *What* are we refining, that is the question. What impresses me about Nigl is his depth of texture. There are layers upon layers of the loveliest raw-silken fruit-mineral jazz, a little nubby and not so smooth the palate can't adhere, and just as you fall happily *through* all those cirrussy layers, you notice how crystalline it all is. I remember a music reviewer praising a pianist's delicacy of touch by saying "You can hear his fingerprints on the keys." It's like that.

Nigl at a glance:

No one would deny this estate's inclusion among the absolute elite in Austria, and many observers wonder if there's anyone finer. Extraordinarily transparent, filigree, crystalline, mineral-drenched wines of mind-boggling clarity. Prices remarkably sane for world-class great Rieslings (compare to the best in Alsace!) Do please note the continuing contraction of the range offered. This is not a statement about the wines; it's a desire to focus. I regret almost bitterly the absence of the "regular" Piri Riesling, in fact, but this one time I conceded to pragmatism.

AFN-116 2005 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

Well *there's* a nose; sweet-pea and rhubarb and basically everything that's fresh from late April to mid June; this has that '05 green 'n cream thing, as if you'd made a compound-cream with cress, sorrel, currant-leaf, Italian parsley and laurel. *Remarkable* quality and expressiveness in its echelon.

AFN-118 2005 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri

+

Bacon, *char*, ivy, lovage, all suggest an austere palate, but *no-o-o-o*, the palate is a total juice-bomb sweetheart anchored by an almost Riesling minerality, and the whole thing has a neon buzz. F'I were you I'd dry my hair before picking up the glass.

AFN-119 2005 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

+

I think he's back on stride after a couple not-so-stellar vintages; first the lovely '04 and now this; immense green-bean aromas with sorrel and wintergreen; this has a perfectly *contained* power; a belly-rich cream ladled over strong bones; almost as rich as goose stock yet with a calcium firmness. Two old loess vineyards near Krems, by the way.



- AFN-120 **2005 Grüner Veltliner “Privat”** +
 AFN-120M **2005 Grüner Veltliner “Privat,” MAGNUMS**
 This is truly wild; gripping pheasant-y aromas, peaty and scorched herbs; the palate is all *kinds* of braised *umami* sweet and eucalyptus spicy; a low register of lemon and ginger and a finish of mint and marjoram. Kinky enough for you? I think the consulting enologist was Doc Johnson.
- AFN-121 **2005 Riesling Kremser Kremsleiten**
 Peony and gardenia in the overwhelmingly flowery nose — this is an especially sexy lavish Riesling from Martin, grown on loess — there’s also a little botrytis, but the palate is wild and spicy with more mineral and menthol than usual; the finish is strikingly long and fennely.
- AFN-122 **2005 Riesling Hochäcker** ++
 Already a legend within Austria, I’m not sure anyone on earth could say what this smells like! Or at least not me; it is otherworldly, complex and wild — straw and candied lemon (hey I tried . . .); the palate is Riesling tantra, sending ethereal borealis signals on a peyote binge, at once lashingly whip-crack spicy but underneath a gingery minty secret sweetness; it is by no means “classical” but *what* a party!
- AFN-124 **2005 Riesling “Privat”** ++
 AFN-124M **2005 Riesling “Privat,” MAGNUMS**
 OK, <*whew*>, this is a more classical and well-behaved force and power; it’s the second cousin of Gobelsburg’s GrüVe Lamm; fragrances of straw and cress and spearmint; the palate is a mass of verbena with palate-clamping length; god only knows what lies in wait here when bottle-sickness subsides. Of course by that point the Austrians will have forgotten it in their clamor for the `06s.
- Where’s the Muskateller?* It was lovely, it was gone, wait a year, to get it on.
- AFN-123H **2004 Grüner Veltliner TBA, 12/375ml**
 The last stop on the honey-train for GrüVe; indeed if you *could* make honey from red peppers it would taste like this, spooned over butter-sautéed green beans. A murmury, satisfying wine.



weingut erich salomon/undhof kremstal • stein

After we were done tasting Bert had to leave for a long-scheduled meeting, but he sent me into the house where Gertrud was making supper. A blues guitarist was wailing away — I love it when they play traditional Austrian *Volksmusik* for me - and wailing, and wailing, and I thought “This guy ain’t bad; he isn’t Stevie Ray or nuthin’, but he ain’t bad,” and it turned out to be CLAPTON, from the Cream reunion at Albert Hall. One wouldn’t expect to hear this at, say, Merkelbach. I thought I’d have an acid-flashback when Pressed Rat And Warthog came on.

There’s even better news; older brother Erich Salomon, who is one of my favorite men of wine and who’d be a *Grand Seigneur* if he wasn’t so down-to-earth, was looking hale and feeling fine after a couple troublesome years. He’d been on a 12-week ayurvedic cure in India,

to hear it told, and between Grüner Veltliner and Cream and esoteric Asian crypto-medical treatments it was like jet-lag without leaving the ground. When the kids came in for dinner I half expected one of them to be riding a unicycle juggling knives.

When I started it was just Erich, waiting to see whether either of his daughters would indicate an interest in maintaining the estate. Bert was the wizard at the Wine Marketing Board — they’re brothers, in case you didn’t know. I warmed to Erich immediately. Either he is virtuosically charming or else somehow the two of us *agreed* in some basic way. I like to think it’s that.

Bert left the Board and came to Stein to help brother Erich out, and he’s gradually received the Torch, though I sense Erich is eager to get back into the fray now that



Erich and Berthold Salomon

sharp cookies. They’re just incredibly nice men.

The new tasting room is done and all signs of construction are gone. The linden tree looks fully recovered from its skirmish with the forklift. Do you know that story? Apparently one of the construction crew backed a forklift, into the linden and tore off some bark and may

he’s no longer hobbled by illness. The two of them are sweet-hearts - there’s really no other word, and though I’m sure they get as ratty and truculent as we all do, they start from somewhere closer to beatific, at least closer than I. Nor are they a couple *P r i n c e* Mishkins; they are in fact

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

have penetrated the wood. So Erich set about to heal the tree. He layered the torn bark back over the wood and held it in place, I don’t recall precisely how. But the “bandage” had to be changed every so often, which he did, and the result is a lovely old tree nursed back to health by a man who loves it. And a man who will care for a tree from sheer affection is the sort of man I want making wines for me.

Bert and Erich seem to get along better than any two brothers I’ve ever seen. I sense a true symbiosis at work between them; Bert correctly understood the Grüner Veltliners were a level below the Rieslings, and together they’re striving to improve them — and succeeding. Bert’s also more alert to the strictly commercial questions.

A few years ago Erich decided to modernize his wines, to emphasize their primary fruit and make them more attractive younger. We live, after all, in a culture which assigns wine a commodity value based on a *very* fleeting impression of a thing that’s barely out of grape-juice diapers. But we won’t change it by kvetching — if only!

Still, Erich’s determination to change was resisted by his cellar master of twenty-five years, who was understandably rather set in his ways. He got to re-set his ways though, as he’s no longer there! At the age of fifty-five, our hero decided to change his fundamental approach to vinification, opting for the modern technique of whole-cluster pressing.

This is quite the topic of debate these days. Erich removed his old casks in favor of stainless steel, and switched from spontaneous to cultured-yeast fermentations. But whole-cluster pressing really signaled his determination to change. With whole-cluster pressing you get sleek, vertical, transparent and filigree wines. If your harvest is superb your wines can be celestial. If your harvest is ordinary your wines can seem small and sterile. Many of the best growers do it in part, some do it entirely. Hiedler is a conspicuous example of one who does not. Bründlmayer is one who does (but Willi does conventional pressing with 10% and then blends the two). Sometimes you lose a little *gras* with whole-cluster pressing, but you can gain a lot of brilliance.

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

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

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

There’s a Knowing text for The price list, a bit of which I’d like you to see. “Great sites and careful work in them are the basis for good or great wines. Our wine-making is based on this principle; give the wine peace to develop itself. Charming, elegant and long-lived wines are our goals — wines that blossom with food and help food blossom. We’re uninterested in Powerwines with 14% or higher alcohol.”

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

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

2005 was as short a crop here as it was everywhere. And much of the Riesling showed botrytis, and didn’t ferment to dryness. In fact there’s a parcel of wine with about 33g.l. RS — close to “feinherb” if this were Germany — blended from Pfaffenberg and Kögl, which was used to cowboy up the “reserve” Rieslings. Most cunningly I might add! In all and despite the botrytis it’s a somewhat better vintage for Riesling here.

how the wines taste:

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

ASU-074 **2005 Grüner Veltliner “Hochterrassen”**

This is one of our front & center value GV’s, always correct and snappy, This `05 is richer and drier than the more polished filigree `04; it’s nutty, sorely, lentilly and zips with adamant snap and pepper. It’s estate-bottled, by the way, from a variety of high terraces on loess and river deposits.

ASU-076 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Wieden**

This is perhaps the wine that’s improved the most in Bert’s *regime*; the `05 is all baked stones and rosemary, not so much “peppery” as *fiery*; it has a sort of capsicum assertiveness standing in for charm; a take-it-or-leave-it, in-your-face bag of rocks.

- ASU-078 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Lindberg “Reserve”**
 Ultra-classy GrüVe nose, almost like a still-moist dough for a dark bread; the palate is spicy beyond spice, as if it were fined with chili-powder; it’s hugely juicy and expressive (Bert says “dusty” and “green tea”) with a somewhat abrupt finish, as if it were interrupted and forgot what it meant to say. Tertiary notes of 2nd-Flush Darjeeling come on.
- ASU-075 **2005 Riesling “Steinterassen” (Salmon Label)**
 This is a dry Riesling *basis* — you want to drink it from a shot-glass. Lovage and fennel fragrances lead to a dry country-Riesling, lusty but ascetic; underripe lime zippiness, for drinkers who like a sharp *whomp* of stone.
- ASU-077 **2005 Riesling Kögl**
 I haven’t seen this wine in anything close to its proper condition, but what I did see gave me a certain pause; it took a long time to shake off some H₂S and even when it did it was in a yowling tantrum of crankiness, but it got fruitier as it sat and I suspect it only needs time, albeit lots of it. Approach with caution in the near term. I wonder how it will show at the June tastings.
- ASU-079 **2005 Riesling Pfaffenberg**
 Fragrance like a Pfalz Riesling, like a Kalkofen in fact; ginger and quince; the palate is again sharply spicy and Altoid-penetrating, but here the botrytis doesn’t fret me — it fits, it adjusts to the rest of the wine instead of drowning it out. The phenolic grip gives way to a finish like good consommé.
- ASU-080 **2005 Riesling Kögl “Reserve”** +
 This is good! It’s the basic wine with 10% of the “sweet” Kögl, giving it a most helpful 5g.l. RS, and it finds the sweet-spot of fruit and spice the others still seek; spearmint and Italian parsley and wisteria; a silky palate, still with the ‘05 adamancy, but this wine has *booty*.
- ASU-081 **2005 Riesling Pfaffenberg “Reserve” (Metternich und Salomon)** +
 This is a dead-ringer for Furmint of all things; quince, wick-smoke, rosewater; it’s the basic Pfaffenberg now with 15% of the sweet wine - and it’s just about ideal Riesling (will they ever get it?); juicy and spicy with a subtle malty savor; a pleasurable wine.
- ASU-082 **2005 Riesling “Noble Selection”** ++
 Here’s are the “sweet” wines in their original form, a blend of two-thirds Kögl to one-third Pfaffenberg; explosively juicy and spicy, the sort of perfect food-wine you wish there were more of. Again, in the “feinherb” idiom, i.e., not pronouncedly *sweet*, just serenely balanced with grace, fruit and length.
- ASU-083 **1993 Riesling Kögl “Library Reserve”** +
 BLESS them for holding these wines back; this is rapturously flavory and evocative — remember it’s from the *old* cellar-regime, quite exotic; mimosa blossom and roasted red pepper; the palate is high-relief and quite dry but fabulously vivid and racy; it’s a slinky lil’ thing in a tight red dress and stilettos, and only just coming into its prime.



I started to write this on Sunday, and it was fine. I was jet-lagged,

but a little unreality seems to work for me. Any therapists who may read those words are encouraged to send diagnoses . . .

Yesterday I went to the office, where I needed to dig out from a 2-week absence. There were calls to return, mail to read, bills to pay, reports to submit, and all day the steady clamor of phone and email. I tried to write, but never really got wood on the ball; I fouled off pitches and knocked the dirt off my cleats. There was too much going on. Now they tell us that guys don't multi-task as well as women, and this feels true. I suppose I can manage it well enough, in terms of not making mistakes, but it makes me grumpy. I care about what I write here. By which I mean, it makes me happy if it's good. By which I mean, if it's honest then it's good, or good enough. This is true even if no one reads it.

For years I wrote as if no one read it, and I wasn't far from the truth. Lately I've learned of a few readers, but forgive me; it's best if I ignore you. Yesterday left me jangly, as if a different piece of music were playing in each ear. Today I decided to write from home, where I can get a little more white-space around my words. Where I can hear my little editor who lives wary and subcutaneous. He doesn't correct my syntax (and I'm sure someone should) but he's always right when he insists something isn't good enough. He knows I'm vulnerable, because I need it to be good.

In a few minutes I'll start writing about Willi Bründlmayer and his wines. Sure, I want you to want the wines, because I was there and they convinced me. I also want you to know what a remarkable and singular fellow Willi is. I also want to weave some kind of flavor among the words. I also want to convey a feeling I have at Bründlmayer and places like his, that these are *authentic* places to be. I think we move through the world in a fog sometimes. And when we alight on someplace *real* it's like putting on eyeglasses that suddenly reveal all that's blemished and bogus around us. To me it is urgent we recognize those things, and avoid them. The bogus isn't *good* for us. It's like a sugar-high that leaves us crashed and wretched later. It confuses us, and we lose our bearings.

Yes I want to tell you about the wines so that

you'll buy them, but it isn't merely about this Veltliner or that Riesling; it's also a dispatch from someplace true in the world, a reminder that such places are here. If you're bludgeoned with stimulus and noise and crave a kindly silence, such places are here. If you're flat and wan and drifting on auto-pilot, such places are here. If you're sinking into ennui as yet another corporate type presses his marketing strategies on you, as yet another former dermatologist or veterinarian lords his milk-and-honey *lifestyle* on you, and you wonder what any of it has to do with wine, with why you loved wine at the beginning — I have places to show you. If you're weary of reading about grape-skin



concentrates and oak chips and spinning cones and must-concentrators and debt service and consultants who guarantee you'll get any given "score" — if you're weary of even *thinking* about "scores", I have places to show you.

If you read a passage of poetry, in a book review perhaps, and if you feel that sudden invasion of silence, so still you can hear yourself wonder *I used to have this thing in my life; where did it go?* and if that has ever happened, I have places to show you. They are why I do this work. They are what I wish to capture in this writing. Because the world keeps grinding us down to the nub until we forget we are even hungry or alive. But *these places are still here*. They are still here. You can go to them whenever you want. You can live the life they offer. You can remove the thorn from your paw. You can know — why.

Now let's talk about Willi.

weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

Though Bründlmayer is by far the largest estate I represent — at a whopping 80 hectares, I find it lovely that we still taste in the cozy little tasting room. I'm sure there's somewhere in the vast Willi-nexus where *delegations* are entertained, but we still taste in this small room off the equally unassuming winery on a quiet *Gasse* in Langenlois. It's nice, and familiar.

I'm also impressed by Willi's decision to hold his biggest wines back from release until he feels they're more ready. The old-vines GrüVe and Riesling and the monumental Lamm GrüVe won't be seen till early 2007, a principled choice with financial consequences, that only a market "leader" could make. But our thoughtful and charming friend is deceptively mild in his social persona. Beneath the surface lies courage and a bedrock integrity.

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

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

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's



Willi Bründlmayer

sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very alert. He follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the "Wine Professor" because of his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are, come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

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

Bründlmayer's is a large domain yet his range of wines is kept within sensible limits. Soils are rocky and dry in the hills, fertile and calcareous in the lower areas. That's according to Willi's estate brochure, from which I'll quote a little.

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

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

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

This year, I think for the first time, we made Willi our *first* stop of the day. I was always showing up in the afternoon after being wrung out by two previous tastings, and I wanted to see these wines with a different palate. By this time I'd started adoring the best '05s and I was eager to see what Willi had done.

In a way the wines are more pensive than they often are — Willi is known to enjoy making *pronounced* wines, but many of these 05s made me think of Nikolaihof.

They had that sapid serenity and easeful length.

I also think Willi's wines are changing somewhat from the time I first encountered them, or perhaps it is I who have changed. They are like an extremely good-looking woman (or man!) who wears very understated clothes. They are almost completely without affect, but with great candor and transparency. I also appreciate the willingness to risk, even when I'm unconvinced by the results. I'm sure Willi would say "It keeps things interesting."

Bründlmayer at a glance:

Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range. Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 80 hectares) winery.

how the wines taste:

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

ABY-164 **2004 Bründlmayer Sekt**

I splurged my final night in Austria and stayed in one of Vienna's grandest hotels. I felt like a Sultan. At breakfast there was this deranged buffet from which I gnarfed an unseemly amount of food. What to wash it down with? Ah! There were two fizzies, one was a Champagne you've heard of and which I probably shouldn't name (though it rhymes with "hurts" if you say it right) and Bründlmayer Sekt at its side. And there, boys 'n girls, I did prove in front of several witnesses that Willi's fizz is INDEED better than middling commercial Champagne. Last year I asked Willi how he felt about Michi Moosbrugger's splendid bubbly at Gobelsburg; he said he loved it, of course, but was himself seeking another kind of wine. "I am actually looking for a certain neutrality," he said. "Not lack of character, but a kind of discretion that will make the wine work well at the table. It should be elegant but not draw attention away from the food."

Willi's fizz, unlike Gobelsburg's, is made entirely from the Pinots (red, white and gray) and also Chardonnay. It's essentially anti-varietal and as seamless as Willi wants it to be. Last year we offered the '02, and this year we've opted to leapfrog over an '03 (which is weirdly compelling but kind of shrieky with 13.5% alc) to a genial '04: this is a light, graceful version of Willi-Brut, charming and transparent, smelling of wet hay and grass, tasting like good Marne Valley Champagne; I think it's the best vintage since '98. It's dosage is based on a 1983 *Spätlese*, and runs to about 8-9g/l.

ABY-157 **2005 Grüner Veltliner "Kamptaler Terrassen"**

We enter with this, as Willi fears his lighter GrüVes are too slight to ship well. It's a *cuvée* assembled from various small parcels and from young vines in the Grand Crus — Willi won't use a GC site-name unless the vines are old enough to *convey* the site. This is an important benchmark for GrüVe, and this is the loveliest vintage I remember: more sorrelly and beany and quite lithe and graceful for an '05; boxwood and celery-root; dimples of smiling fruit here! An *adorable* wine.

ABY-160H **2005 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml**

This year I'll only offer this in halves, because I'm also offering the Loiser Berg (see below); with the same weight as the Kamptaler Terrassen this has an entirely different profile, more craggy and angular, spicy and peppery; it's less winning but more adamant. And it's *wonderful* to have it in little `uns.

ABY-167 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg** +

From these schisty terraces comes a masterpiece of mid-weight GrüVe, with digitally precise delineation and nuance; peo-pod, mineral, a fine high spiciness and hyssop-grassiness; a wonderfully *civil* and reasonable wine.

ABY-113 **2002 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** +

Not a typo, just a plaintive gesture of hope. What in fact is the best old-vines Veltliner Willi can offer his customers *right now*? It isn't the turbulent backward `05 though that is the saleable commodity, the *new vintage*. It is precisely this glorious `02, and it's his hope and mine there are enough of you who buy *wines* and not commodities. So, you get a chance to obtain the better wine and restore two guys' faith in humanity.

This `02 has density, strength, grace, length and fragrance, *real* growing-up wine fragrance. It has "only" 12.5% alc, so all its density comes from *inner* material; it's a touchstone wine, a passionate introvert. I'm thrilled to be able to offer it.

ABY-170 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Käferberg**

Often this bottling is too over-the-top for me, but in graceful vintages like `05 it contains its power and out comes a glory. This is as creamy, plump and mineral as Meursault-Perrieres, but with GrüVe pepper and wild green; mizuna and pea-vine and mussels; the wine has a voluptuous power, and even with its intensity it has a weightless floaty quality.

NOTE: a potentially sensational *GrüVe Ried Lamm* — one of Austria's monument GVs — will be offered in early 2007.

ABY-158 **2005 Riesling "Kamptaler Terrassen"** +

And so it begins, a wholly *beautiful* group of Rieslings, each one a model of precision and nuanced articulation. This has a cool green creaminess; I remembered Willi's attraction to shade-grown green teas; there's a haunting herbal-flower complexity; this is virtually perfect "basic" dry Riesling that will develop amazing aromas in 3-4 years.

ABY-171 **2005 Riesling Steinmassel** +

From these high wuthering slopes of schistuous granite often comes one of Austria's great *unexceptional* Rieslings, showing the basis for their greatness. And oh, this is a fine vintage, the best since `02; redcurrant and currant-leaf; a watertight structure and tight green-herbal spiciness - almost a GrüVe pepper — a wine both pointed and moderate.



- ABY-166 **2005 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein (+)**
- ABY-166H **2005 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**
- ABY-117 **2002 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein +**
 The `05 shows some botrytis but is engulfed by waves of mineral; it's as intense as some vintages of Alte Reben, with classic site character. I hedged the "plus" while I wait to see how that botrytis resolves. But the 2002, that's another story. It's developed a haunting smokiness to go with its primary notes of guava and talc; there's amazing interplay and nuance and a happy hint of vanilla but still with a cool green cream of leafy sweetness. Again, I am so happy to be able to re-offer it to you.
- ABY-165 **2005 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein "Lyra" ++**
 The name refers to Bründlmayer's trellising method, a Y-shaped system that looks "as if the vine is throwing its arms up toward the heavens," says Willi. This system also more than doubles the leaf-surface exposed to sunlight and encourages quick drying of leaf and grape alike after a rain. Willi also wants to demonstrate you don't *need* old vines to make great wine.

 But there's more. "Lyra is the wine of the sun," Says Willi, "the brainchild. Whereas Alte Reben is the wine of the soil, the darker underground. You drink each wine with a different part of yourself."

 What a lovely thing to say.

 This is a beamingly happy concentrate of the stony aloe-vera foundation of Riesling; verbena and a limey bellow of Riesling green; power, mass and florescent brilliance yet with all its ripeness it's still not peachy — rather like pink- lady apples. Willi wants to demonstrate you don't need old vines to make great wines, and this regal masterpiece is all the proof I require.
- ABY-155 **2004 Muskateller +**
 This has come a huge distance from a year ago, and I'd now claim it's the Class of the Muscats I know from Austria. It's like Riesling with an infusion of Elderflower, generous and full of character; cliché or not there's a whole bouquet of flowers here, set firmly in a binding of tilleul and mineral.
- ABY-172H **2000 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein Riesling BA, 12/375ml ++**
 Nice to see you again! It's already quite gold, but splendidly spicy, an essence of tilleul with endless grip and length; sweet malt and tangelo and vanilla cakes and candied lemon and white chocolate - dude makes good sticky!
- ABY-159H **2000 Grüner Veltliner TBA, 12/375ml ++**
Rare Cellar Release!
 Frightening stuff here! One of the great sweet Austrians ever, like GV with its own honey; crazily high-toned and spicy, varietally and site specific; galvanically powerful and ringent, with length and the sweetest lime-verbena-jasmine flavors.

NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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



Heiligenstein vineyard

weingut schloss gobelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

Lord has it *really* been ten years since Michael Moosbrugger took over this property? No wonder I need a new car.

Just as I was leaving Austria the new issue of FALSTAFF was appearing, hailing Schloss Gobelsburg as *Winery Of The Year* (as it had done for Heidi Schröck three years ago), and there are many observers within Austria who find this to be the country's most exciting estate. There is certainly no one *better* in this offering. I am awed by the dedication and long-term idealism of Michael — Michi — Moosbrugger, and I am keenly thrilled by his wines. But perhaps even more, I am touched by the grace and kindness of Willi Bründlmayer's gift to us all.

Bründlmayer? Explain.

Schloss Gobelsburg has a centuries-old monastic tradition, during which, as Michi puts it, "There were periods when the wines were great and periods when they weren't; after all, not every generation of monks had the same passion or skill. But what was always true was the quality of the land." When Willi first told me the story he too pointed to the vineyards. "Terry, it is some of the absolute best land in the Kamptal," he said.

But the property was drifting, and as no relief was in site from within, the monks considered summoning the cavalry from without. Willi was approached and his advice sought.



Michael Moosbrugger

wine-lover seeks winery. Put the two together and **whoosh!**

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

Michi's wines excel by precision and polish now. Their texture is truly silken, and their "temperament" is as pensive as that of their maker. Gobelsburg has entirely shed the skin of the Michael-Willi association and had

Bründlmayer had a customer, a young man in the opposite end of Austria. Michael Moosbrugger was a restless wine lover, just barely thirty years of age, who had visions of making wine *s o m e d a y*. Potentially great winery needs new blood. Young, energetic and visionary

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

arrived at its own place in the firmament.

Gradually, one step at a time, Moosbrugger has added new categories of excellence to his roster, until it seems everything he touches blazes into brilliance. His dessert wines are unsurpassed anywhere in Austria. His sparkling wine is fabulous. His *reds*, from a region not known for great reds, are sensible and lovely. This doesn't result from any sort of alchemy, you know. It *looks* easy when you're sitting in the tasting room and the wines are so good you start taking their excellence for granted. But in fact it involves gradual and painstaking work you do when no one is watching. Choices of vine-material and replanting when necessary. Re-design in the cellar — including an innovation so brilliant you can't believe no one thought of it before. Knowing that large cellars such as Gobelsburg's have varying temperature zones, and wanting to move wines among different zones without having to pump them, Michi invented a system of casks-on-wheeled-platforms, so that entire *casks* can be wheeled hither and yon.

Michi is aware of the gravity of a Great Tradition, but rather than weigh him down it seems to prod him on. If he is aware of occupying a place in history, I imagine it's to hope that, hundreds of years from now, someone



will read a chronicle of Schloss Gobelsburg and cite his era as one of enlightenment. He is certainly an example of leaving the world better than you found it!

Feeling awed yet? That's not my intent. Michi's a rather quiet guy (as guys go) but he and Eva are actually Just Folks, and my visits here are warm and relaxed. In fact I've left a couple soul-prints at Schloss Gobelsburg. I was there with colleagues and customers on 9/11/01. And one Summer I was there with the whole gang of Michael Skurnik Wines, and we had a party, with a band, and we commandeered the stage at one point, and Michi sang "New York State Of Mind" in our honor, and we played "Smoke On The Water," and the police were called and a splendid time was had by all.

how the wines taste:

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

AZZ-070 **NV Brut Reserve** (+)

This is my personal favorite non-Champagne fizz; indeed I'm sure if Nicolas Chiquet made sparkling wine in the Kamptal this is what he's make. The current *cuvée* is '01-'02, disgorged March '06 (that's a lot of time on the lees); it's 15% Pinot Noir, 15% Riesling and 70% GrüVe — the latter two derive from pre-harvests from Grand Crus like Lamm and Gaisberg (!); this is saltier than last year's blend, but just as silky, classy and Veltliner-y, and it may be even better when it recovers from disgorgement (which acts like a concussion on a wine).

AZZ-085 **2005 Grüner Veltliner "Gobelsburger"**

"Gobelsburger" is in effect a 2nd-label, partly from purchased fruit, intended as a price-point wine for the retail trade. Alas, in Michi's hands, it's much more than that.

It quickly became known just what fricking *amazing* wine the '04 was, and again this '05 is insanely above its class. In fact it isn't a "light" wine at all; at 12.5% alc it's the weight of Wachau Federspiel; remarkable aromas here, rhubarb and red pepper; the palate is *loaded*, roaring with torque, lentils and mizuna; fuller-bodied than the crystalline '04 but just as refined. It has to be one of the dozen-or-so best white wine values on earth.

AZZ-086 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz** +

AZZ-086H **2005 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz, 12/375ml**

The first of the great GrüVes at Gobelsburg, from a high plateau south of the palace, on tertiary gravel along with huge rocks from the original Danube, all blanketed below a layer of loess. This '05 is archetypal! It has its own fervid pepper and also the pebbly-creamy grip of '05; it's like a cold bisque from 30 different herbs, with arresting length and precision.

AZZ-089 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Renner**

The site lies at the foot of the Gaisberg where the stony gneiss soil is deeper and contains loess; the vines were planted in the 50s, from old original plant material — this is significant in Austria, where the post-war years saw the plantings of various modern garbage-clones whose only function was to yield like crazy. Starting with the 2001 vintage this has been a highlight of this assortment, a big-scaled Grüner Veltliner of amazing value and contained elegant weight and power, with detail and economy. The nose is doughier than the Steinsetz's; more lemon, but still with an oyster shell overtone. The '05 has perfect signature-aromas. As always it's more overtly roasty and red-peppery and succulent. A barely-sharp finish precludes a "plus". It remains among Austria's best bang-for-the-buck GrüVes.

AZZ-090 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** **++**

AZZ-090M **2005 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, MAGNUMS**

Damn sure the best GrüVe I tasted from '05. You know, it isn't easy to make great wine from Lamm. Big wine, yes. Impressive wine, for sure. But *great* wine almost always indicates *contrast* between strength and delicacy, and that's what Michi achieves here; the aromas are precise, exotic and "sweet"; grilled fennel and leeks; the palate is just masterly; for penetration, proportion and grace but with fiery intensity, this is a class very few wines gain entry to.

AZZ-091 **2004 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition"** **+**

This is a deliberate attempt to replicate the style of 50 years ago—conventional pressing on the skins, no must-clarification, no temperature control, and 18 months in old casks with frequent rackings to encourage secondary flavors. It's not a pastiche so much as an *homage* to an old dialect of white wine disappearing from the modern world.

He's done it four vintages now with GrüVe and I admire the *gratitude* these wines embody. In fact this '04 isn't *obviously* different from the wines made by modern techniques; it has wonderful aromas of old pipe smoke and burning birch; the palate is hugely peppery and fennely, with embedded "sweetness" and fervid mineral grip; there's a brash earthiness but also cool mossy cellar smells.

AZZ-087 **2005 Riesling "Gobelsburger"** **+**

I feel almost guilty buying and selling this wine at *this* price. It has a truly lovely fragrance; green tea, verbena, seckel pear, lime-blossom and wisteria; the palate is just *NUTS* — the wine is too good — it's like a baby Gaisberg, with a salty lick of black-berry and mineral and woodruff; I mean, come *on*; is there better Riesling at this price on *earth*???



- AZZ-088 **2005 Riesling vom Urgestein**
 AZZ-088H **2005 Riesling vom Urgestein, 12/375ml**
 From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heiligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it's really complex on a scale of its own. Abstract from body or alcohol, there's a symposium of flavor happening here, the tropical-mineral Heiligenstein, the berry-mineral Gaisberg. In effect it's like a *bonsai* of riesling; it isn't supposed to be "big" but instead to enthrall you with its detail. The '05 contains somewhat more Gaisberg than usual; cool green aromas dominate; lemon-blossom; the palate has what our British friends like to call "cut", a very sharp relief, a trebly peppery ripe spiciness.
- AZZ-093 **2005 Riesling Gaisberg** +
 A highly complex fragrance of fifteen minerals (yes I counted them . . .), violets and wisteria; the palate is a noble savage, tart-berry; a slithery serpentine thing that tastes like minerals struck by lightning.
- AZZ-092 **2005 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein** ++
 This has come to be one of the most important Rieslings on earth, an annual must-buy for anyone serious about this greatest-of-all-varieties. It's entirely more exotic than the Gaisberg, with smoky tropical gales of flavor; redcurrant and yellow peppers; a voodoo-potion of fruits and incense and campfire and berries, with a billowing minerality; I only hedge the second "plus" due to bottle-sickness having flattened things somewhat — the searching, haunting finish suggests even greater things to come.
- AZZ-094 **2005 Riesling Alte Reben** +
 This is from 58-year-old vines in the Gaisberg; fragrances of blackberries and licorice and burning-leaf; the palate is sinewy and chewy, *ripely* tart, fiery and intense.
- AZZ-095 **2004 Riesling "Tradition"**
 Again all Gaisberg, and all Vetiver — there's really no other association necessary. It shows a chewy roundness acting in concert with '04's verbena-mintiness.
- AZZ-097 **2005 Zweigelt "Gobelsburger"**
 It's deceptively straightforward, even a little youthfully stiff; a fine blueberried Zweigelt giving simple — but not simple-minded — joy; in fact it billows very sweetly and arrives at a charm like a cache of cherries, growing even darker and more violet-y in the glass.
- AZZ-098 **2003 St Laurent Haidegrund**
 A smoky dense fragrance like *Rugiens* or *Teurons*; a little animal, saddle-leather; enters very high toned, stewy and oaky; the mid-palate is like the char marks on a steak; a softly tannic finish to a commandingly authoritative wine. This *isn't* "light" stuff.
- AZZ-096 **2003 Pinot Noir "Privatkeller"**
 This hails from a parcel on the east flank of the Heiligenstein; it has high toned spice-box, shiitake-soy aromas, along with nuances of tobacco and baked tomatoes; a markedly plummy and stylish Pinot Noir with ripe juicy sweetness; done, by the way, in 100% new Mannhartsberg barriques. "How could we talk about *terroir* and then use French oak?" asks Michi. "We'd rather use casks from trees that breathe the same air the vines do."
- AZZ-099H **2005 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++
 Michi has a genius for these things. Picked November 24th from the Steinsetz, and it's pure, gorgeously explosively impressive sweet wine.
- AZZ-100H **2005 Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** ++
 From both Gaisberg and Heiligenstein; a lime nectarine *panna cotta*; again on the "cool" side, a quintessence of the green and mineral and citrusy lime. Sorry for my lack of verbiage — I was rode hard and put away WET at this winery!

weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

I was having lunch with an old friend at Slanted Door in San Francisco when a quartet of Austrians arrived, consisting of Ludwig and Maria Hiedler, Leo Alzinger and Thomas Klinger. Pure coincidence. But I had to send them something to drink, so I sent them — wickedly — a bottle of Gysler's sparkling Scheurebe. I knew they'd love it and love it with the food, but really I wanted to see Hiedler's face when he looked at the label. Scheurebe is *infra-dig* in Austria and I was sure he's be appalled: *What the f@!k is Terry up to now?* Well bless him; he didn't let me down. Ludwig is, shall we say, an expressive man.

We were sitting at dinner one night. María-Angeles Hiedler was to my left with Ludwig at the head of the table to my right, talking animatedly to Peter Schleimer. I caught María looking

pensively at her husband. "What first attracted you to Ludwig?" I asked her.

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

I glanced over at Ludwig and all I could do was smile. It was all so true. He is a very beautiful man. And lately I feel his relationship to his wines has somehow culminated, so that human soul and wine are aligned in a unity of being. You can't separate them; he *is* this wine; it *is* him. With, perhaps, one fascinating exception.



Maria & Ludwig Hiedler

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

"I am a restless spirit," said Ludwig Hiedler; "I

- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 14,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Thal, Losierberg, Spiegel, Heiligenstein, Gaisberg**
- **Soil types: Sandy loess and loam, gravel, eroded desert sandstone**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Riesling, 7% Weissburgunder, 10% Chardonnay, 3% Frühroter Veltliner, 17% Zweigelt, Pinot Noir and Sangiovese**

always want another angle to improve the wines." Hiedler likes extract most of all. "It's the single most important facet of wine," he says. "That's why I don't believe in the whole-cluster pressing, because you lose too much extract."

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

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

your budget.

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

All viticulture is "ecological" (natural fertilizers, no herbicides or pesticides, composting with the skins, but "we are not organic" says Ludwig, as fungicides are used). All harvesting is selective, with two or three passes through the vineyards, exclusively by hand. All pressing is pneumatic. All fermentation is temperature-controlled. The wines are then matured in stainless steel or

acacia casks, according to their needs. Hiedler uses a different yeast culture for each grape variety, the first time I have seen this.

Or *used*, I should say. Because his latest experiments are to do spontaneous fermentation without enzymes or even SO₂, which he did with 95% of his '05s. This is part of his — and Austrian vintners generally — retreat from "internationalism". When they arrived on the world stage they were, naturally, eager to join the prevailing currents; they spoke with colleagues from all over and went back home full of notions and ideas. All of which is harmless, and maybe even good. But not as good as stepping away from the plausible norms prevailing any-where to revisit what's *uniquely* yours. "We want to return to our cussed individuality!" said Hiedler, laughing.

Hiedler at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

AHL-108 2005 Grüner Veltliner "Loess"

This is the finest vintage since Ludwig started making this wine; a pure lentilly fragrance; textbook loess-grown GrüVe; a sweet aloe perfume emerges with air; the palate has a finely layered texture between leaf and crushed stones; it's open and playful and even intricate — amazing articulation and *diction* for an 'everyday' wine; you can taste the tiny veins on the underside of a leaf.

AHL-109 2005 Grüner Veltliner Thal

I never get the same answer twice when I ask about the soil here; this time it's *urgestein* and the next time it's *loess* and Ludwig's fact-sheet refers to "red sand", so maybe it's simply "weathered triceratops dandruff from the Paleozoic age" or something. In any case the wine is always juicy and exotic — the Viognier cognate is especially vivid here. Old vines (around 70), and this '05 shows dark char and botrytis aromas with exotic peppercorns, nutmeg and flowering fields; the palate is a sorcerer's cauldron of smoky juicy craziness with notes of burning leaves, leading to an ashen finish that's almost animally expressive. An extremist to be sure, but fascinating!

AHL-110 2005 Grüner Veltliner Thal-Novemberlese

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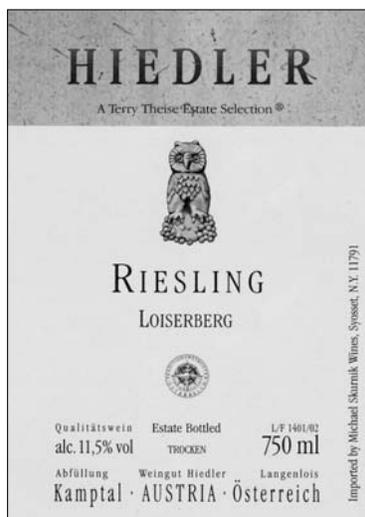
Man when Ludwig aces it, he ACES it. This is his greatest GrüVe since the supernal '02 Maximum, and it's a serious contender for wine-of-the-vintage. "This is simply goddamn great GV" I wrote, both classic and baroque; great solid columns of structure, amazing over-the-top ornamentation. *Batonnage* until June! Wonderful secret-sweetness, sweet lees, toasted egg-bread and parmesan, but the palate is zingy spicy pepper leading to a finish of spearmint and balsam. Wow.

AHL-111 2005 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum"

+

This is an orgy of GrüVe, salacious, abandoned, certainly not *wholesome* — in other words, you wish you were here! Gigantically yeasty aromas like Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs; the palate is like perfect green-beans stir fried in goose fat; as sweetly absurdly spicy as a Mahler symphony, and as heart-rending, and as wickedly fun.

- AHL-112 **2005 Riesling Loiser Berg**
 I liked the second of two tanks more; it had more cinnamon and apple to go with all the stony adamant '05 Riesling juju. This is considerably preferable to the '04, and should integrate even more by Fall.
- AHL-113 **2005 Riesling Steinhaus** +
 Ludwig calls this a “rampant” vineyard; it has amphibolite and gneiss in the higher terraces and loess in the lower, and it always gives him a singular Riesling that hints at Sauvignon. This was the final '05 harvested (on 11/15), and shows a strikingly complex herbal fragrance with lavish flowering field; intricate interplay of many herbs and flowers (more than 15, less than 22) with length and secret sweetness and a wonderful minty shimmer and a lime-blossom savor.
- AHL-114 **2005 Riesling Gaisberg**
 A powerful mineral portrait, like liquid granite with blackberry juice; the wine is sneaky-long and tangy, silvery and ultra-violet.
- AHL-115 **2005 Riesling Heiligenstein** +
 A more imposing fragrance, still massive and mineral but with all the vineyard’s fruit-herbal mojo; the wine is stingingly spicy and close to the final limit of expressiveness in its foamy stock-pot-of-wildness style. More muscle and viscera than, say, the exquisite '02; a wine for a *blanquette de veau*.
- AHL-116 **2004 Weissburgunder “Maximum”** +
 Nearly 50-year-old vines now. I often wonder if this is the greatest Pinot Blanc in the world. Ludwig is almost mystically aligned with the vine. This '04 has a Puligny-fragrance of corn-fritters, sweet crab meat, tropical fruit and vanilla pound-cake; a power-palate, with complex sweet-spice leading to a vaporous finish, a large sweet *umami* with — amazingly — an overtone of verbena.
- AHL-104H **2004 Weissburgunder Eiswein, 12/375ml** +
 The *name* is the flavor! Eiswein *SO* rules.
- AHL-103H **2004 Chardonnay Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**
 Once again, sweet oaky Chardonnay rules— provided it’s REALLY sweet. Picked at 140 Oechsle and fermented in once-used barriques, the wine is like a honey of maize and corn; thick-licious (I made up a word!), firm and spicy, with an amazingly esoteric apple finish.



the matter of “globalization”

The matter of globalization in wine seems to put certain people on the defensive. This is regrettable, not least because defensive people often lash out, and a dialogue which ought to be able to be conducted civilly ends up being conducted evilly. Robert Parker’s recent essay, posted on his website, contained many reasonable and persuasive points, the value of which was diminished by an



intermittent tone of invective. All intellectuals aren’t “pseudo-intellectuals” (I wonder how he tells them apart) and all persons taking views contrary to his aren’t guilty of membership in the “pleasure-police.”

I’ll try to summarize the positions of the two camps. Critics of globalization in wine are actually suspicious of a uniformity of wine-styles they perceive has arisen over the past roughly-20 years. For the sake of brevity, let’s call these people “romantics.”

Proponents of globalization—let’s call them “pragmatists”—argue that wine in the aggregate has never been better, and that good wines are hailing from a larger number of places than ever before. They do not perceive a problem, and think a bunch of fussbudgets are trying to rain on their parade.

Romantics would counter that the sense of multiplicity is misleading, because it’s actually the same *type* of wine hailing from all these new places.

I cannot reasonably deny the validity of the pragmatist’s argument. There are certainly many more competent and tasty wines (and concomitantly fewer rustic, dirty or yucky wines) than there were twenty years ago. Yet I can’t help but wonder; certainly the floor has been raised on overall wine quality. But has the ceiling been lowered? That, I interpret, is the romantic’s argument. But not all of it.

Baseball fans are cruelly aware of the steroid scandal threatening the basic integrity of the

sport. We are sometimes less aware of the role we ourselves have played in bringing this about. We seem to want to wish it all away. We enjoy the prospect of herculean demi-gods bulked up on chemicals hitting baseballs 500 feet. This is becoming our Ideal, and players embodying this ideal put butts in the seats and command the largest salaries. They are also the

envy of other, less “enhanced” players, some of whom seek to climb on board the gravy train.

I see a metaphor here. There is no doubt that the prevailing recipe for modern wines with commercial aspirations effectively seems to *churn them out*; ripe, sweet, softly embedded tannins, large-scaled and concentrated. The pragmatists care less about how such wines get that way than they do about being entertained and thrilled by juiced-up sluggers hitting the ball 500 feet.

I’ll yield this argument is properly conducted in shades of gray. Parker has often expressed his esteem and admiration for moderate, elegant, temperate wines. He typically scores them in the high 80s, and has told me he wishes more people prized and drank such wines. Yet he must be aware the commodity called a “Parker-score” in fact damns such wines with faint praise. And though he admires these wines well enough, he reserves his love and expressive emotionality for their bigger, more hedonistic cousins.

Thus a particular idiom becomes the prevailing idiom, because everyone wants the scores and the financial success they engender. It is the singular persuasiveness of this monoidiom against which the romantics struggle. They—we—are innately wary of uniformity, as it is contrary to nature. We are also alert to an insidious effect such uniformities can create. We risk becoming passive, infantilized, dulled. When all things are one single way there’s less

need to pay *attention* to them, for they no longer can surprise you.

Pragmatists will claim I am overstating the case; none of them argues that all wines should taste the same. Fair enough. Yet they themselves often accuse romantics of wishing to return to some imagined Eden of dirty, weird and rustic wines (which, they sneer, we excuse by citing *terroir*). The dialogue threatens to reduce to a war of straw men.

I would ask the pragmatists to consider this question. How, in a world of wines made by an indisputably prevailing set of practices in pursuit of a given result, will there still be room for the quirky, the asymmetrical, the evocative? Or, are we content to permit such wines to disappear? Is this the wine-world—is it the *world*—in which we wish to live? If not, how do we prevent it?

I am not placing value judgements on “modern” methods. Many of them are benign. Nor is this the time to argue against the falsifications. Some people think it’s *fine* for ballplayers to use steroids! I am asking for consideration of the *consequences* inherent in a belief system. It is certainly true that regions such as, say, Priorat, were unknown and unavailable twenty years ago. Yet to my palate this signifies very little, for Priorat’s wines join an international *glom* of hot-climate reds whose wines are, in the old phrase, much of a muchness. Yes, there is another (*yet another*) source of big-ass reds. I’m not sure why I should care.

In cuisine there comes a point of ennui when all one sees are the same luxury ingredients in nearly interchangeable preparations. Monday it’s squab stuffed with foie gras in a truffle *nage*; Tuesday it’s squab stuffed with truffles in a foie emulsion; Wednesday it’s truffle-crusting foie gras in a squab jus, and eventually it becomes a meaningless farandole of dishes constituting the *luxury-dining-experience*, which you could have in Hong Kong or Los Angeles or Las Vegas or New York or Kuala Lumpur. It becomes a membrane separating you from the world, swaddling you in a specious bliss, seducing your senses. I imagine this when I taste yet another big wine indistinguishable from myriad other Big Wines, and yes, it might well be superior to the weird little wine that grew there before—*might* be—but what does it signify? That people in many different places can suss the formula and apply it? I’m not sure

why I should care.

And yet we romantics *must* yield the point: the floor has risen, and this is a good thing. Our struggle is to applaud this while protecting the ceiling. And the “ceiling” isn’t merely new stratospheres of hedonism (even *more* ripe fruit, even *more* intensity: more *more* MORE) but rather those wines *uniquely* great. What other great wine is great as the best Loire Chenins are great? As the best Barolos are great? As the best Jurançons, the best Mosel Rieslings, the best Grüner Veltliners, the best Grand Cru Chablis? Ultimately it isn’t greatness we must protect—it is uniqueness. Preserve the unique, and greatness will take care of itself.

The pragmatists need to realize there are risks inherent in their aesthetic.

And we romantics need to realize certain things too.

We *have* misapplied the concept of *terroir* to excuse flawed wines. This concept is precious. We need to respect it, and use it with care.

We *have* been guilty of a form of puritanism; if it tastes unpleasant it must be virtuous.

The pragmatists ought in turn to acknowledge theirs isn’t the only form of pleasure. There are worlds alongside the sensual, and wine can be intellectually and spiritually nourishing, and people can desire these experiences, and the *true* hedonist isn’t threatened by them.

I wonder if we cannot all unite behind the value of diversity. I would like to think so. From my high-rise window I can often see raptors soaring and swooping through the sky, and I love these big graceful birds. But I could never imagine myself feeling “I sure love these big hawks, and other big birds too, eagles, buzzards, and I sure wish all birds were like these because they give me such pleasure.” What of the assertive red cardinal? The graceful heron? The silly woodpecker? The pensive dove? I want to live in a world of thousands of different wines, whose differences are deeper than zip-code, each one of which shows me the unending variety and fascination of this lovely bit of green on which we walk.



weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

As if Johannes Hirsch didn't have enough bother with being the first to go all-Stelvin and the first to delay bottling his top Grand Crus (which resulted in the awkwardness of the "May-September" bottlings of his '02s), he's now dealing with a host of unanticipated ramifications from his decision to become bio-dynamic.

Hannes is one of around five or six vintners who decided to join the biodynamic fraternity two years ago, and who are in the multi-year process of certification. In the vineyards all is well. In the parlors all is — political.

Small wonder I have several growers in my various portfolios who tell me they're "organic" or even "biodynamic" but who'd rather keep it to themselves. I happen to believe in certifying,

because it protects those who truly walk the walk from others less scrupulous, but as I listened to Hannes' tales of woe I really felt his pain. One chooses to undertake a risky transition needing many years to complete because you want to promote the health of your land, but as soon as it becomes political it reduces to squabblings and nit-picking and you think "If I'd known it would be like this I would have just done it and never told anyone."

My wife, who's a doyenne of the sustainable agriculture movement for some thirty years now, says you gotta tough it out. I'm sure she's right. But my heart goes out to



Johannes Hirsch

the lone wolves of the world. Politics always reduces to a lowest-common-denominator. If I were ever asked to join some Riesling conclavity (like *that* would ever happen . . .) I'd politely decline, even if I agreed with the principles and supported the work. Because my work is *living* the principles, at least I hope it is, and it's pleasant to consider

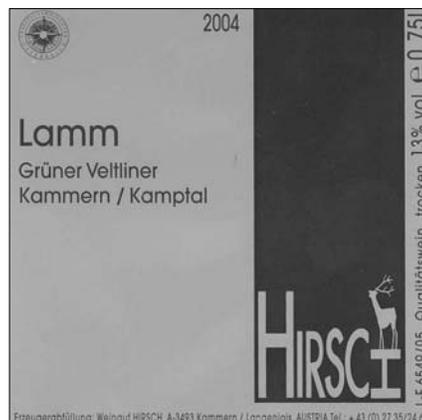
a world of *individual* people each trying to do the right thing. As opposed to the grim spectacle of a bunch of people quarreling about how much cubic zirconia has to go into the cow horn.

A lot of you have met Hannes, so you know he's sharp and funny and makes really *sizzling* wines. But you may not know what a sophisticated thinker he is.

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

Nor what cool-bloodedness it requires to hear all the virulent gossip about how his winery is on the brink of ruin thanks to screw-caps. All of this could obscure the wines themselves, but it doesn't have to. These are intelligently conceived wines of scintillating expressiveness and bewitching spice from a man who knows exactly what he's doing, and why.

I was first here in 1992 or 1993, during the trip-from-hell when I had infections in all six of my sinuses and two of somebody else's. Johannes Hirsch says he remem-



bers my visiting but I must have been in such an efflu-
viant funk I don't recall. I do have my notes, though,
which recount intermittently excellent wines inter-
persed among a few ordinary ones. Which is how I must
have filed them away. When I'm prospecting I am most
interested in consistency.

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

I asked Johannes Hirsch if he thought he had a

watershed vintage or breakthrough year, but he said
no, just a steady climb up with small refinements and
incremental improvements all the time. The wines are
whole-cluster pressed with all that implies. There's plen-
ty of land in great vineyards.

Father and son work together in apparently seam-
less harmony. The whole operation is redolent of care
and resourcefulness (they fertilize with goat-dung from
a neighbor who makes chevre!). Party though we might,
I'm very sure when the sun comes up the next morning
my guy Hannes is back to sweating it out again, because
wine like this doesn't just happen.

Hirsch at a glance:

Zoom! Went this agency, from out-of-nowhere to the top.
Stellar-quality wines from a star-quality vintner at reason-
able prices. AND AVAILABILITY IS GOOD. Fantastic 2005s constitute the eleventh
consecutive "1st Growth" vintage from this superstar.

how the wines taste:

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

AWH-051 **2005 Grüner Veltliner "veltliner #1"**

We actually had complaints that the label changes every year. I can't comprehend how
this could be anything but wonderful, but there you go. `Hannes' S.O. Sandi arrived
with their (incredibly adorable) baby just as this wine was poured. Babies can be shy, as
you know; even a basically happy baby like this one. I tasted the wine. It has ripe aro-
mas, with a lot of belly-richness; a lovely textured GrüVe, dry and pure; a sweet-pea
sorrelly richness. The baby looked at me and suddenly *smiled*; dude, I was melted.
Maybe I looked happy myself, tasting the wine. Taste it yourself and you'll see why.

AWH-050 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein**

AWH-050H **2005 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

Lovely mid-weight GrüVe, on the lentil-sorrel side with "sweet" Viognier notes; pretty
zingy stuff.

AWH-052 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Lamm**

+

This is almost perfect *big* GrüVe; not over-endowed, not heady; rather diligently precise
with fine diction and focus; smells like Australian lamb and marjoram, and lands —
glides is more like it — onto the palate like a 747, yet each scintilla of flavor is in high
relief despite its weight. You can have power without sacrificing clarity and elegance; it
is so encouraging.

AWH-046 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Lamm**

+(+)

There's caraway aromas, pheasant too; raw bacon, chicken *demi-glace*; again the palate
is different than one expects, more solid and mineral, but this will change as the mouth
catches up to the nose; it's weighty and thick, and when mineral collides with exotica,
this wine will soar.

- AWH-053 **2005 Riesling Zöbing** **+**
 For sure the greatest-ever vintage of this! Jeez, *what* fragrance; currant-leaf, mirabelle, aloe vera; the palate is gorgeously racy and sweetly grassy like tarragon; amazing substance for a “little” wine; woodruff, raw silk, sweet roasted fennel — amazing. *Don't* miss it.
- AWH-055 **2005 Riesling Heiligenstein** **+(+)**
 It's the richer of the two Grand Crus, meatier, more gelatinous, almost like veal stock; a Riesling of almost deranged *umami*; whip-crack spice and swollen earth-heat; it's like the fat layer on a spit-roasted suckling pig plus the caraway seeds.
- AWH-049 **2004 Riesling Heiligenstein** **+**
 The '04 has a fulminant, adamantly profound nose, and this time the palate corresponds; as massive as a thunderhead; roasted red pepper, noticeable (but not objectionable) acidity; wild plum, malt and apricot; it has a real smoldering intensity *without* high alcohol. The work of a master, my friends.
- AWH-054 **2005 Riesling Gaisberg** **++**
 Regularly one of Austria's most supernal Rieslings, this '05 doesn't let up; a fervidly mineral fragrance leads to a toe-curling, knee-buckling palate with psychedelic force and structure; purest granite and lemon-balm and juiciness from aardvark to zygote; it's all-05 in its undeflected minerality, but just *try* to resist it.



wachau

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

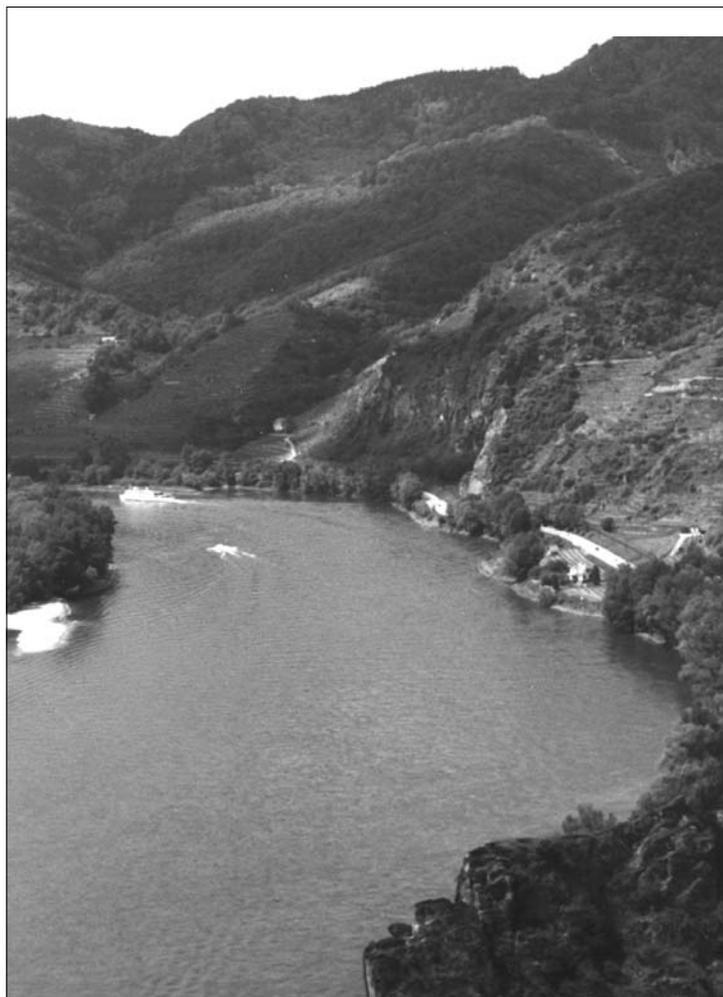
good sense at work in this one. You're going to have to take that on faith, though, because you will be asked to LEARN SOME TERMS.

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

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

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

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



The Danube

leo alzinger

wachau • unterloiben

This year I tasted Alzinger's wines after finishing in the Kamptal and Kremstal. In fact I'd tasted nothing but those wines for several days, and I was curious to see if any sort of existential essence of *Wachau* would be apparent.

Yes and no. *Something* was certainly apparent, but it was as much specific to Alzinger as general to the Wachau. For this is a very special and singular domaine.

Regardless of one's view of the various wines from the Names of the region, there's an unchallenged consensus that Alzingers themselves are the sweetest people. Indeed, if they were more pushy and ambitious I'm sure they would have shoved their way to the top of the masthead.

Leo Alzinger Sr. and Hans-Günter Schwarz (ex-Müller-Catoir) are friends. Hans-Günter told

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

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

This is how it works in the Wachau. The first year I was granted an allotment of twenty cases of the least of three Veltliner Smaragds. I duly (and gratefully) accepted them. Next year a second Veltliner was made available, along with a few cases of Riesling Smaragd. Next, I



Alzinger, son and father

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

received four Veltliners, two Federspiel and two Smaragd, and a Riesling Smaragd, much more wine but still not much wine. One year the floodgates opened: a whopping 200 cases for the lower 48 plus Hawaii. Last year we went up to 450 cases. Each year, I inch farther away from the back of the queue. Peter Schleimer and I have asked very gently if any more wine might be available. Alzinger smiles his buttery beatific smile. "Privately, a few bottles," he says. You have to come over to my house if you want to taste them. Bring the cheeze-whiz!

I happened to be sitting next to a buyer for one of Austria's major wine retailers one evening over dinner. We was schmoozin'. I asked him: "Apart from a *professional* appraisal, which Wachau wines do you personally most *enjoy*?" He thought for an instant and answered: "Alzinger and Prager." When I repeated the story to Peter Schleimer he agreed; it's a virtual consensus. There are more impressive wines, perhaps . . . *perhaps*, but there are none more loveable. Alzinger is a retiring, sweet and gentle personality; which may be why he gets fewer wreaths and garlands, but those In The Know *Know*, and Alzinger's best are just as scarce and sexy as any Austrian wine.

I noticed the wines as soon as I made my first visit to Austria; they made for some unforgettable drinking if you could find a mature vintage. The young wines I saw were stormy and closed, but that's changed in the last

bunch of years.

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

This is the only winery I visit where I taste a lot of cask-samples. Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates

some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The beauty of his 2005s came as no surprise, but their purity of tone grows more striking with each passing year. It hurts how little wine we get, hardly enough for one *restaurant*, let alone an entire fire-belching behemoth of a **country**. But, but . . . patience. Others were there first. I must humbly wait. Existing clients have their rights too. Rat-bastards.

Alzinger at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

ALA-053 2005 Grüner Veltliner Frauenweingarten Federspiel

The vineyard is on alluvial soil near the Danube, and this '05 is markedly perfumed and pretty. This, by the way, is an estate where my tasting notes tend to be short (mercifully, I'm sure you're thinking), because I don't want to miss a social moment with these good folks, and because the wines are so effortlessly *themselves* that once you know them, what's there new to say about them? "Ah, he looks well this year," would suffice entirely, but it wouldn't make you want to buy the wine.

ALA-054 2005 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel

Mühlpoint is in effect the lower slopes of Steinertal, below the terraces, on light loess and alluvial sand. It's usually a highly *green-beany* GrüVe, and this Federspiel is firmer, lentilly, roasted green peppers, less charming than the above but more determined.

ALA-055 2005 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd +

I don't remember a better vintage of this wine. It's a really *satiny* rendition of this usually-nutty fella; serene and creamy yet with all the peppery juju; purringly soft, but it only looks boneless because it's so graceful.

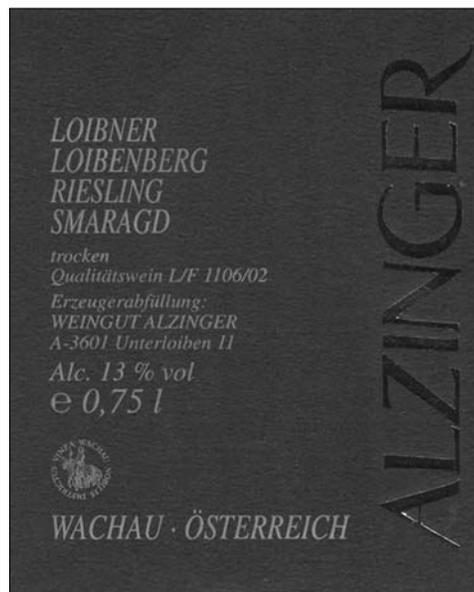
ALA-056 2005 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd

It's one of the great Grand Crus of Europe, a steep (18 to 34 degrees) terraced hillside of weathered Urgestein (the so-called Gföhler Gneiss) and slate, overlaid with loess in some easterly sections. More spice and force now, more *willful*; has its usual mimosa blossom and guava; a seismic rumble of inside-power here, like a lava-flow of GrüVe.

ALA-057 2005 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd +

At one point we tasted a wine blind, and the first note I wrote was "I'm not sure what variety this is but it's definitely Steinertal." For such is this wonderful vineyard's character; it isn't usually the most powerful or *profound* site in the Wachau, but it's regularly the most brilliant, complex and vigorously mineral. This is pure crystalline *Urgestein*, and what a euphoria of fruits and herbs in the fragrance; flowering dill, hyssop, chervil, boxwood, staymans, even a hint of banana; the palate is zingy and salty, racy yet there's that secret sweetness again; a wintergreen finish to a truly Grand Cru wine.

- ALA-058 **2005 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel**
Here's the stony force again, common to certain '05s especially from the Wachau; marjoram and tart apple; the mineral is more dispersed and powdery on the palate; the finish is herb and stone again. Even *with* 2-3g/l. RS it tastes drier than any of the GrüVes
- ALA-059 **2005 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd**
The soil is similar to the *Gaisberg's*; mica-schist and gneiss; it recalls a site Jamek used to have (now with Prager) called Zweritaler; a crazy nose of scallion, radish and garigue; the palate is a pointed jab of Riesling even *with* the '05 creaminess; a gingery zing and a white-lilac softness lead to a stern finish of herbs and stones. Bottle-sickness has surely tamped down the fruit.
- ALA-060 **2005 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd** +
It's a very rich deep soil, just below the renowned Kellerberg, Urgestein mixed with sand, and it gives highly pronounced Rieslings. More *quetsch* and redcurrant now; musk; an alluring palate too — if you know Alsace, think *Florimont* or *Fustenturm* — authoritative, big-bodied wine that feels crammed with flavor; not brilliant or shimmering but instead a long-simmered *umami* richness, chewy; almost freakishly long finish.
- ALA-061 **2005 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd** ++
The first of the two GREAT Rieslings (there's actually a third we can't get — *waaaaaah!*) among Alzinger's '05s: though the fragrance is a sleeping giant the palate is blazing with force, ripeness and clarity; seems to tickle every cell on the palate; this huge thing you can almost watch break down and disperse like streamers from a firework; this wine delivers it all: mass, yin-yang of fruit cream and mineral salt, yellow and green elements in an endless dance. Till now the best Riesling '05 tasted.
- ALA-062 **2005 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd** +++
Oh it has *its* fragrance. You can't not just grin. It's just a babbling lunatic of spice, herb, stone, plum, length, force but not brute-force; thrust but with cunning aim; neon-buzzing interplay of "sweetness" and glittering mineral. Rare, supernal wine here; dry Riesling does not improve on this!



weingut josef jamek

wachau • joching

This was my first visit of the trip, and I was alone. It was a pretty Spring midday (“The first day we’ve set up tables in the garden,” they told me) and I had that super-attentiveness you have when you’re at-table alone. At Jamek you taste somewhere in the restaurant, as if to emphasize the connections among wine, food, regionality. The garden slowly filled up with people pausing to enjoy their lives on a soft Spring day among the flowers and blackbirds and trees. Some of them brought their dogs, who lay cooperatively under the table as well-behaved Euro-dogs do. I watched food and wine being served and wondered; *What role does wine play here?* To what does it pertain? Do we ever think about how wine fits into other aspects of our lives, or is it just wine-*qua*-wine for us? There was an old golden retriever who lay pensively near his family; he’s known for untold years he won’t be fed

from the table, but still he lies there pensively gazing at us all with doleful tolerance. How does wine pertain to *him*?

It is something to see wine drunk without fuss in a Spring garden as the world sings and blossoms and people eat their salads and pike-perch and schnitzels. (Yes I know they do it in California too, but what does Spring have to do with big-ass oaky wines with 15% alcohol?) It makes wine one among many joy-companions in a life lived appreciatively.

2005 was “interesting” at Jamek; *all* the Riesling was harvested before the first Veltliners were. “For the first time in our history,” they said. But the entire harvest was conducted here, as everywhere, in perfect sunny weather.

We had worked through the Veltliners and Pinots, and we may even have tasted the Muscat, and when the first Riesling was poured, one of us—it might have been me—heaved a happy sigh. Hans Altmann, owner and cellar-master of Jamek for several years now, grinned at the spontaneous happiness inspired by his Riesling.



“Sometimes,” he mused, “I think that every sip of wine that isn’t Riesling is wasted.”

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

Jamek did so many things first it’s impossible to imagine the entire modern Austria wine scene without him. “For decades he has produced wines of invariably

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

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

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

One has to understand Jamek’s restaurant as a kind of compass guiding the style of the wines. It seems to be the fulcrum, not the winery. “We have a winery and also a little restaurant where we serve the wines,” is decidedly not the case. “We have a restaurant and also a winery which supplies it” is closer to the truth. Altmann agreed when I said I thought his wines were deliberately fashioned to be useful at table. This doesn’t preclude them being profound—

they have their own noble tradition to observe—but it does suggest they're not chasing those 90-point scores. Good for them! The wines are profound *anyway*.

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

Altmann's is a curious mixture of modern and traditional approaches—all shiny new equipment in the press-house, and nothing but casks in the cellar. They ferment in stainless steel and can control temperature if necessary. No cultured yeasts, minimal SO₂. The wines are not fined.

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

Money is always a vexing question in the Wachau.

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

Opinions differ as regards the results of his taking over. Some observers believe the wines have reestablished themselves among the Wachau elite, while others *expected* this to happen and are still waiting. I hear the chatter and try to stay focused. In my own view there's no doubt—none—that GrüVe Achleiten and Riesling Klaus (at Smaragd levels) are among Austria's great monuments.

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

Jamek at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

AJJ-058

2005 Grüner Veltliner Ried Achleiten Federspiel

One of the greatest Grand Crus, "one of the four best sites in the Wachau" according to many knowledgeable observers. It's again an Urgestein variant, in this case a light, weathered crystalline soil with a top layer of loam and eroded material from the cliff-sides. This is Grüner Veltliner wrought in iron, or put another way, this is Achleiten as spoken by Grüner Veltliner. The Great One in miniature; lentil, bean and gneiss; winsome but with a peppery pebbly mid-palate; marjoram and lovage.

AJJ-059

2005 Grüner Veltliner Ried Liebenberg Smaragd

Altmann said the soil is "*para-gneiss*" and that "It's as if we had Veltliner in the Ried Klaus," yet I found it a direct, juicy and zingy GrüVe; the site faces due south but isn't a Grand Cru because it doesn't receive morning sun; full stone and fennel-seed and endless juiciness; even a phenolic nip in the finish. Full marks on the *fun-o-meter*!

AJJ-060

2005 Riesling Ried Klaus Federspiel

A wine of grip and logic; clearly structured and as inevitable as a mathematical proof; brilliant as high-altitude light; stony and subtly exotic; oxygen reveals botrytis, but this is a spicy adamant Riesling (9.2g.l. acidity!) with outline and precision; it's a precision-drill-team of Riesling.

AJJ-061

2005 Riesling Dürnsteiner Freiheit Smaragd

Plum blossom and mirabelle; even the aroma is juicy here.; the palate is intense, Riesling formed in a kiln; generous and lavish with juicy interplay between spurtingly ripe fruit and salty botrytis; it has every possible friendliness, this wine.

AJJ-062

2005 Riesling Ried Klaus Smaragd

Only a very few cases of this Riesling monument. It's a botrytis wine to be sure, but neither grotesque nor overripe; rather, extravagantly spicy and with a sort of melted mineral; the back-palate has a botrytis flourish, a kind of untamed "kinky" quality you love if you love and you wonder about if, like me, you're wary.

AJJ-063

2005 Muskateller

Like Nigl's '04, this is Muscat for Riesling lovers; cool and silvery; gorgeous fragrance; the palate is focused and delicate; lemon-balm, woodruff and forest herbs; slim, but the vaporous finish is wonderfully long. And it tastes good right out of the bottle while watching the sun set in the mountains.

nikolaihof-wachau

wachau • mautern

Young Nicholas Saahs — Nicki” as I understand he’s called by his contemporaries — is back in Mautern after finishing his studies in Geisenheim. I can only imagine him sitting in his classes thinking, time after time, *This isn’t the way we do things; what are these people talking about?* He brings that youthful energy (and a most comely and smart lady-friend) back with him. He even undertook to revive the ancient (and dauntingly huge) wooden press. It’s nice having him there, and also a little unnerving somehow. Nikolaihof is among other things a kind of shrine for me, and Nikki’s folks are . . . not larger-than-life; perhaps *deeper* than life, though I’m sure to him they’re just mom and dad.

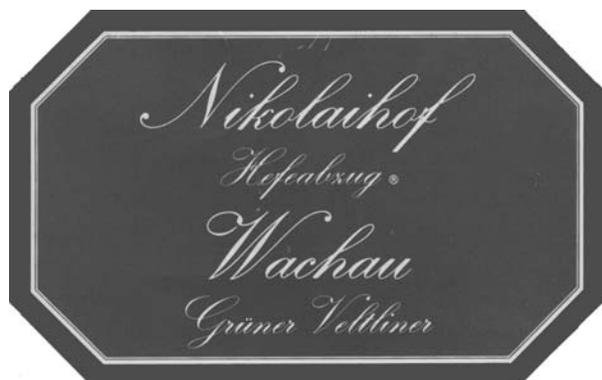
One never knows quite what to expect from a vintage here. Nikolaihof sometimes seems to exist in a parallel universe from their nearby vintner-colleagues, and if the prevailing vintage is

“apples” one isn’t shocked if Nikolaihof’s is “oranges”. Nothing, though, could possibly have prepared me for what I found among the ’05s.

I arrive in a condition of blankness, prepared for anything that happens. If I arrive *expecting* a rarefied spiritual circumstance the expectation blocks it. Sometimes it’s affectionate, kindly and fun. Sometimes it’s quite workmanlike. Sometimes it is very mysterious indeed, as it was a few weeks ago, induced by the amazing group of wines. But I’ll return to this later; first let me tell you about the estate.

They are biodynamic, and they live by the biodynamic calendar. It’s typical for Saahs to integrate their lives within a matrix of principles; they hardly seem to consider their wine as an abstract object but rather as an ingredient among many which grow in nature and transmits a life-energy of its own.

This can be confusing to a certain kind of wine-freak who obsesses on the wine-object as such, but in the end I am comforted by the desire to integrate wine into all the



things that emerge from creation and give us pleasure.

Saahs’ preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn’t seem to hail from a concern we’d call “environmental” in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall

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

approach to sharing life with other *forms* of life, and also from their sense of time. Ah, time. There’s an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in their courtyard which is a pretty nifty symbol of time; thick, slow, sturdy, gentle, ultimately patient. I’m fond of this tree, all the more so because of those before and after me who’ll have enjoyed its tolerant friendship.

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity’s sake I’ll call it just “Nikolaihof”) is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first allowed to carry the official Austrian **Bio** sign. (Frau Saahs is charmingly dismissive of what she might call organic parvenus. Even those practicing integrated viticulture are suspect: “it is better than nothing,” she allows, “but not much!”) She and her husband have farmed and made wines organically for over two decades; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Mr. Saahs, is a believer in organic production as a guarantor of **superior** quality. He’s one of the only ones to say this. I myself

am often asked whether I believe organic or bio-d creates *superior* wines, which is both a loaded question and an irrelevant one. Frankly I don't care if the wines are "better". Organic or bio growers are seeking a certain relationship with their land. Very often these sensibilities conduce to the making of excellent wines, but not necessarily. They are, however, quite healthy for both land and the humans who work it. Do we need to ask for more?

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

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

It seems to boil down to fungicides. The organic farmer can only use copper-sulfate (though Saahs uses a spray made from stinging nettles or valerian drops, sometimes valerian tea or other biodynamic preparations which are diluted to homeopathic amounts). The E.U. has severe limits on the amounts, as do the organic certification agencies. Most growers who want to go as far as possible towards organics are stopped at this point. It is simply too risky, they say, to do away with chemical fungicides. I asked Mr. Saahs if there was anything he could say to reassure these well-meaning growers to take the plunge. He pondered the question. "Actually, it's very difficult!" he finally answered. "There is a risk you'll lose some of your crop. You have to work many times harder in training the vines and cutting leaves away to get the air moving through the grapes." In other words, he can't honestly tell a nearly-organic grower "go on, it's easier than you think," because in fact it's just as hard as he thinks.

I happen to feel it's a better world if most growers are *mostly* organic than it is if a *few* are entirely organic

and the rest conventional-chemical. That said, and all respects paid, the real back-breaking sacrifices the Saahs and other true-organic growers make must be acknowledged with a term they alone can use. I'll be more careful from now on.

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



It takes more people to farm organically; the Saahs employ 10 workers for 20 hectares. They claim a conventional winery could do the work with four or five. They are happy, they say, to give employment to more people; "We are not in this world just to make money," says Frau Saahs. Among the 20 hectares of land are two meadows

allowed to grow wild. “We learned if we didn’t control the vegetation in these meadows that the most predatory of the plants would eventually overcome the weaker plants, so each year we mow the meadow twice. It levels the playing field,” she added, looking thoughtfully into the distance. “We don’t drive a big car, we don’t take world cruises . . . but we do mow our meadows twice a year,” she said, as if to herself. “We simply occupy this little form of skin and bones for a few years, but we *need* to nourish our hearts and souls by finding a home in our parts of the world and caring for this home.”

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

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

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

Again we sat in the chapel and began the tasting. Again they sat me (embarrassingly) at the head of the great table, and again the spell stole over me, and I was glad the others were there to chatter away so I could write and wonder. Believe me, I don’t arrive *waiting* for this to happen; I rather think it won’t. But it does, somehow. I wonder if it begins with the hug Christine gives



Christine Saahs

me, which is just two seconds too long to be merely polite, an embrace containing kinship, an embrace that welcomes and accepts me. It is no small thing to be accepted by such a woman.

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

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

toward shore. They seem utterly without *affect*, but instead serenely themselves. They are numinous in their very lack of thrusting and pushing. The wines we tasted this year were not merely meditative; they told truths you cannot see in the lab; they spoke calmly of unnamable sureties. They are candid and modest. They are all the reasons we *should* love wine but few of the reasons we actually do. We are very busy measuring our pleasure, locked away in our self-conscious cells. These wines don't so much meet you halfway as *show you a third place*

that's neither You nor Them, but somewhere you meet in truth only by dissolving your respective walls. The *wines* have done it; now it's your turn. I cannot tell you *how* these wines stir such a calmness of spirit. Other wines are perhaps more poignant, or more exciting. "Wow," you say, "this is exciting wine; I have to tell others how *exciting* this wine is . . ." But I have never tasted wines more *settling* than these. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.

ANK-058 **2005 Grüner Veltliner "Hefeabzug"**

This is a light sur-lie GrüVe that's become a house-icon; it's pipe-smoky in '05; the usual leeliness is of course there but less "sweetly" than in '04; this one's more *GrüVe*, box-woody; the palate is like a cool chervil-yoghurt soup, but it's crazy-long and sweetens with air.

ANK-059 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel** +

Again it's like 50 minerals and 20 herbs all lying there grinning at you; it's an immense friendliness that isn't remotely *fruity*, but it's so refined, delicate and caressing, so winsome and pensive, so vaporous yet so long — it is, in a word: *miraculous*.

You need to take some care with wines like these. It hurts to serve them ice-cold. They are distorted in the mega-tastings. But they'll keep you the best company you could ever have.

ANK-060 **2005 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel**

The fragrance is botrytis-smoky but the wine does this silky feline thing; the structure seems to have bend-able bones; the wine *never stops WHISPERING*, endless simple words, *grace, grace, grace*....

ANK-061 **2005 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd** +

(I need to tell you about this wine though I don't think it will have been bottled in time to ship for Fall '06; still, it'll be bottled *SOME* time, and the wine is amazing; you take the green-creamy diction of '05 and deepen it — it's like white lilacs and the tenderest mineral; the wine wriggles delightedly on the palate but resolves into a daydreamy finish that uncovers things you forgot you knew; what fine quietude. You want all night with it.

ANK-050 **2003 Riesling Steiner Hund "Reserve"**

By the way, it's "reserve" because the vineyard is actually in the Kremstal (thus no "smaragd") and they dislike the word Spätlese. From a tiny but supernally great Grand Cru, this can be one of the world's profoundest wines — from any grape variety. The '03 is all boucherie, with roasted beet and redcurrant accents; again it's a wine of *atmosphere*, hugely ripe and exotic, as if five different incenses were burning simultaneously.

ANK-062 **2005 Riesling Steiner Hund "Jungferlese"** +

The first vintage from a new parcel in this great Grand Cru, and it's a *thrilling* Riesling whose bit of RS does it nothing but good: I'm clean out of words, but the wine will blow you away.

ANK-063 **1991 Grüner Veltliner “Vinothek”** **+++**

If you remember the astonishing '90 Riesling Vinothek — and if you ever tasted it, you remember it — this is its descendant (and there are future vintages in store of this concept); these are wines left to themselves for up to fifteen years in old casks, and bottled when Saahs' think them ready. Sometimes never. Sometimes: THIS.

An utterly glorious bouquet! It acts as an old Loire Chenin acts; offers a honey so refined you enter the soul of the bee. OK, enough soul-stuff. It's like a 30-year *balsamico* of GrüVe, with an incomprehensible concentration and spice; the cymbal-crash freshness of '91 (it has acidity!), the minty high notes, the *urgent* thrust of flavor, but then, the soul-stuff (as if you could escape it, or would want to . . .), this haunting green breeze through dripping woods, the smell of the bark, the leaves, the mossy floor, and the sweetness weaving through it like a spell . . .

There really are *no* wines on earth quite like these.

ANK-054 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg “Jungfernlese”** **+**

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

ANK-20 **1999 Riesling Im Weingebirge “Jungfernewein”** **+**

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



hans reisetbauer

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

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

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

to Michael Pronay, the greatest narcoleptic journalist I've ever known. "With Reisetbauer we see a unity of man and occupation such as one seldom sees. The friendly



Hans Reisetbauer and his stills

bull lives schnapps, speaks schnapps, makes schnapps and loves it like nothing else."

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

was analyzed and was approved for consumption by babies. So I figured if it's good enough for babies it's good enough for our schnapps."

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

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

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

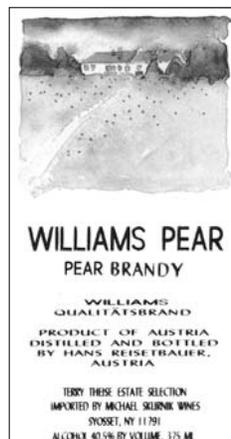
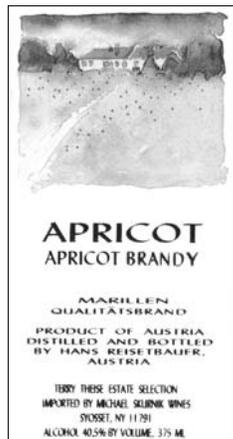
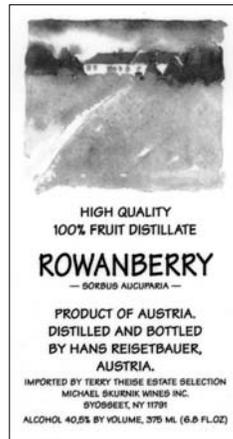
I'm just an *amateur*, I must stress, and I'm not especially well-informed, but that said, what strikes me about these spirits is their honesty and power. They're not especially seductive. If they were Wachau wines they'd be F.X. Pichler rather than Alzinger.



Young pear trees at Reisetbauer

Reisetbauer offerings:

- XHR-012 **Sparkling Apple Cider, 12/750ml**
- XHR-001 **Plum Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-002 **Williams Pear Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-003 **Apricot Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-004 **Cherry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-006 **Rowanberry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-009 **Raspberry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-011 **Wild Cherry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-013 **Carrot Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-014 **Ginger Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-010 **Mixed Case Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
(Pear, Apricot, Plum, Rowanberry, Raspberry, & Wild Cherry)
- XHR-015 **Whiskey, 6/750ml**



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

-Lawrence Osborne

Top Back Cover Photo: *Vineyards at Schloss Gobelsburg with the estate's castle and church off in the distance.*

Bottom Back Cover Photo: *Wildflowers grow in Nikolaihof-Wachau's Steiner Hund vineyard.*

