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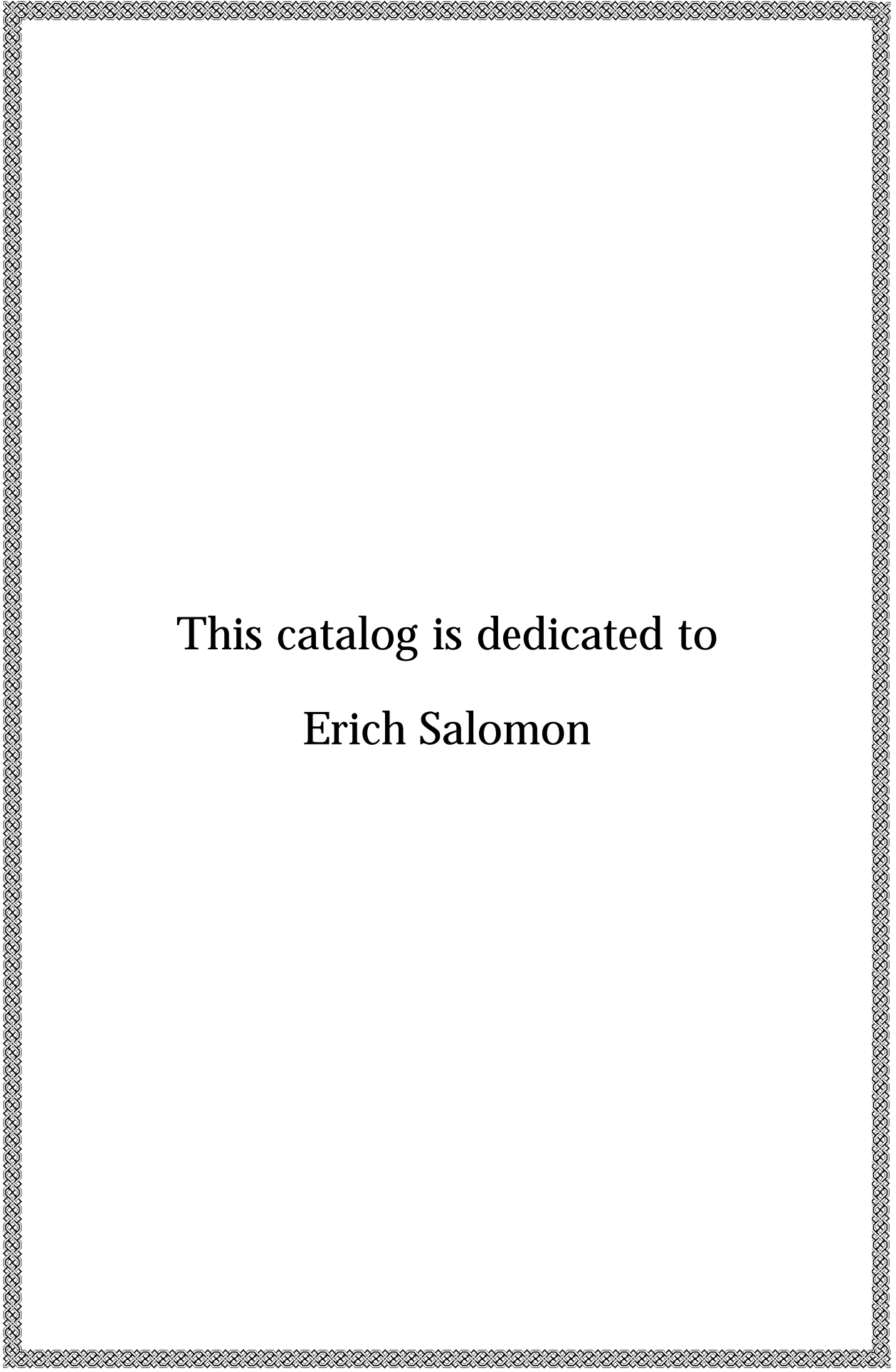
AUSTRIA 2001



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This catalog is dedicated to
Erich Salomon

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

- Michael Ventura

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

- D.H. Lawrence

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

One morning a couple years ago I left the cozy little Landhaus Bacher to start the days rounds. There was a little flyer someone had slipped under my wipers. The Bühl center ("shopping mit feeling!") presents the **HORNY FUNK brothers**. Hmmm. My erstwhile sidekick Mr. Hutchens and I were *sans femmes* for these two dreadfully long weeks. Some pitying deity musta saw us and thought to give us a name!



Now it begins to appear we shall never be rid of the fine Brothers of The Horny Funk. It rings with an almost Cistercian aura, don't you think? Last year and again last week I saw posters announcing concerts (or maybe prayer breakfasts) by the Brothers, who are evidently still horny and I hope, still funky. If you ever decide to walk through a field of flowering rapeseed you will experience the earth in all its seething funky horniness. The smell is wild and feral. Something somewhere is *getting it ON*, baby.

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 horny-funky yourself.

So, this offering is the story of a HORNY FUNK brother among the lilacs and Veltliners and hedge-thrushes and cuckoos and frogs and the many critters and bloomies that make up the horny, funky world of Austria in Springtime. . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

•The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.

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

Even more: I feel there's a sort of yearning among many of us for experience that isn't vapid. Given the choice, many of us tend toward instances of meaning. The rocketing growth of organic foods (and the sensibilities surrounding their production and consumption) is only partly issues of "healthfulness." I believe there's a significance at work; people want to participate in constructive, enriching experience. They like the idea that their food choices help support small organic farmers. They like buying locally not only because the food tastes better but because it's nice doing business with one's neighbors, it fosters community and spirit of place. What does this have to do with wine? Just this: given the choice between a wine made in a factory, made by marketing nabobs and technocrats, with all manner of extraneous flavors *added* in the "production" process, or a wine made by a *family* who maintain an intimate connection to their land, and whose land *expresses itself* in the taste of the wine, which tastes *purely* of the land and the grape, many people will choose *soul* and the human touch over a sterile "product." Some of these drinkers are people my age, mid-40s, starting to

feel their mortality, wanting richer experience in the time remaining to them - to us - and some of them are young drinkers who don't know "better." Whoever they are, they're out there, and they need what you can teach them, if you choose. Or you can wait till they find *you*, and be willing to be taught. Put your head in the sand and all you see is dirt.

Most Austrian white wine is dry. Most Austrian sweet wine is very sweet, in the obvious-dessert-wine manner of Sauternes. Most Austrian wine, period, is DRY. Just after the scandal there was a rigid insistence that the wines be bone-dry, but this has relaxed as the wine culture matures. These days many of the wines carry a few grams-per-liter of residual sugar, undetectable as sweetness, but discernable as deeper fruit, more thrilling flavor (and incidentally more flexible at the table). I have never tasted and cannot imagine an Austrian white wine that was diminished by a *small* amount of sweetness. A few of the growers are starting to agree.

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

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

THE 2000 VINTAGE

This good to excellent vintage is already cursed by having to follow the truly great 1999. I hope we're all grown up enough by now that we don't require every vintage to be BANG! POW! SOCKO! in order to be commercially interesting.

2000 is really two vintages. For RIESLING it is a fine vintage across the board, giving nearly as many great wines as 1999 and 1997 did. If it "lacks" anything it is only the majesty that heralds the truly supernal years. I'd easily place it in a category "among the best" and perhaps even "among the VERY best" with five to seven years in bottle. I sense these Rieslings will age exceptionally well. Their acidity is almost entirely tartaric, which tends to get less "petrolly" with age. Of all the explanations for the petrol effect, the most plausible contends it's an oxidation (or a reduction) of malic acid. If this is true, it would tend to happen more often in vintages with less-ripe acidity. 2000 was warm, acids are very ripe and genial, but these Rieslings are *drenched* with minerality and the best of them have crystalline texture and laser-etching of detail. The very best have a shimmery magnificence that'll make your scalp tingle.

2000 is a *good* vintage for Grüner Veltliner. The Rieslings are better but the GrüVes are groovy enough.

Again, 2000 is really two vintages. After a very early and very warm spring and summer, the harvest began four weeks ahead of schedule in early to mid September. Some wonderful Veltliners were harvested, not the blockbusters but the ordinary normal everyday quality up to 12.5% alcohol. These Veltliners are as good as they are in any vintage, even the "great" ones.

There was a rainy period in late September that lingered into October, and most growers suspended picking. When the sun came out again, growers waited for the grapes to dry and regain some of the sugar they'd lost to dilution. The vines were parched after a dry summer and the rains were gulped and slurped. Botrytis began to show up. Harvesting resumed. This later picking displays the schism between Riesling and Veltliner in 2000. The Veltliners came in very ripe (14-15% at times) and the resulting wines are generally excellent but not stupendous. Riesling was another story; hail to the late-ripening wonder grape, o horny-funky ones, because *these* were superb.

It's hard to generalize about the other varieties. Pinot Blancs ranged from O.K. to outstanding. The Styrian Sauvignons were outa-this world. Many red wines were muddy, but my hero Mr. Glatzer had as gorgeous a collection as he's ever had.

2000 most resembles 1992, but it's better than 1992. "We've learned a lot since then," was the prevailing sentiment. The less-ripe wines are a world apart; nothing in 1992 came near to these dense, intricate 2000s. And in the realms of the mega-ripe, 2000 is generally less clunky than was 1992.

STAR WINERIES in 2000 include **Schröck, Glatzer, Salomon, Mantler, Jamek, Zull, and Bründlmayer**.

SUPERSTAR WINERIES in 2000 include **Polz, Nigl, Alzinger, Hirsch, Hiedler, Schloss Gobelsburg, and Nikolaihof**.

Most 2000 wines are less shapely than their predecessors from 1999; they have more body but less outline. They are also unusually abrupt. They finish quick, reversing the usual palate-structure of Austrian whites. This was especially prevalent among the late-picked Veltliners, and is a large part of my reason for not lauding them more.

Such botrytis as may have been present was never dominant.

There's a (gulp!) Marketing Issue with these 2000s. Y'all have run with Grüner Veltliner as *THE* Austrian wine, and I can hardly blame you. I told a TV crew who did a spot on me for some Austrian show that I "loved Riesling above all other grapes grown in Austria, but probably actually consumed more Grüner Veltliner, because it's incomparable and has such usefulness with food," so believe me, I hear you. GrüVe is a miracle and there's nothing else barely like it. Riesling may well be "better" (I think it is) but it's beside the point. Veltliner is hornier and funkier. Problem is, the 2000 Rieslings are two levels better than brother GrüVe. Think you'll switch your orientation and increase the proportion of Rieslings you buy? I didn't think so.

2000 is precocious and will show well young. My guess is it will ultimately be chronicled among the next-to-best vintages for Rieslings and among the good-average vintages for Veltliner. What is truly wonderful about 2000 is you get almost unbelievable quality at the "low" end.

FIRSTS AMONG EQUALS

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

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

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

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

GRAPE VARIETIES

Grüner Veltliner

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

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

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

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

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

I stress again: **Grüner Veltliner is THE ANSWER to all the foods that supposedly are wine-killers**. Artichokes, shrimp, avocado, every manner of obstreperous veggie, the Veltliner loves 'em. Need a white wine for a wild-mushroom sautee? Step right up. Want a wine for a really **peppery** salad, lots of mizuna, tatsoi, arugula ("arugula" in Italian), I have it for you. NO INTELLIGENT WINE LIST CAN AFFORD TO IGNORE THIS VARIETY! And, bless you all, few of them do.

Tasting terms: like Chardonnay, Grüner Veltliner has many faces. Unlike Chardonnay, they never need make-up! I needed a whole new vocabulary for this variety, as no amount of rustling down every corridor of my rococo winespeak turned up any precedent for this critter's flavors. So, to start with, there's the "**flowering fields**": by this I mean the dispersed sweetness of warm meadows, not perfumey, with a feral, almost stinky undertone, but earthy and sexual and subtly musky. "**Hedge-flowers**" is similar, but more specifically floral; oleander is a clear example. Mimosa is another. These flowers are less sweet-smelling than, say, roses or violets; more polleny or roasty. **Smells and flavors of green vegetables** are common.

Lentils, green beans, pea-pods or even pureed peas themselves. The metaphorical extension of this are words like "mossy" or "heathery" and I have been known to say "vetiver" when the whole thing blazes into great beauty. **Smells and flavors of sharp greens:** again, common. Mustard-greens like tatsoi, mizuna and arugula have resonant echoes of flavor in GrüVe. Sometimes it smells like boxwood, or in more discreet examples, like watercress. Green things. **Fruit smells:** most common are strawberry and rhubarb, followed by undefined citrussy notes. These are simple literal associations. **Mineral notes:** I use "ore" to describe a sense of minerality so dense it feels *compact-ed*, 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. Three years ago in a blind tasting whose judges were predominantly non-Austrians and whose wines were either Veltliners or white Burgundies, the TOP wine and three of the top FIVE were Grüner Veltliners, beating up on blue-chip Grand Cru Burgundies costing six times as much. You can try this in your own home! (Ring sold separately.)

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

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

Riesling

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

Give me a break! If anyone made that argument about Chardonnay they'd be thought insane. "Well we aren't doing Australian Chardonnays because we don't want to siphon business away from California." And yes, reality-check Terry, I *know* the Chardonnay market is bigger than the Riesling market, though my Jeffersonian belief in human perfectibility has me in pathetic denial

about our mawkish affection for that most sleazy of wine-types, but you *would* have more Riesling if you were a *bet-ter* PERSON. You'd eat more healthily, read more books, get more exercise, spend more time with your kids, take part in civic activities, and get laid all the time - simultaneously! Amazing what Riesling can do.

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

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

Pinot Blanc

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

Muskateller

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

Red Varieties

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

The first of these is **SANKT LAURENT**. This is a très hip grape, folks. It's Pinot Noir-ish with a "sauvage" touch, and it can do nearly all the things fine Pinot Noir does, but with added top-notes of sagey wildness. More growers would plant it, but the vine itself is prone to mutation and it can rarely be left in the ground for more than twenty years or so. It won't flower unless the weather's perfect. "You have to be a little crazy to grow this grape," said one grower. Yet such vines become litmus tests for a vintner's temperament; like Rieslaner, when you see it you know, ipso facto, you're dealing with the right kind of lunatic. Now that my friend Glatzer's St. Laurent is in production, Theise Selections is officially a Laurent district.

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

Finally there's the **BLAUFRÄNKISCH**, a variety I didn't take to right away. 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. I'd still put it in the Malbec-y school (whereas the Zweigelt is Syrah-y and the Sankt Laurent is Pinot-y). In my recent visit to Austria I remarked that an especially good Blaufränkisch we were tasting reminded me of good Cahors, and someone said "This is far better than any Cahors being made today," so you get the picture. Zweigelt is for spaghetti, Sankt Laurent is for duck or squab, and Blaufränkisch is for lamb chops. A perfect three-course meal!

AUSTRIAN WINE LAWS

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

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

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

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

Well, one could pick a few nits with this point of view. But I kinda like it!

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

The Austrians have just had to change their law to accommodate EU regulations, and the maximum residual sugar level for wines labeled TROCKEN has been raised from 4 grams per liter to **9 grams per liter**. This is some irony! I didn't talk with a single grower who wasn't derisive on this issue. The fact is, with the acids and pH of typical Austrian wine, sweetness levels from 6 to 8 grams really do show, and a sensible feature of the Austrian wine law

has had to be sacrificed so some Brussels bureaucrat can have everything tidy. Why can't these nimrods worry about the amount of dog-doots on the sidewalks in Paris, and leave Austrian wines be?

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



THE AUSTRIAN WINE CULTURE

The Austrian wine culture is giddy, overheated, fun and also a little weird. It has a new-world sense of infinite possibilities, and the urgent *buzz* of a wine scene in full burgeon. Yet it's based on old-world verities. It is surrounded by the redolence of long-simmered loveliness, buildings, trees, gardens, all calling to you from out of the long, slow past. But this wine culture has fundamentally reinvented itself in the last 17 years. (Before the 1985 scandal most Austrian wines imitated German wines.) Yet the lines along which it reinvents itself are largely conservative; fidelity to soil and a healthy aversion to confected flavor.

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

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

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

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

There are encouraging signs this culture is beginning to mature. Many growers told me they were in retreat from the idea of ripeness-at-all-costs and concentrating instead on balance and elegance. The grotesqueries of many 1998s may have hastened this current. I hope so,

because I was getting worried. Even mature growers, who might have known better, were saying things like "We want to see how far we can push (ripeness)," but when they pushed it to yowling, brutal and bitter wines, enough was more than enough. After all, who's to say if 13% potential alcohol is enough that 14% is necessarily better? In contrast, the all-at-once ripening of late October 2000 was a source of dismay to many growers, who despaired of having time enough to harvest before over-ripeness set in.

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

A NOTE ON MY USE OF THE WORD

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

Map of Austria



weingut erich and walter polz

südsteiermark • grassnitzberg

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

I'll use the English "Styria" and the Austrian "Südsteiermark" interchangeably.

The city of Graz, Austria's third-largest, lies less than half an hour north of Südsteiermark. The region is one of the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous of any wine region in the world, a chaotic jumble of steep hills with knife-edge ridges, meeting in dreamy folds that seem to stretch into

eternity. No consecutive fifty yards are flat. You always seem to be standing on the highest point, looking out at enormous vistas of velvety undulating green.

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

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

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



It is hard to depict them without recourse to metaphor. What strikes me about Styrian wines is a quality of *savor*. They are *verdant* in the way that Spring leaves are verdant when they have just unfolded and are still sticky, the greenest green that ever is. It's this deep liquid sapppiness that takes the place of mere brute power in the

best Styrian wines. I will confess I wish you cared more about a regional distinction like this one, rather than lumping all Austrian wines together. But that's silly of me. I just want to send more business to a grower who's

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

doing everything right. And whose region ought to be a selling point.

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

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

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

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

There are somewhere between six and ten "leading" estates here now, and by most estimates Polz belongs in the top two. The nod for absolute-top status seems to have gone his way in 1997 and again in 1998, but these

things are ephemeral and maybe the other guy will shine next year. He'll have to be incandescent to outshine Polz's 1999s! I make a point of keeping current with many of the top Styrian estates, and my judgement remains: Polz is consistently among the best at the top level, and he's the very best at the basic level - perhaps more important. 2000 was a spotty vintage in Styria, predicated on microclimate (and the intuitive touch of the vintner), yet I can't recall a more consistent vintage from Polz.

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

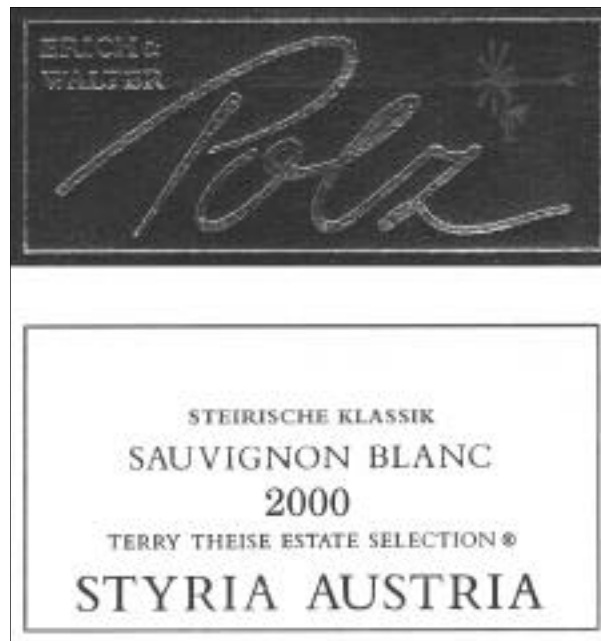
I make a final plea to you to listen to these wines. Power isn't all that matters, not in cars, not in instrumentalists, not in baseball players - and not in wines. The *tone*, the *ride*, the *grace*: **THE FLAVOR**. We mustn't forget!

Polz at a glance:

Polzs also vinify the wines of REBENHOF, which are thicker and juicier (though a little less exquisite) than their own. 1999 might be the best vintage in the history of this estate, and 2000 isn't far behind.

- ARP-57 **2000 Muskateller "Steierische Klassik"**
Styrian "Klassik" denotes a light, unoaked wine such as typifies the region. "We were never really satisfied with our Muskateller," said Erich, "so we deliberately lowered the yields by half to get more concentration." Y'all know I like Muscat but man, *this* is about as pretty as a wine can smell! Pure orange-blossom fragrance leads to a palate that's demure, delicious and sappy, and a finish that's long and suave, with an intricate mineral note creeping in. *So* pretty and *so* useful. A wee little miracle. +
- ARP-58 **2000 Muskateller "Steierische Klassik," REBENHOF**
Orange-blossom again, but more stone, mint and laurel; juicy, a bit less pristine than Polz "proper" but more evenly structured and similarly long.
- ARP-60 **2000 Grauburgunder Grassnitzberg**
The site is a 1er Cru equivalent, and the wine is often among the most satisfying Pinot Gris you could ever ask for. 80% of this wine went through malo; it was made in various woods, none of them new and no barriques. It has a *sensational* nose, focused, leesy; palate has amazing torque and drive; big but nowhere near plump; spicy, demi-glace and oniony; like twice-cooked beef in a meaty sauce with a hint of plum, and eggplant on the side! I'm telling you, this is HIP stuff, and when you order it you WILL be as cool as you think you are. +
- ARP-53 **1999 Obegg**
This is 60% Sauvignon Blanc and 40% Chardonnay (Morillon). Erich wants to market the site name as a significant terroir. It's limestone, and very steep, facing west. This is a Graves-like wine, fine and a little fierce; the Sauv Blanc is tempered by the Chardonnay (which in effect stands in for Semillon); the oak works, the wine's well-stitched. The finish seems oaky but Erich isn't releasing it till late Summer, and possibly not till next year! "We're keeping an eye on this wine," he said.

- ARP-59 **2000 Pinot Blanc Wiltscheiner Herrenberg, REBENHOF**
 This he threatens to delay for at least a year but I don't see how I can let him! This *is* as good as the genre of oaky-leesy wine can be. A perfect ripe varietal aroma; crackery and mealy; the palate is plush but vertical, focused, convincing and yeasty-scallopy; a long finish, unapologetically woody but whew! What shape and structure. +
- ARP-54 **2000 Sauvignon Blanc "Steirische Klassik"**
 Lime and lime blossom and lime zest and stone and currant leaf. Wonderful. Vivid. It has weight and snap and vigor. Only the 2000 brevity of finish prevents my "star" but YO! NEW ZEALAND: *Achtung, baby!*
- ARP-55 **2000 Sauvignon Blanc Theresienhöhe**
 A new wine for Polz, from urgestein soils in the region of Kitzack, about 40 minutes away. This is quite different! More polish, more compact, a marbeline-like texture, red-beet fragrance, needle-precision and focus in an almost finicky sweet-herbal style. +
- ARP-56 **2000 Sauvignon Blanc Hochgrassnitzberg**
 Certainly one of the world's great Sauvignons. There's a friendly competition among a few great names in Styria to see who can make the most breathtaking Grand Cru Sauvignon, and there are times I cannot see how this gem from Polz can possibly be improved upon. Over time I've started to feel this is a great Grand Cru that *happens* to be Sauvignon Blanc. It has wonderful focused power, and something hedge-flowery and tropical and wildly herbal, all over a bedrock of stony length. +



hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

Storing and Handling

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

The Assortment

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

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

Bottle sizes

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

OAT-003 - 12/250ml
OAT-007 - 12/500ml
OAT-009 - 12/1 Liter



weingut engelbert prieler

neusidelersee-hugelland • schützen

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

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

both of 'em, and it's high time you saw these wines. So I spent another day with Prieler.

Having spent all this time with him I have unusually little to say. "Often underrated" says Giles MacDonogh. Sometimes when you're getting acquainted with a new vintner you're just not surprised any more by his spiel: *all* the good ones are lowering yields, *all* the good ones are hand-harvesting. You know? Give me something colorful, man, something I can *use*! "Yes, ah, my great-grandmother was married to a horse whom she called 'Mr. Costigan' even after forty-five years of marriage. And this horse actually planted the vines and installed the indoor plumbing. . ." You know, that kind of thing.

He's up and hobbling around now (after a disastrous injury in the cellar) but that poor foot will "never be the same" and it throbs in damp weather. Luckily there's an heir on the horizon in the form of a charming and ambitious daughter who's been making a few of her own wines, good wines too. He's the kind of sweet man who

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

wants to do everything for you; show you the vineyards, guide you back to your hotel even though you know the way. I even like his dog. But then I like most dogs.

Prieler at a glance:

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

- AEP-11 **2000 Pinot Blanc Ried Seeberg**
Vanilla, wet straw, peach-pit; the palate's ripe, warm, a bit salty - all steel with 100% malo and lees-contact till March - integrated, leesy and generous; ample but not clunky. About Pouilly-Fuissé in weight.
- AEP-12 **2000 Chardonnay Ried Sinner**
I came a calling for Pinot Blanc but you know, the past two years the Chardonnay has impressed me *as much*, maybe more. A perfect nose, all fruit and lees like the great 1999. This is, simply, everything you *want* big Chardonnay to be and nothing you don't! A schisty-limestony soil gives a lovely subtle grip and mineral; the big fruit *means* something. Fine spice and fire; very pretty finish. *This* sinner has nothing to repent.
- AEP-13 **1999 Blaufränkisch Johannishöhe**
Bit of gout de capsule on the nose; the palate comes on bricky, with a crinkly kind of corrugated texture and enough juice to compliment its spice. Rosemary-ish and lamby, briary, almost garriguey or like bouquet-garni.
- AEP-14 **1999 Blaufränkisch Ried Goldberg**
This is the big boy. Deep interior sweetness, dense and complex; lovely transparency and even minerality. A certain *sauvage* profile leads into a finely delineated finish. It has the stature to justify its price, and enough of that middle mineral to justify its effect.

weinbau heidi schröck

neusiedlersee-hugelland • rust

Heidi and I have traveled around the States a couple times now. As I knew she would, she melted audiences everywhere we went. You feel good drinking her wines, which is how it should be. Heidi's wines have always been good and she insistently continues to improve them. Her Pinot Blanc is unlike any I know. Ditto her Muscat. Her Furmint adds to what-can-be-known about white wine, it's so original. Her whites in 2000 are *berserk* with flavor. How'd she get them so manic in such a hot vintage? She picked in the earliest part of the day and used *dry ice* to cool the fruit at the winery prior to fermentation. "The cellar was full of this mist and smoke from the dry ice," she told me. "It was like Star Trek." Yow: beam me up Frascati! Each wine was so sizzlin' I started to get silly; you know the feeling? One sensational wine follows another until

you just have to *laugh*? I even liked the token-oaken wine (which she calls "Woodstock," saying at one point "It's the flavor of '69," which perked my ears up) and I only left it behind to avoid cluttering the offering.

Heidi is another one whose place on the imaginary pecking order I couldn't care less about, though I won't say it upsets me to see how rapidly she's been climbing! I want to represent her wines and that's all there is to it. First because they're good wines, sometimes utterly *great* wines. And second, because they're Heidi's wines. And Heidi is just one of God's great folks.

Without fawning, then, how to depict her? Heidi is one of those people who seems to drink life from a deeper cup than the rest of us do. Scott Fitzgerald was right, there's no accounting for vitality. Heidi is a person of quite invigorating vitality, from that buttery alto voice, to her zingy sense of humor, to her frank and unaffected seriousness about all matters of consequence, from wine-making to raising kids, and as the mom of twin boys, she's got a few notches on her parenthood belt.



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

Usually when I'm tasking with a guy vintner for the first time it's a brisk affair and it has a certain amount of Wary Male Circling. With Heidi it was an agreeable process of exploration and when I reflect on it now I am amazed at the egoless clarity of our communication. What kinds of wines do you want to make? What do you see in this one? To what extent do you shape your wines, or do the wines shape *you*? Those kinds of questions. And she was asking her own questions of me: what is it you liked about this wine? or didn't like? what are you

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

particularly sensitive to as a taster? or insensitive to!? She attends to such questions with an intensity that reminded me of Hans-Günter Schwarz at Müller-Catoir. It is the furthest thing from the usual pissing contest, but rather an issue of considering the other's point of view and seeing if it is useful or illuminative - the question whether it is "correct" doesn't arise.

Each vintage here seems to build upon the last. The wines gain in complexity and authority. This is the best and most serious collection yet. One wonders what's to come. . .

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

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

AHS-37 2000 Weissburgunder

Heidi's were unique Pinot Blancs, but I suspect 2000 heralds a sea-change. They used to be correct enough, shellfishy, appley and leesy, but they sometimes tasted as though a rogue gene snuck in carrying mimosa-blossom scents that took you to another place entirely, not "northern" and vivid but rather cozier and more murmuring and buttery. "That was cask-aging," says Heidi. Lately she has been emphasizing *batonnage* and trying to get the wines more compact and dense. The 2000 is *the* most mineral and gripping of any Schröck Pinot Blanc I recall: apple and straw aromas (zero-botrytis) - she did 80% whole-cluster pressing - leesy (she didn't rack until two months after harvest); this almost suggested Chenin apple and quince; incredibly firm and stiff; very long, with an undeflected attack. And this from low-acid fruit ("which is why I did the whole wine in stainless steel," she says). A new era in Heidi-Pinot.

AHS-40 2000 Furmint

The grape of Tokay reintroduced after nearly vanishing from Burgenland. It's usually confined to the production of botrytis-sweeties but a few intrepid souls are making sizzling exotic dry wines also, and if Loire Chenins are high on your list-o-goodies then no way you wanna miss this. As the vines get older the wines are less scrutable their first six to twelve months in bottle. The 2000 was all middle and inference in May 2001, but *what* complexity here, a wine that blows a thick chord of flavor, long but not streamlined; the virtual opposite of the 1998. Soursop and quince, but really it's a thick, muscular wine in the Riesling idiom. A year from now will be another story!

AHS-39 2000 Muscat

Subtle rose and orange-blossom nose; the palate is an ambush of spice, grip and lees; mouthfilling, liqueur of roses with a whip-crack of spice on the back; it's not blatant, but very fine. I'll say it again: Muscat is high on my list of Great Frivolous Pleasures, and I sometimes wonder if the "little" pleasures don't affirm life *as* profoundly as the Big Serious Pleasures. After all, Neruda wrote a wonderful poem about his socks. He might have been drinking Muscat at the time.

AHS-38 2000 Vogelsang

This means birdsong. Cheep, cheep. It's a locally important site, and Heidi uses the site name to give herself latitude in blending differently each vintage. This one's 50% Pinot Gris, 25% Sauvignon Blanc and 25% Muscat. This is one of the great originals in this offering and I am certain it's the best wine you probably won't buy. How do you "position" the wine without a varietal tag? Had you been at my side tasting it I just know you'd have thought, as I did, "I *will* find a way, any way, to sell this amazing wine." It has a coral color and an animal, sexual, wild fragrance; just hypnotic. The palate is fantastically spicy and long. If you ever thought "I wish Muscat (or Sauvignon Blanc) had more juice," wait till you roll around with the warm cuddly body of *this* blast of juicy wine-luv. +

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

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

AHS-42h 1999 Ausbruch Muskateller, 12/375ml

I see this might end up being called "Bernstein" (which means "amber") or Non Plus Ultra (which is when you're highly nonplussed), but either way it is both massive and exquisite. A real Muscat essence, with lovely clarity; an elastic s-t-r-e-t-c-hhhh of flavor, almost like a jam of Muscat. It's *really* dessert, seeming to refer to every possible flower, yet serene and stately. Wonderful achievement for a wonderful vintner who's only just starting to show what she can do. +

weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

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!

Don't accept a lunch invitation if you don't know exactly what you're doing. We were a group of six, Walter Glatzer, his lovely sister Priska, Mark and me and Hacksaw Bill Mayer and Peter Schleimer. First was a platter of empanadas, stuffed with either leek or blood-sausage. I ate three or four; I didn't know what was coming. An enormous tureen of consommé with veggies and semolina dumplings. Then at least five different salads. Then platter after platter of fried chicken and schnitzels: chicken cordon bleu schnitzels, pork schnitzels, veal schnitzels, pork

cordon bleu schnitzels. It was a veritable *horizontal tast-ing-o-schnitzels*. I ate, I don't know, maybe five schnitzels and a few pieces of chicken. Oops! *DESSERT*. Oops again, two desserts, including the house-special, semolina dumplings filled with strawberry purée and dusted with powdered sugar. A light lunch at *Chez Glatzer*. I don't think I ate dessert, but I wasn't conscious, having passed out after the umpteenth schnitzel.

Walter Glatzer is a miracle. An amazingly nice guy, making sensational wines and offering them at way down-to-earth prices; this isn't, you know, an everyday occurrence! He's also obsessively motivated to keep improving the wines, and his 2000 collection is, truly, his best yet.

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 astrin-



gent, 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-

- 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

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 8.5 hectares of vineyards, from which he aims, like all the young lions, to grow the best possible grapes. He'll green-harvest when necessary, not only to increase dry extract but also to guarantee physiological ripeness. Glatzer does all his harvesting by hand, though he could, if wished, work much of his land by machine.

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

- AGL-47 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett**
 If I were a teacher of wine classes (*there's* a terrifying thought . . .) and I wanted **one single wine** with which to demonstrate GrüVe, I'd use a Glatzer. His is the tabula rosa for the variety, and this 2000 is so perfect-and so let's not-mince-words, cheap-that you really don't want to be without it. I mean, oh YUM, what fruit! Walter's wine is always snappy, but this shows a remarkably fine, concentrated rhubarby fruit, and the 5 grams of residual sugar does it a power of good. It fermented until December (picked September 5th, "the earliest harvest we've had since 1945") and it is much too good for its price.
- AGL-54 **2000 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"**
 "Dornenvogel" (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots. I selected this wine on nose alone, a wonderfully complex rendition of GrüVe, almost tilleul or lichi or water-chestnuts; the palate is just resplendent, the finest and most intricate Veltliner from here; grace and vigor and a lovely (though vintage-typically brief) finish. Amazing focus of taffeta and guava. +
- AGL-49 **2000 Weissburgunder "Classic"**
 Walter's hit his stride with his Pinot Blanc. Snappy and mealy and bright, good grip and middle, slight bite of ripeness, clean vivid and true.
- AGL-50 **2000 Zweigelt "Riedencuvee"**
 Plump, cool, fleshy, a Julienas-type; serious spurt of fruit but not sweet fruit, more the slightly unripe blackberry; long for its weight. Surprising but lovely.
- AGL-51 **2000 Blaufränkisch**
 This is just *gorgeous*. Red wine (any wine) doesn't need to be solemn in order to be serious; this has immense sappy charm and genuine complexity, delineates into skeins of spice and finishes seductively. *This* is Austrian red at its best, and my perfect vision of delight-o-rosso. +
- AGL-52 **2000 St. Laurent**
 Haven't these been just wonderful? 1998 was Walter's maiden-voyage, and as usual he aced it. (The man has wonderful instincts for red wine, knowing exactly when to STOP and not let them get too narcissistic.) I adore this grape! If you skipped my introduction, it's a finicky Pinot Noir-ish vine which gives wines that seem to suggest a Burgundy mixed with 15% Mourvèdre. Good examples are kinetic and layered. Finding excellent and affordable St. Laurent had become something of a rosetta stone for me, but the search is over. This 2000 is virtually perfect. Dense and solid and earnest; crusty, veal, morels; suave, almost salty finish. VERY LITTLE TO BE HAD! +
- AGL-53 **2000 Blaufränkisch "Reserve"**
 I hesitated because I was so seduced by the purring fruit of the St. Laurent, but this is another level of quality with a more "serious" profile. It's the Sangiovese face of Blaufränkisch, with wonderful spiciness, depth, and a hospitable grin of lamby fruit.
- AGL-48 **2000 Zweigelt "Dornenvogel"**
 This is more transparent than usual, and closer to its St. laurent parent. Sweet fruit yet somehow sleek in the face of its richness. Plum and *glace du viande* rather than cherry. A spiciness flames into the finish. "Dornenvogel" denotes Glatzer's reserve quality and experience shows me these wines keep improving from five to eight years beyond the vintage.
- AGL-55 **1999 "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 Zweigelt, a bit of Blaufränkisch, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Cabernet Sauvignon and the balance is St. Laurent. It is all done in (double-gulp!) *new wood*. But this is a very RARE example of a show-off oakster that *works*; and a lot of real trendy Spanish wine is no better than this. Like the 1998, but more open and elegant, cedary and complex. Large, rich and sweet but with sweet ripe tannins; this never ceases to flatter and delight. If it were Italian with a name like, I don't know, *GLUTEOSO*, you'd be salivating to have it on your list.

weingut zull

weinviertel • schrattental

I particularly like Zull for the very “neutrality” of his style. These are squeaky-clean matter-of-fact wines whose occasional forays into extravagance (like now with his splendid 2000s) are all the more beguiling for the abandon they imply. I like candor and clarity in a wine. It’s a detour to Zull, an hour-plus from the Wachau in each direction, but one I’m happy to make for such wines as his.

Giles MacDonogh contents himself with the one-word descriptor of “excellent” to describe the wines. But a couple of my other sources (whose names I won’t quote because you haven’t heard of them and possibly couldn’t pronounce them!) go into more detail. Zull is described as going against the regional grain in that he is “innovative and takes pleasure in experimenting,”

says one source. “The results are wines of purity and fragrance.” Zull’s twelve hectare estate is described (circa 1991) as an “insider’s tip.” Zull, it turns out, wanted to study math and physics, but 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 wine-making. But wine finally seems to have gotten him in its clutches. He decided in 1982 to make every effort to concentrate on quality, “because it’s fun that way, and also good for business,” he said. Zulls had only sold their wines in cask, and our hero wanted to make a name selling top-quality wines in bottle. So it was BACK TO



SCHOOL time for Werner Zull, studying viti- and viniculture “with other students roughly half my age,” he recalls. “But I’ve never regretted it, even for an instant.”

The whites are reductively made. “We avoid all unnecessary or disturbing handling,” he says.

He describes 2000 as “extreme and incomparable, with the earliest flowering in recorded memory. Even the deep green of the leaves in June was a visual confirmation; this was a unique season. We were in the vineyards constantly keeping yields under control. The rain in July came as if by appointment. And the cool nights in September and October retained the pointedness of aroma we want.”

It was the earliest harvest they’ve ever had. Yet the

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

wines “are terroir-wines,” he says, “fragrant, concentrated, smooth and rich in extract.” Zull’s wines can seem almost too scrupulous, too constricted, but the sometimes sprawling personalities of many 2000s was emphatically not seen here; these are brilliant, focused wines polished to a high sheen of gloss. They are a high-spot in this offering.

Zull at a glance:

Ultra-clean, stainless steel wines with lots of minerality and pupil-dilating clarity! Outstanding success in 2000, his best vintage since 1995.

AFZ-31 2000 Grüner Veltliner Sechs Vierteln

A “viertel” is a quarter, or idiomatically a parcel of vines; thus the wine hails from six parcels. It does not mean “sex fearful” as you may have supposed. This was well-nigh perfect light GrüVe: lentilly and snappy, dry dry dry; long and focused, mineral and crackly-crisp. The antithesis to Glatzer’s; this is a mineral granita-o-Veltliner.

AFZ-32 2000 Grüner Veltliner Ödfeld

This may be Zull’s shining moment with Grüner Veltliner; it has glorious fruit and a textbook peppery-arugula nose with iris-ey, almost Riesling notes; glowing fruit over superb snappy structure and the whole thing just gleams like sunlight off water. +

AFZ-33 2000 Riesling Innere Bergen

There was a correct but cerebral Riesling that had me worried. But this wine, whew! It’s world-class Riesling, soaring easily past many of its more pedigreed cousins in the famous regions; gorgeous flowery-iris-ey aromas sing from the glass; wonderful fruit and spice, a shimmer that’s minty rather than minerally. Compare to Wachau Federspiel and *exult*: you bought the wine with the flavor instead of the name. Didn’t you. . . ? +

AFZ-34h 1999 Welschriesling Eiswein, 12/375ml

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



weingut richard thiel-kremsmunsterhof

thermenregion • gumpoldskirchen

Thiel is, among other things, a sweet-hearted man as down-to-earth as folks can be, making wines of considerable sinew and viscera. I know - how well do I know - how many of you are into, shall we say, *kinky* wines. You like a touch of the exotic, now, don't you. Cabernet/Chardonnay/Merlot are like the missionary position with the lights out and your pajamas on. Even Sauvignon Blanc or Viognier or Syrah aren't bizarre enough to satisfy your vile appetites. Riesling and Pinot Noir, ah, now they're the ticket. Pinot Noir all purring and *dirty* and Riesling so wildly vivid and tingly . . . that's the way you like it, you hopeless libertine.

Well, do I have something for you. Think you know it all, do you? Think you've penetrated every last naughty forbidden pleasure? *Sure* you hold the keys to every dwelling of eros? *Have*

you met ZIERFANDLER? Have you swapped spit with ROTGIPFLER? Well then **don't** come swaggering to me like you're Joey de Sade. There's someplace you haven't yet entered . . . kind of scary, isn't it. Think you got the huevos? I guess we'll see!

Thiel is part of a quality-alliance for his region, of which Gumpoldskirchen is the epicenter. Back when I lived in Germany, if there was one Austrian wine in every cheesy little supermarket it was some sweetish bilge from Gumpoldskirchen. Busloads of German tourists filled the *heurige* all season long, enjoying the courtly ambience of the lovely town at the base of the pretty hills. The so-called Thermenregion (because of its many thermal springs) was the last to jump on board the quality renaissance which seized Austria following the anti-freeze matter; it's barely ten miles from downtown Vienna but it *feels* quite relaxing and countrified and so everyone and his *Bruder* goes there. It's a tribute to these hot young bucks that they were driven to improve quality **when they already had all the customers they'd ever need.**

Richard gave me a little brochure he'd prepared. I like these things in Austria; they're remarkably free of fluff. He describes his philosophy as follows: "The harmony of physiological ripeness, fruity fragrance and the body of a wine results from an interplay of grape variety, soil, weather, vinification and time," going on to say "In the past [our] wines have been rather 'well-behaved,' too conventional. Now [we are] adapting to the strengths and weaknesses of each vintage."

This isn't the first useful thing I've received from Thiel: one year he told me a really nifty proverb I've been thinking about ever since. "Eating and drinking are the three most wonderful things." He also gave me a wine so wonderfully weird I was just delighted at all the possibilities life can toss our ways. Don't worry, I didn't select it and won't be haranguing you to buy it, but just in case you think the wines I select are strange, get a load of this: A Zierfandler-Rotgipfler BA, that underwent malo and was aged in barrique, with 12.5% alcohol, 9 grams of acidity and 60 grams of residual sugar, tasting like some nectar of kumquats and persimmons. I, of

course, loved it but there are few filthy perversions to which I won't stoop.

Yet Thiel has also turned the Austrian wine-world on its ear with his Rieslings. I don't remember who commissioned this tasting, but Peter Schleimer took part in a big blind hoo-ha of 1996 Rieslings that included all the big names, and when the dust settled Thiel, this **upstart**, this **nobody**, had one of the top-three wines! Peter reported this news to me because I'd kept asking him: "Am I nuts or is the Thiel Riesling incredibly good?" "Yes to both," he replied. Now, this begs the question: Do I *need* any more Riesling in this portfolio? Yet I think it's the *wrong* question. I don't *need* anything; I don't need to be selling Austrian wines at all, I have enough rocks to push up enough hills, thank you. But once I decide to *do* it, why not go all the way? No, it doesn't matter whether I *need* more Riesling: It matters how I can in good conscience leave great Riesling *behind*. I am a little vinous Johnny Appleseed, and this is what I have to sow. Anybody with wines this good deserves to be shown around.

Thiel at a glance:

Another sleeper-agency, producing original Rieslings from chalky soils in warm microclimates. Plus several novel and weirdo grapes that provide us with all new flavors to expand our wine-horizons. Outstanding 2000s, a step UP from 1999.

ATH-18 **2000 "Das Beste Vom" Riesling**

"The best from our Riesling" is an old-vines cuvée from two chalky sites averaging over forty years. It's regularly one of the best Rieslings in this offering and doesn't receive a fraction of the attention it deserves! In some vintages it's just a modest step up from Thiel's "regular" Riesling but this 2000 was quite a leap. Much more depth and fundament now; big chalky, husky fellow, nettle-y and peppery, lusty and voluminous. It recalls the better 1992s. Brief but vivid finish of ramps, fennel and red mullet sautéed in olive oil.

ATH-19 **2000 Zierfandler/Rotgipfler "Klassik"**

Just when you thought it was safe to go out - who or what is "Zierfandler?" It is the native grape here, and as best I can determine it doesn't grow anywhere else. It isn't too far from Riesling in its makeup, less citrussy and more radishy, and I don't like the vegetal notes it takes on with age, though these are prized by the local cognoscenti. It can taste rather like Tocai, that oniony character, but it's more compact, like Riesling. Thiel has a very sure hand with Zierfandler (translation: "one who fondles ziers") when he keeps it away from wood. This cunning little fiend is 50% Zierfandler and 50% Rotgipfler and I was knocked out by it, even more so than by the Rieslings. This is the "light" one at 13.5% alcohol; it has the waxy rosewater aromas of Rotgipfler underlined with the nettle-y-radishy bite of Zierfandler; it's more *explosive* than the Riesling; a fierce bite of spice and penetration; fruity, but with that white-peppery snap. Impressive stuff!

ATH-20 **2000 Zierfandler "Select"**

A fine red-beet fragrance and an almost luscious palate with cut and spice. Has stature and power, quite long and decked out with gaudy flavor. Lots of lively interplay of high-relief flavors. I should warn you; once you buy, sell and drink such wines it tends to spoil you for ordinary wine, so be sure to lay in a bushel of kumquats, two swivel-tables, a harness and twenty AA-batteries.



weinberghof fritsch

donauland • oberstockstall

“For the joy of wine” is the heading on Fritsch’s price list, which also contains this trenchant observation under the heading Philosophy: “Wine is created in the vineyard; every possible practice in the cellar can only preserve the form inherent in high-quality fruit. There is certainly no turning back from modern cellar-technique, but neither is mere cleanliness and purity the sine qua non of wine; great wines show themselves first and foremost by soul and character.”

I was very glad to see this young, rather earnest vintner receive the accolade WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR from Falstaff magazine - roughly analogous to Food & Wine here, though with much more attention paid to wine.

I have learned to expect much at this address. Fritsch has been dealt a few good hands the last several years, and played well with them; his Rieslings, especially, have soared.

That said, Fritsch has been something of a sleeper in this little collection. Somebody always is, I suppose. Ironically I think the wines would get more attention if they were a little less good, and were offered for concomitantly lower prices. Let’s see if I can tempt you with these goodies . . .

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 7,700 cases
- Top sites: Schlossberg, Steinberg, Foggathal
- Soil types: Loess, eroded primary rock covered with loess, loam and red marl soils with iron
- Grape varieties: 33% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Riesling, 18% Weissburgunder and Chardonnay, 16% Zweigelt, 10% Pinot Noir, 8% Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot

Fritsch at a glance:

Some of Austria’s best red wines come from this young, dedicated vintner. Such that one can forget how good his Veltliners and Rieslings can be!

- AFR-42 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Windspiel**
He likes the riper “classic” more, but I like the cool, calmly pointed fruit of this, which is more lissome, comely and elegant too. Here’s a secret: it has 3.5 grams of residual sugar which does it a world-o-good. OUTSTANDING VALUE.
- AFR-43 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Steinberg**
Again, this was the less ripe of the two site-Veltliners but also less overt and gaudy. The nose is subdued and fennely; the palate shows fine high-toned fruit and pronounced mineral; the finish is a wee bit warm in the 2000-style. If it sounds like I’m damning with faint praise, I’m not. 2000 isn’t a resonant year at Fritsch (he may have been distracted by a lot of political goings on regarding various growers’ associations) but what’s good is quite good, and quite well-priced.
- AFR-40 **2000 Weissburgunder Schlossberg**
This came on the heels of a Chardonnay with only 10% barrique-vinification and tasted somehow LESS oaky despite being in fact a lot more oaky. The wood is subdued with more than enough leesy fruit; the wine is upright and solid and not sleazy as oaky wines can be.
- AFR-41 **2000 Zweigelt “Classic”**
This can be just about perfect mid-weight Zweigelt. Fritsch had drawn the samples from cask the night before my visit and left them in a carafe without sulfur, so we asked for fresh samples and *voilà*, now a wine redolent of violets, claret-y, juicy and little dusty.

weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

Once I finally got there and met Lehrner, he spoke such a rapid and opaque dialect it might as well have been urdu. I managed to glean that he's unusually forthright and passionate (don't they often go hand-in-hand?) as he hadn't a kind word for any of his 1998s, most of which he described as "anemic." Though he's softened to them I think he still feels it a wee kind of vintage. Leave it to me to try and persuade him otherwise.

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.

Paul Lehrner is hugely (and correctly) proud of his sensational 1999s, and even more so of the big-bodied, firm and finely tannic 2000s, which he says are "a point better." We'll see! The effusiveness of red wines from cask has famously misled tasters, even vintners, and I want reassurance the 2000s won't end up muddy and thick at the expense of clarity.

I really like Paul. He's candid and he never knew what a chip on the shoulder felt like. He also showed me a neat trick to handle tannin buildup; grapeseed oil. And if you don't have great dark Austrian bread to dunk in it, a demitasse spoon will do. He's so much of what I love in a vintner, giving us beaming honest wines at modest prices, and I really hope you buy the hell out of these ripe, even-keeled 1999s.

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

Lehrner at a glance:

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

- APL-17 **1999 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**
Spicy and lamb-y; sweet, medium-weight; a glass of black-cherry dee-lite; smiling, forward and easy.
- APL-14 **2000 "Claus"**
This is 50% Zweigelt and 50% Blaufränkisch. Santa comes early for this sneak-preview of 2000; and this is juicier than a big greasy calzone; sappy and sweet and long and spicy.
- APL-18 **1999 Blaufränkisch Ried Steineiche**
This was a cask-sample; the wine was done in 50% new barriques; a euphoric perfume and the most structure of the wines so far; solid and gripping, with a stony underpinning; overtone of carob, meaningful tannin now.
- APL-15 **2000 Blauburgunder (Pinot Noir)**
He has very little Pinot Noir and wasn't entirely sure I should see it! I saw it all right. I also saw the few available cases of a superb 1999 snatched up by a customer with whom I was travelling. This is 100% new barrique; fine, ripe, varietal nose, blueberries and sap; round, rich and violet-y palate. Can't wait to see how this develops, but probably won't get to because *THERE'S HARDLY A BIT OF IT*. So hurry.
- APL-13 **1999 Cuvée Paulus**
They all have their Sassicaia. This is Blaufränkisch (50%), Cabernet Sauvignon (22%), Zweigelt (15%) and St. Laurent (13%), and it was being bottled as we tasted it (we heard the clank and clamor of the bottling line), so Paul pulled us both a cask sample and a bottle off the line. The cask sample was searching, with a complex nose in the plummy Burgundy direction; stylish, spicy and complex; the blend both marries and lets the components speak, so the Blaufränkisch spice sings on the front and the St. Laurent purrs on the middle and back and all of it's perfumed with Zweigelt's special charm. The same wine from bottle was unsurprisingly more angular and spicy, but it was also 10 degrees cooler. This is *a lot of wine* for the money.

kremstal and kauptal

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

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

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.

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

Until the EU arrived and started fixin' stuff what weren't broke, there was a very smart vineyard classification. Now with absorption into the great maw of nouvelle-Europe, these growers will have to see what, if anything, can come of their enlightenment.

Other than the profound individuality of certain sites (Heiligenstein comes first to mind) there's a little of

regional "style" to distinguish these wines from Wachau wines. If you lined up a slew of them blind you wouldn't be able to guess at them by dint of flavors; you'd look more for body or thrust, or for the specific styles of certain vintners. You might say that Wachau compares to Hermitage as Kauptal-Kremstal does to Côte Rotie. It would need another two importers of Austrian wine to get all the deserving growers into our market, there are so many of them. Indeed, I keep being told of more hot young up-n'-comers for my competitors to check out. I could actually see myself becoming identified with this region exclusively - The CHAMPEEN of the KREM-STAL! - because I strongly feel it's the most accommodating source in Austria (therefore among the most in the world) for utterly **great** wines. I won't, because I'm attached to my suppliers all over the place. But if I had it to do again, knowing what I know now . . .



weingut erich & maria berger

kremstal • gedersdorf

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

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

Even when Mr. Berger *senior* disappears into the cellar to unearth a masterpiece, he never

brings out a blockbuster. I have now tasted what he says are his greatest Riesling and greatest Veltliner, and they are superb, and yet they excel by dint of greater *length* more than by greater **weight**.

Look, I am a man past my mid-forties. I'm in the wine-biz and drink wine very often. For those reasons and possibly others of which I'm unaware, I'm starting to place my highest premium on *drinkability* and *beauty* when I select wines, not just for you but also for my per-



sonal 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?

- 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



Berger at a glance:

Charm and value typify these wines. Clean, cultured-yeast wines with lots of primary fruit, yet aging superbly. Steady-as-she-goes fine vintage in 2000.

how the wines taste:

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

ABG-40 2000 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter

We sell a whole lot of this lovely wine, and I am proud to have found it. I doubt if there's a better **value** anywhere in Austria. It's almost pointless to detail its flavors: it's perfect light Veltliner and it has remarkable class for its *echelon*. Stack this puppy and watch it fly. Pour it by the glass and enjoy the happy faces of your guests.

ABG-43 2000 Grüner Veltliner Zehetnerin

Pretty nose and a dear, semolina-dumpling of a palate. It's slight but adorable.

ABG-44 2000 Grüner Veltliner Loessterassen

This is indeed a textbook loess Veltliner; Erich's quite proud of it, and I admire its precision and sincerity, but I yearned for 4 to 5 grams per liter of residual sugar to give it more charm. As it is, it's studious and fine.

ABG-41 2000 Riesling Steingraben

As always, this a classy Riesling. The 2000 has flourish and fragrance and ripeness and a wee touch of sweetness. Such pretty smells, pure lime, tilleul, wisteria; length and charm, with just a small tweak of alcohol on the finish.

ABG-42h 1998 Rivaner TBA, 12/375ml

God help me, Müller-Thurgau (you do know this "Rivaner" is just a jazzy name for the plebe-est of all grapes, ja?) I admit it; I done was seduced. We have nearly 300 grams per liter of residual sugar (which tastes like HALF that amount), 11.2 grams of acidity (amazing for "Rivaner"); a musky nose, honeysuckle and dandelion honey; the palate has the wonderful spice of the 1998s and overall a rich, sun-heated flowers impression. Most important - look at the price! Seen it? Then *act fast*, because we don't have much!

weingut mantlerhof

kremstal • brunn im felde

In a vintage where great GrüVe is prone to be scarce, please be advised NOT to ignore this wonderful winery any longer. Basically, anything that says “Mantlerhof,” “Veltliner” and “2000” is a wine you should buy!

I expected otherwise. Mantler’s wines can sometimes collapse under their own power, and 2000 is prone to a certain brutish volume, but each of these wines was etched and dense and serious. So my expectations were wrong. This is not the worst thing that can happen to me.

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

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

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

I generally found Mantler’s wines to be thickly saturated with flavor, adamant and penetrating rather than elegant. (That said, I don’t think these 2000s are a fluke.) He leaves his musts on the skins longer than many others do, perhaps that’s why. After temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel the wines are racked promptly and bottled fairly early.

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

- 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



Mantlerhof at a glance:

Elite-quality winery producing classy Rieslings, mossy Veltliners and various specialties, and the world's nicest guy! 2000 breaks the vintage mold, giving Sepp Mantler a superb collection of Veltliners.

- AMH-32 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Weitgasse**
Thick for its lightness, big minerally middle like pulverized stones; salty, really wonderful fennel-y density. Exciting "small" GrüVe, among the best I tasted anywhere. Short-list this.
- AMH-27 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Lössterassen**
As above with more reduced-stock density, more caraway, more power and a sterner finish, but the power-pack of mineral is still there, and the sense of compacted density. W-O-W!
- AMH-28 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel**
Simply great Veltliner. Almost molten fruit and mineral. Amazing rhubarb-tobacco nose, seething spice and utterly turbocharged fruit (thanks, again, to a few grams of residual sugar); double-take pretty. Dense and lovely. +
- AMH-31 **2000 Neuburger "Hommage"**
You don't know this grape variety. Years ago it was more widely planted, especially in the driest terraces where it withstood aridity more successfully than Veltliner. Once irrigation became possible most of these terraces were planted over to Riesling. Then there's the ephemera of modishness; Neuburger is simply out of favor. Today's "hep" Austrian wine cats and kitties prefer sprightly-zesty wines with explicit vim (I sometimes think of myself as a vim vendor) and the Neuburger is one of those *umami* varieties. It's a 19th century kind of flavor, like veal sweetbreads, more baroque than modern and full of murmur and inference. Nuts, butter, caramel come into it with age. Mantler told me the *must* smells like green apples. I happen to like the variety - it has a soft echoing déjà vu effect on the last palate that appeals to my romantic side. But it's getting damnably hard to find. Mantler dedicates this wine to his grandfather (hence "Hommage"), and you'd do well to investigate it especially if you like Pinot Gris, its spiritual cousin. This Neuburger is the most fragrant I've ever experienced, and the palate is firm, even mineral, compact and long. It almost feels acid-driven. Suave wash of juice and spice. Not so much wine-for-food, but rather wine-*AS*-food.
- AMH-30 **2000 Riesling Zehetnerin**
I don't think I've ever tasted Riesling that tasted like rye-toast! And if, that was nonetheless good. Do you dare?
- AMH-29 **2000 Roter Veltliner**
This is a textbook example of the variety, less whacked out than its party-on! sib from 1999. Basically it tastes like GrüVe at six years old, more roasted pepper and smoky-mushroomy *umami*. It's a more interesting wine than the GrüVe Lössterassen at the same price, unless you're in a GrüVe groove.
- AMH-23 **1999 Roter Veltliner "Hommage"**
This zoomed ahead to become one of THE most compelling wines of the 1999 vintage. It is clearly Great Wine though you've never come near its peyote-blast of supercharged ethereal fruit. Gramps gotta be way proud of his little 'un for this wonderful wine; passion fruit and pumpkin crème brûlée. Or it's all beets and redcurrants. Or it is all of these. There's 37 grams per liter residual sugar seamlessly integrated into the wine; great plummy power here, and caramel and clove, and yoo gotta original bone in yoo body yooza gotta try *dis*! +
- AMH-4h **1995 Roter Veltliner Beerenauslese, 12/500ml**
The return of an old friend, which I can't believe he still has. This is one of the most powerful and original dessert wines I've ever encountered. No matter how broadly you've tasted, you've never tasted anything remotely like this. Nut-husky, passion fruit, bergamot, lysergic power, like a nectar spat from a flame-thrower; maniacal intensity!
- AMH-24h **1999 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/500ml**
This is EXACTLY what it says it is! Magnificently spicy and sassafrassy. A steal. Completely seductive, thrilling and I mean, we're talking *gorgeous*. +

weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

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

Last year I had the charismatic Rebecca Chapa with me as we drove to Nigl. I played a tape

of some film music Pat Metheney did for something we never saw here; "Passagio Il Paradiso," very dreamy music, and Rebecca said she felt drowsy. I was down in my center where wines such as Nigl's can be received calmly. I had engineered that response deliberately; I know by now how best to taste the most challenging or intricate of wines. But this year we only drove ten minutes early one Sunday morning, and I was too sleepy to contrive mere consciousness, let alone sophisticated emotion.

Nigl's were also the first wines I tasted from the Krems area (Wachau, Kremstal, Kamptal), which is kind of like starting in the Pfalz with Müller-Catoir. Here's why I'm telling you this. These wines are so great I feel a need to reduce them as rigorously as I can in order to see them matter-of-factly. If I don't I pay too much attention to how they make me feel and not enough attention to *them*. I also have to concentrate my resources; it's hard work to taste these wines if you have to write about them. Taking tasting notes felt like an irrelevant chore.

I don't claim Nigl is the best winery in Austria, but I also don't believe there's anyone *better*. Since 1993 he's excelled both for supernal quality and for consistency across the range. 1997 saw him ratchet it up to almost unbearable levels of expressiveness and beauty, and he stepped easily through the 1998 difficulties and produced another iridescently detailed vintage. 1999 was superb almost as a matter of course. The Rieslings of 2000 are every bit as good.

As always there isn't very much wine, and I will allocate it, but you can't drink better dry white wine from anywhere else on earth, and anything remotely approaching this quality would cost you at least twice as much.

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

The Krems valley has a climate rather like that of the western Wachau. "During the ripening season we get oxygen-rich, cool breezes in the valley," says the Nigl price list. "Therefore we have wide temperature spreads between day and night, as well as high humidity and

- 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

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.

Veltliner makes up 42% of Nigl's sites, Riesling 37%. He'll green-harvest if need be, and the actual harvest is as late as possible. Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled - as I saw - first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles are singularly great white wines, with a high, keen-ing brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate, as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there. Flavors seem to be written in *italics*. I often think of Nigl when I think of the other Riesling-shamans, people like Boxler, Grünhaus, Dönnhoff - the ones who somehow hew these flavors to a pitch so keen you think it could cut glass.

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!) 2000 is chock-a-block with masterpieces!

how the wines taste:

Martin describes 2000 as "a cross between 1992 and 1997." He learned, he says, that "Low acids aren't tragic as long as you have fruit" but he may be taking the filigree precision of his wines for granted. Growers often generalize about wine through the prism of their own cellars, naturally.

AFN-74 2000 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

Martin wondered whether his Gärtling, which I have offered in the past, is really meant to travel; it's a summer-wine which excels by its gurgling freshness, perhaps not enough of a Statement for our exalted market. So we're trading up to this loess site in Krems and in 2000 it's a *big* step up.; nettle-y and beany and radishy, even-tempered and mild but clear and penetrating. Spicy, mineral; textbook GrüVe.

AFN-75 2000 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

Two sites, averaging sixty plus years old. Consistently it is among the top five to ten Veltliners in every vintage, and it is a classic statement of GrüVe on loess. But be patient, as it needs its second year to unfurl its splendors and perhaps ten years thereafter to say everything in its inscrutable soul. The 2000 is actually better than the 1999; really superb, wide open, profound, juicy and adamant; no mysteries here, just a jet-blast-o-GrüVe. A little nip of warmth on the finish is in line with the vintage, by the way. +

AFN-67 2000 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri "Privat"**AFN-67M 2000 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri "Privat", Magnums**

"Privat" denotes the best wines of each vintage from each variety. This is molten, like a primordial magma of Veltliner. Stern and a little unhinged. Expressive if not precisely charming; more "difficult" than the Alte Reben, more intricate and also more commanding. Martin's track record with this series suggests the bottle I tasted was truculent from bottling. +

AFN-73 2000 Sauvignon Blanc

The 1999 version of this wine was more Riesling like in nature. This 2000 is less herbal but grassier and cattier than the 1999. It works on its own terms and displays its own complexity. Sauvignon Blanc likers will dig it.

AFN-68 2000 Riesling Senftenberger Piri

VINEYARD PROFILE: Piri is a large site, entirely terraced, entirely on brown Urgestein with medium-thick topsoil. Whatever comes from it has fragrances of iris, pepper and iron. Martin's Rieslings often show a fine, subtle melange of peach and blackberry. The polish of this wine struck me immediately; it was the first 2000 to display such precision and chiseled-ness. Fine and filigree, it has more echoey length than any of the GrüVes; charming sweet-grassy mid-palate and a long finish for this vintage. I was starting to get excited about the next wines.

AFN-69 2000 Riesling Kremser Kremsleiten

Year after year this is the sexiest of Nigl's Rieslings, the one with the most peachy exotica, often with a helpful tease of sweetness; this was the first really Great wine I tasted from 2000, and I think it's two steps above its counterpart in 1999. "Whoa, this is a 3-star fragrance!" I wrote. As much laurel and tilleul as the usual pitted fruit. And the palate is just gorgeous. *What* fruit-complexity, with a perfect backdrop of mineral and sweet-herb, and what an ethereally pretty finish. You'll be very glad you own this. +

AFN-70 **2000 Riesling Ried Goldberg**

Yes, you guessed right; it is an homage to the great titan of the WCW . . . or, wait, I got it backward: Bill Goldberg himself is named after this vineyard. In any case, you haven't seen it before because last year wine.com took it all. It's a slatey soil, from a low-lying parcel on the terraced hillsides, but crumbly, "feinerd" (fine-earth) as they say. As such it's a new expression for Nigl Riesling. We're talking ALL MINERAL, ALL THE TIME, THAT'S RIGHT, ALL MINERAL, ALL THE TIME! Though it isn't expressly slatey like the Loiser Berg from Hiedler. Rather it has a kind of luscious powder with an overtone of lime and tarragon. And it isn't even slightly "austere." It's actually rather grand. +

AFN-71 **2000 Riesling Ried Hochäcker**

This is in fact a small sub-section of Piri on poorer soil, and it consistently gives Martin his most mystically complex wine. Pour it at night and you'd think it could attract the aurora borealis. The first blast of fragrance here was literally bacon. (Is Martin a member of Dan Phillips' "Bacon Of The Month" club, I wonder?) You're going to wonder if you ever smelled anything so complex. Probably not. Resplendent spice, mineral, power; threads of fruit woven into the pervasive mineral. Magnificent Riesling. People will be talking about this wine for many years, trust me. +

AFN-72 **2000 Riesling Piri "Privat"**

AFN-72M **2000 Riesling Piri "Privat", Magnums**

After being laid to waste by the Hochäcker I wasn't sure what I had left for this bad boy. The nose was closed by dint of its very profundity and massive concentration. The palate showed literally stunning solidity and depth of fruit, a black hole of density, with a profusion of white lilac, wisteria and iris and even peach-blossom. Martin said it "smelled like peach jelly when it was in cask." A wine to dream over, unless you just prefer to lie stunned before its inscrutable majesty. + + +

AFN-63h **1998 Riesling Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**

This is gorgeous: spice-cake and botrytis; firm, almost Eiswein-tangy; still waxy and minerally with a raw-silken texture and just shimmering brilliance.



weingut erich salomon/undhof

kremstal • stein

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

Your response to these wines was initially most perplexing, but they're starting to acquire the cachet they deserve. Any time I take someone to visit Erich you come away melted with admiration and enthusiasm, not only for the wines but for the man himself.

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

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

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



entirely. Hiedler is a conspicuous example of one who does not. Bründlmayer is one who does (but Willi does conventional pressing with 10% and then blends the two). Sometimes you lose a little *gras* with whole-cluster pressing, but you can gain a lot of brilliance. I like the

- 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

style though I'd be saddened if everyone did it. Wines might become too formulaic.

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

Also among the general changes under this roof is the shortening of the range; Erich's only offering three Veltliners and three Rieslings and *c'est tu*. Update, simplify, lay the foundation in place for the next life-stage; it's all very stirring to me, somehow. Salomon's is a winery where I feel tentacles reaching into the past and into

the earth. Erich is wanly dismissive of my more mystical wanderings, but I doubt he'd quarrel with me on this point. He is quite aware of the pull of history, and quite attuned to the specific characters of his soils and the flavors they impart.

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

I think of Selbachs. Johannes is the driving force behind the **superb**-ness of the wines, but it is Hans his father who is the spiritual and ethical compass for the family, just as it's Sigrid his mother who makes such things morally explicit. Selbach's wines *quiver* with meaning, as Salomon's do also, and I am happy and grateful to drink *through* the wines and into that place

which hums and glows. It doesn't have to be a Big Deal (and yes I am a stupid-head, I know) but there is meaning in this nexus of human, earth and wine. It feels good and solid to partake of it - in however small a way.

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

We chatted as wine-guys do about the 2000s, looking for reasons for flavors, cause/effect equations. I did this and therefore got that. But I've had a little ornery voice that wondered if this wasn't after-the-fact truisms, and Erich said something quite casually that made me grin. "You never really know why wines turn out the way they are. You just do your best. The secret is kept by nature."

Salomon at a glance:

This is certainly the sleeper-agency of any in this portfolio. Sensational value for first class stellar wines. Changes in the cellar work really took hold with the magnificent 1997 vintage. 2000 is especially wonderful.

how the wines taste:

Since 1997 these are modern wines, more fligree 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-30 2000 Grüner Veltliner "Hochterrassen"

There were two bottlings of this, a January and a March. Bert Salomon was certain I'd like the first of them. But I didn't, because it was mingy and constricted. The later bottling showed much more warmth and fruit, not as shrill, with good length and classical stylishness. That's what you'll get. This is a VALUE, by the way.

ASU-22 1998 Grüner Veltliner Wieden Reserve

Quite the best of the three GrüVes on hand, almost bacony now. Oleander and flowering-field, sorrelly and very classy; the palate works lean and spicy, with that smoky finish. Bold-print seriousness here. Perhaps very good indeed plus, even. I have to work on that Coates staccato-prose. "Very clean entry. Very, very spicy. Lean middle. Racy. Needs time. Put away. Should age well. Perhaps very well. Shortish finish. Good plus." This is one of the great Veltliners of the 1998 vintage. Very fine indeed. Plus, plus. There, got it. "Rather short, if a little bit long. Finishes endlessly briefly. A real clump of lard, this hirsute Veltliner. Decent pus . . . I mean PLUS." Getting closer all the time!

ASU-34 2000 Grüner Veltliner Wachtberg Reserve

"A little bit of Auslese character," says Erich, betraying the Austrian über-sensitivity to residual sugar, of which this wine shows virtually none. Lovely fragrance of rhubarb and cherry tobacco; rich mineral palate with an almost cayenne-pepperiness emerging on the finish.

- ASU-35 **2000 Riesling "Steinterrassen"**
Does der job, bawse. Light but transparent and full of fruit; lingering echoes of sweet grass; lovely fragrance, thick flowery mid-palate. Emblematic Austrian Riesling.
- ASU-31 **2000 Riesling Kögl**
So pretty and complex. A little more starched than Alzinger (where we'd just come from tasting), more scritchy. Red beet and caraway; grip, minerality and such pretty fruit. +
- ASU-32 **2000 Riesling Pfaffenberg**
This is one of the great vineyards for Riesling in all the big wide world. There's more of a puréed, semolina feel to them, less steely. This smells like rainier cherries, peaches and sautéed bananas. It's juicy, with a lecherous grin of fruit. Plenty of spice and mineral shimmer and even a little phenolic nip; superbly intricate finish. +
- ASU-26 **1999 Riesling Kögl Reserve**
Big, yellow-plummy density and a fierce, thick spiciness; roasty-ripe sweetness and yet a lash of mineral; fervid, muscular stuff. +
- ASU-33 **1990 Riesling Kögl Spätlese**
This 1990 Kögl and the 1990 Pfaffenberg below are library releases. Erich intends to continually offer wines in the second stage of their development. After these two wonderful 1990s are gone a 1995 is in the wings. Meanwhile, it's a gift of providence to have these wines to play with. Bear in mind they come from a very different cellar-regime than that which prevails now. Apart from being wonderful Riesling, this is a herald from another age, mealier and woodsier, smoothly textured and just off-dry. You don't feel either the 9.5 grams per liter of acidity (!) or whatever residual sugar may be present. You do feel this lovely flavor of mulled peach-cider coating your senses. The next wine is bigger, richer and more overt (and also discernibly sweeter) but this is more fundamentally Austrian.
- ASU-18 **1990 Riesling Pfaffenberg Spätlese**
Wasn't this the white-wine-of-the-year with 96 points somewhere or other this past year? I know I saw something somewheres. Good for them! Buy this, decant it, walk away from it for fifteen minutes, (Erich himself recommends an entire hour) and return to enjoy a great masterpiece. Or drink it immediately if you like stinky wines! This fine 1990 wants about five more years to reach its peak, but even now you see the low, deep yawn of tertiary flavor working its way out. It's grand, lavish, potentially symphonic, complex, minerally and elegant; it's a great vintage, and it's been stored perfectly, and we don't get many chances like this. So!



weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

Willi is one of my favorite people in the world. He is a favorite person of many people, to hear it told. One June I had him with me on a tour of the States, and he's such a trouper. There was a little corner café near our hotel in New York, and usually when I ambled over there for breakfast I'd see Willi sitting at an outside table, looking très continental, reading the *TIMES*. I'd get my tea and sit there with him and we'd pass sections of the paper back and forth like Oscar and Felix. Later in the year when I was back in New York at the same hotel, I walked to the café in the frosty morning, the tables all taken inside now, and I missed Willi.

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very *alert*. He

follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely *interest* - *ed* 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!

As if that weren't enough - after all, how often do you encounter a paragon? - Mr. Bründlmayer seems incapable of producing an ordinary wine. Apart from the stunning Veltliners and Rieslings you see here, he also makes Austria's best sparkling wine, he's entirely successful with his international-styled Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, and has made several compelling red wines over the past few vintages. This is just a class, class act.

Willi has a little homily stitched onto a wall hanging in his tasting room. It says: "Drink that which is clear. Love that which is rare." Indeed. Love and rarity and clarity seem to perfume the air at this winery.

When I first met Willi, he was one of a contingent of Kamptal-Donauland vintners who has arranged to present their wines to me in Krems. It was a convivial group



of colleagues, each tasting the other's wines, no secrets, no jockeying for position. Willi kept to himself for the most part. I'm hazy on the details, but I recall learning that the wine in my glass (not one of his) was unblended. I'd asked whether it was at all thinkable to adjust a low-acid 1992 with a judicious few liters of 1991. I turned to Willi, hoping to score a point for my broad-mindedness, and said I wouldn't object to such a practice if it made for a better wine. But he wasn't having it: "I actually have more respect for the vintner who refuses to alter his wines in any way," said he. "It shows someone who is determined that his wine be truthful and who will not compromise." Well, if I gotta be rebuked, that's the way to do it!

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

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

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

Willi and I have sometimes disagreed about his wines, typically the biggest ones. Some of the 1998s just plain got away. 1999 was wonderful, and 2000 may be as good if not better. I sat in his tasting room thinking "These are so delightful and fine and interesting and seductive . . . why can't I be like this?" All you Bründlmayer-lovers have a lot to look forward to!

Bründlmayer at a glance:

Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range.

Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 60 hectares) winery. Splendid 2000s come as no surprise.

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-82 **2000 Grüner Veltliner "Kamptaler Terrassen"**

This is from all loess. Fragrant, polished, sonorous, elegant, light GrüVe. But it's deceptive, for there's real material here.

ABY-83 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang**

ABY-83h **2000 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml**

Even for Bründlmayer this is just extremely lovable wine. All the heathery, vetiver aspects of GrüVe at its most charming, but still minerally, thick and juicy. The best vintage of Vogelsang I've tasted. +

ABY-84 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben**

This was too bottle sick to compose a detailed tasting note, but potentially I like this best of any vintage since the supernal 1997; it's rugged and meaty but it has great snap and varietal pepper. I'll taste it again in a few weeks so don't be surprised if I yammer at you about how I underrated it.

ABY-76 **2000 Riesling "Kamptaler Terrassen"**

This is gorgeous little wine. Full of playfulness, lively and snippy; mineral and sleek but not thin (12%) and beautifully dense with Riesling's basic innate fineness.

ABY-77 **2000 Riesling Steinmassel**

From the high wuthering slopes of schistous granite comes one of Austria's great "ordinary" Rieslings, showing the BASIS of their greatness; this might well be the best of them yet; it's even more minerally than usual, but all violets-irises-wisteria, sweet grasses and wild berries. Uncompromisingly dry and stony but it is so LONG, perfumey and jazzy. +

ABY-78 **2000 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**

ABY-78h **2000 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

A true Grand Cru and one of the greatest homes for Riesling on earth; It's an imposing hillside, all terraces, facing south, with a primary-rock soil based on permafrost. Its wines are invariably (even the Veltliners) exotic, papaya, lichi, ginger-vanilla, firm, dense and minerally. I have four guys with vines there and wish I had more; it's the kind of site you can never have too much of. Here's another thick mineral-pack of flavor, site-typical but emphasizing the hedgeflower-iris aspect and less the tropical-exotic (though this could change); it's subtle and pretty.

ABY-79 **2000 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, and O.K. man, I get it! For this is simply zowza Riesling; lemon-cream aromas, hedge-flower, nearly musky. It has a spellbinding palate, seething with spice and lavish with fruit and wonderful mineral grip on the back; it is sex-ay wine! +

- ABY-80 **2000 Gelber Muskateller Halbtrocken**
The maiden-voyage. It's thrilling and wonderful, alluring and shrieking with fun. Help me understand why we all don't sell more Muscat! Prove that we CAN. It's the one little weirdo-wine I really wish you'd kiss on the lips.
- ABY-81 **1998 Bründlmayer Sekt**
I spluged my final night in Austria and stayed in one of Vienna's grandest hotels. I felt like a Sultan. At breakfast there was this deranged buffet from which I gnarfed an unseemly amount of food. What to wash it down with? Ah! There were two fizzies, one was a Champagne you've heard of and which I probably shouldn't name (though it rhymes with "hurts" if you say it right) and Bründlmayer Sekt at its side. And there, boys 'n girls, I did prove in front of several witnesses that Willi's fizz is INDEED better than middling commercial Champagne and is, I'd argue, the best sparkling wine in the world that's not Champagne. Vintages differ; if you have any of the serene 1997 you have something that could pass for Chiquet (or Taittinger on a good night), while the 1998 we're about to ship is a street-riot of fruit that recalls Billiot or Geoffroy. You can prove your total hipness once and for all by getting behind this stuff.
- ABY-70h **1998 Grüner Veltliner Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**
Stunningly varietal, and with a lavish blast of green tea, lime-orchid fragrances and flavors of breath-taking clarity, almost absurdly focused and penetrating.
- ABY-71h **1998 Grüner Veltliner Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml**
Even more fervidly varietal, albeit thicker, with insane spice and verve despite its cream-honey richness. Your humble scribe was running out of emotive-o-gooers about now. Out of nowhere, perhaps the most spectacular sequence of dessert wines I've ever tasted that wasn't at Müller-Catoir! + + +



weingut schloss golbelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

Here's a happy story.

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

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

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

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

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

Michael and I reached a kind of nadir when I tasted his 1998s, but time has softened the quills and we understand each other now. He might think I exaggerate my affections for his current wines to compensate somehow,



but the opposite is true. Having established that our relationship can tolerate disagreement, I can be scrupulously candid now (within the bounds of normal tact, of course). After lovely 1999s these 2000s are, if anything, even better. They soar above the average run of quality - even at good estates, and the best of them are within easy view of the summit, the place where Austrian wine can climb no higher. Michael's natural expression when his face is in repose is inscrutable and melancholy, but I hope

- 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

he smiles when he reads this. He has much to be proud of.

Not only were the wines all kinda lovely, but there was a very darling baby and a glowing young wife with another wee one *en route*, and a great big dog (who seemed obtuse to the fact that the much smaller dog with whom he was attempting sexual congress was unwilling - possibly unable - to accommodate him) and a garden in giddy blossom - yes, it was horny and funky - and a little renovation in progress, and all in all it was a portrait of a young, loving family with all the pieces in place. Add great wines and stir, and be stirred.



Gobelsburg at a glance:

New life breathed into an old monastic estate, with Willi Bründlmayer as consultant. The wines are excellent VALUES while Moosbrugger consolidates his reputation. They won't always be so. Outstanding 1999s, but lots of people made great 1999s. The 2000s are soaring above their class, and Moosbrugger has ARRIVED.

how the wines taste:

Only five vintages having passed under Moosbrugger's regime, it's hard to discern any stylistic crystalization. At least I can't put words to any such impression. The wines are clean, clear and "modern," and they demonstrate the splendid land from which they come. The timbre leans more toward Hirsch than Bründlmayer, though the 2000s are cousins to Nigl. Michael does seem to have a genius for making very *pretty* fine-grained wines at the "low" end of his range - no small gift. Occasionally his bigger wines remind me of being pulled around by a large hyper dog; you wonder who's in charge of the proceedings. Power is untamed, and runs away. Most 2000s avoided this. And some of the wines offered below are some of the *finest* in *all* this offering.

- AZZ-24 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Allerheiligenstiftung**
I'll *give* a bottle to anyone who can correctly pronounce this word on first attempt. Well, maybe not, but I'll sure shake your hand good! It's winsome and lentilly, this little lovely; classic dimply GrüVe, charming and very long and classy.
- AZZ-33 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Gobelsburger Steinsetz**
All irises now, and lime, on a stony bed of mineral. As always this is virtually perfect entry-level GrüVe, multi-dimensional and glossy, with wonderful spice. The best vintage yet.
- AZZ-34 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Renner**
It's essentially similar to the Steinsetz, only bigger. Integrated and juicy, forthright big-scale Veltliner, a great example of what I mean by "flowering fields."
- AZZ-35 **2000 Riesling vom Urgestein**
From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it's really complexity on a scale of its own. Abstract from body or alcohol, there's a symposium of flavor happening here, the tropical-mineral Heligenstein, the berry-mineral Gaisberg. *No wine in this offering comes remotely CLOSE to offering such value.* +
- AZZ-36 **2000 Riesling Kammerner Gaisberg**
Michi's best Riesling yet and a masterpiece by any standards. Ravishing nose; it's shimmering, vivid, racy palate just phosphorescent with fruit. There is sensational depth and penetration and a sizzling interplay of flowers, mineral and sweet fruit.
- AZZ-37 **2000 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**
Has a sleekness, clarity and polish that wouldn't be out of place at Nigl. We're all sitting here stunned. An exegesis of mineral with an ethereal cloud of fruit perfuming your senses with an itchy, insane prettiness. Literally incredible penetration. + +
- AZZ-30 **1999 Zweigelt**
"Really? You want to taste my reds?" Michi was truly perplexed now. Even more so when I went and selected two of them. But this is really everything I want Austrian red to be: sappy and deep, soft but with murmuring depths. We tasted this a touch too warm, by the way; at proper temp the wine will feel firmer and livelier.
- AZZ-31 **1998 Pinot Noir**
A yielding, gentle, varietally true Pinot Noir; very pretty nose, pure lovely fruit. Say village Volnay in an uncomplicated vintage. Simply TASTY.
- AZZ-32h **1999 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml**
Three-ring circus of flavor here, varietally true, almost bizarrely vivid; it's full-tilt crazy-ass delicious and unlike anything you *ever* tasted. Incandescent spice, a body both firm and luscious, and endless length. SOMMELIERES: CHECK THIS OUT! +

weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

The good news: **outstanding vintage, among the best in the history of the estate, the third fine vintage in a row.** The bad news: Aw, *crap!* There is very little wine.

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

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

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

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

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



I liked him instantly and instinctively. He's informal, open, transparent. He's quite candid about his wines, thoughtful too. Even his tasting room is clear, a modern, white room under a tempered-glass sunroof. This is another father-son winery, with an interesting spin on the usual genera-

tional clashes. The younger Hiedler says "in 1981 my father gave me these alternatives: 'either you finish your studies and I continue to determine how our wines will be made, or you take full responsibility immediately.'" Looks like our hero made the right decision! The first

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

thing he did was to get the wines out of cask sooner. Not that he's reflexively anti-cask: "You can make good wines in wood if you work absolutely clean," but he wants the wines in bottle earlier. He is, saints be praised, resolutely anti-barrique. He feels the wines of Kamptal-Donauland need a full year to begin to show, perhaps even longer for his wines. Wachau wines show earlier. This is especially true of the loess-grown Veltliners, which have less minerality but a bigger belly of fruit.

All viticulture is "ecological" (natural fertilizers, no herbicides or pesticides, composting with the skins, but "we are not organic" says Ludwig, as fungicides are used). All harvesting is selective, with two or three passes through the vineyards, exclusively by hand. All pressing is pneumatic. All fermentation is temperature-controlled. The wines are then matured in stainless steel or acacia casks, according to their needs. Hiedler's also unusual in his use of a different yeast culture for each grape variety, the first time I have seen this.

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

Hiedler at a glance:

Don't like squeaky-clean, reductive wines? Step right up! Amazing values for chewy, ample wines with old-fashioned meat on 'em. They are among the highlights in 2000.

- AHL-61 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel**
As always the issue at this estate is which of the uniformly excellent wines to leave out. I do try not to clutter things. This Veltliner is especially taut and salty, curranty and rhubarby; it has firm stony concentration with a plush padding of mineral-soaked fruit; really glaring, high-relief flavors.
- AHL-62 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Thal**
This is always a terroir creature, old vines (nearly 70 years old by now) on a complex Urgestein, but this vintage is especially bewitching, with lovely fragrance and a wolfishly satisfying flavor that gets you licking your chops. (I wonder if Egyptian wines make you lick your cheops . . .) There is really a tremendous aroma: birch-smoke, miitake; a monstrously juicy palate that is long and penetrating; and a peppery Thai-basil finish.
- AHL-53 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Thal-Novemberlese**
"We actually picked this the end of October, but don't tell anybody," whispered Ludwig. I won't, I swear! The past several years Ludwig's been picking the botrytis fruit first and leaving the clean fruit hanging for a later gathering, and this amazing GrüVe is faithful to the *spirit* of that idea, if not to the actual calendar. There's higher-toned fruit, wet straw, mussels, leeks or ramps; fits the profile of the last few vintages, with brighter fruit, more grip and more overt complexity: mirabelle and grass and vetiver and mandarin; a leering juicy grin of finish. +
- AHL-55 **2000 Riesling Loiser Berg**
Slate par excellence. This is frisky, limey and minerally, with a hint of sharpness on the finish (despite its 5.9 grams of residual sugar) but it is so focused, open and snappy. Fresh, breezy Riesling.
- AHL-56 **Riesling Steinhaus**
Ludwig's continually acquiring more Riesling vineyards, although he himself isn't a "Riesling man" (he likes Pinot Blanc most of all), thus it's remarkable to see his sure hand with them. This is the first vintage from a new acquisition, pure gneiss soil; he spoke of "gooseberry, lime, mint, totally mineral" and I'd add lilac and tarragon; it's a juicy-mineral twig of Riesling with a firm stony finish. *WE HAVE VERY LITTLE OF IT.*
- AHL-57 **2000 Riesling Gaisberg**
Utterly Grand Cru flavors, with ringent, hair-trigger tension, nervy, racy and minerally; splendidly compact and spicy. This Great vineyard comes closest to the style of Nahe wines than any other in Austria. And I have THREE great producers in it. Sometimes it's good to be me. ONLY A WEENSY BIT AVAILABLE. +
- AHL-58 **2000 Riesling Heiligenstein**
This has it all; lavish exotic fruit (guava, corn, quince) and grandiose mineral, fabulously complex and resonant, echoey and long. One of the greatest Rieslings of the 2000 vintage. *WE HAVE SO LITTLE I COULD SCREAM.* +
- AHL-54 **2000 Weissburgunder Maximum**
Consistently one of Austria's great wines, and consistently one of the world's great (if not greatest) Pinot Blancs. In the sunny 2000 vintage it threatened to run away, but it has less heat than the smaller Pinot Blanc from Spiegel even *with* more alcohol. Crab cakes, corn fritters, pimento, fennel frond; huge but not ungainly; those fond of big Harley-Davidson wines will like this even more than I do; chain-saw power and cut. 100% malo, by the way, and from 46 year-old vines.
- AHL-60h **1998 Chardonnay Trockenbeerenauslese, 8/375ml**
What do you say about a wine like this? It tastes like roasted dates. It's probably riddled with VA or other techno-oogies, but how on earth do you deny that grandiose, beautiful fruit? It's as concentrated as heather-honey. It's a show-stopper, both absurdly concentrated and somehow also *light*, transparent.

weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

As hysterically as I sometimes let myself write, I try not to make unsustainable claims, and as passionately as I often feel about wine, I try to rein it in so you will feel safe taking me seriously. So when I find myself faced with a situation such as this one I have to weigh my words. An estate doesn't become "great" on the strength of six vintages. Or does it?

Certainly *Gault-Milau* had no hesitations in placing Hirsch in the top-rung of growers two years ago, alongside all the Grand Pooh-bahs of the Wachau. I might not go quite that far (then again . . .), but I'm glad someone else did!

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

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

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



just a few years; it's too new-worldish, too TV-attention-span. Still, there are the wines. What's a person of conscience to do?

I asked Johannes Hirsch if he thought he had a watershed vintage or breakthrough year, but he said no, just a steady climb up with small refinements and incremental improvements all the time. Only in a German-speaking country could such an estate have gone so long undetected by American importers greedy for stellar agencies. I'll happily take the good fortune, but it's kind of pathetic!

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

There isn't all that much recondite wine data to tell you. They're 20 hectares in size, mid-sized for the Kamptal. 60% Veltliner, 35% Riesling. The rest goes under the heading of "other" (the proportion of which is being steadily reduced in favor of the two classics). The wines are whole-cluster pressed with all that implies. There's plenty of land in great vineyards. Prices are below-market value for such sterling quality. Johannes Hirsch himself is a *hunk*, speaks great English, knows lots of good jokes and how to tell them, and says he'll come over here whenever we need him. He gives us enough wine. What more can one ask from a supplier? Do you think he'd buy me a car?



Hirsch at a glance:

Zoom! Went this agency, from out-of-nowhere to the top. Stellar-quality wines from a star-quality vintner at reasonable prices. AND AVAILABILITY IS GOOD. Fantastic 2000s constitute the sixth consecutive “1st Growth” vintage from this emerging superstar.

how the wines taste:

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

AWH-18 2000 Grüner Veltliner Kammern

Smells adorable, tastes adorable, all nectarine and cox-orange apples; cool, lissome and pretty.

AWH-19 2000 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Heiligenstein

AWH-19h 2000 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml

Unusually salty and minerally. Sensational aroma; medium weight but a crazed back-drop of complexity of mineral, yet withal discreet rather than ostentatious. More fruit will emerge (it’s just bottled) but even if it doesn’t the wine is classy and courteous.

AWH-20 2000 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Lamm Alte Reben

Lamm is in fact the lower slopes of Heiligenstein but the soil begins to change; “it starts to show loess,” says Johannes, and the site is a notorious heat-trap. This splendid Veltliner has the Lamm-signature aroma (rosemary, soursop, and yes, lamb) and a stern, mouth-filling palate; needlepoint pepper and almost a note of pinesap, certainly mizuna-arugula; fiery but not hot; Lamm has been known to overstate its case, but not this time! +

AWH-21 2000 Riesling Zöbing

You do know, don’t you, what wonderful value you get from little-wines-from-great-vintners? This is indeed light but with more sheer substance than dozens, hundreds, bazillions of big dumb brute-wines. It’s dimpled and pliant on the surface but has good mineral grip below, and a longer finish than many 2000s (and nearly all GrüVes).

AWH-22 2000 Riesling Gaisberg Alte Reben

Well *this* is pretty! Better than the 1999, with a refined interplay of spice, flower and mineral behind a lavish dance of tangy fruit - and *quite* some finish. Grand Cru style, capacious, seductive and penetrating. A few drops of framboise in the tank, maybe? Comes very close to the supernal 1998. Man, *THINK* of the possibility for a horizontal tasting of this great site from Hirsch, Gobelsburg and Hiedler. You could hardly get a more exciting trio of Rieslings - of *wines*. + +

AWH-23 2000 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein

More body and more obvious profundity. Complex and lingering and less puppy-playful than Gaisberg; you could almost say it’s more conscious of its own greatness. Remarkable minerality in the foreground, almost Wachau density but with that amazing fruit shimmering over the top. +

AWH-10 1998 Riesling Gaisberg Alte Reben

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

wachau

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

The restaurant's wine list is an Aladdin's cave of treasures from the Wachau and its neighbors. And yet, as I perused it night after night I found myself more drawn to the wines of the Kamptal and Kremstal, which simply offered more quality-per-Dollar than the magnificently unreasonable Wachau.

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

its actual worth, inasmuch as other regions also produce supernal wines, possibly even **more** of them.

The greatest Wachau wine will distinguish itself from its neighbors in the Kamptal or Kremstal the way great Côte du Nuits does from Côte du Beaune; all things being equal, Wachau wines are simply weightier. The best of them, though, are distressingly scarce, and prone to be pricey, especially at lesser levels of ripeness. The great wines are worth whatever one can afford to pay for them, but the smaller wines often strike me as dubious values. And one must be quite selective. There's a large

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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. The lighter wines tend to be better elsewhere, but the world is chasing Wachau wines like a greyhound running after a slab of bacon. It's the result of the great froth of hysteria

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

The Wachau will always draw tourists because it's amazingly beautiful. The Danube cuts a gorge through a range of hills that can truly be called rugged. Vineyards are everywhere the sun shines, along valley floors on loamy sand soils, gradually sloping upward over loess deposits and finally climbing steep horizontal terraces of

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

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 col-

lision of two climactic phenomena; the Pannonian current from the east with the continental current from the west, all of which make for extreme variations of day and nighttime temperatures. The autumns, particularly, are clement and usually dry, enabling growers to harvest quite late with little fear of botrytis. Early November picking is routine. (Though one sly grower said: "There's nothing romantic about picking in November.") The western section of the regions is said to give its finest wines, due in part to cooler nighttime temperatures as the breezes blow down from the hills. The wines become fuller-bodied and more powerful as you move downstream, reaching their utmost force and expression in Loiben and Dürnstein.



The Danube

Most of the growers in the Wachau have banded together to form the VINEA WACHAU growing association. This began in 1983, before you-know-what. I tend, as you know, to be rather curmudgeonly on the subject of growers' associations, but there's some good sense at work in this one. You're going to have to take that on faith, though, because you will be asked to LEARN SOME TERMS.

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

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

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

Finally comes the most fanciful name of all, for the best class of wine. Get to know **Smaragd**! Put a little LIZARD in your life! For that's what it means; "Smaragd" is the German word for "emerald," referring to the brilliant colors of the lizards who like to sun themselves beneath the vines on a summer's day. I actually think there's some poetry here; lizard, sunlight, hot skin, basking, ripe grapes, big wine, you get the picture. Smaragd 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.

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!

weingut josef jamek

wachau • joching

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

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

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

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

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

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



Each year I try to dine in Jamek's lovely restaurant in Joching, as there are too few places left in our homogenized world where you can find elegant, deft preparations of regionally integral dishes. You know you are **somewhere** in particular and not anywhere else. Sad how rare and precious that experience has become.

Indeed one has to understand the restaurant as a kind of compass guiding the style of the wines. It seems

- 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

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*.

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

I sat in the restaurant one early Friday evening talking with Mr. Altmann (Jamek's son-in-law) and uneasily watching the place fill up. Tasted around fifteen wines and had the chinwag about cellar stuff. Altmann's is a curious mixture of modern and traditional approaches - all shiny new equipment in the press-house, and nothing but casks in the cellar. They ferment in stainless steel and

can control temperature if necessary. No cultured yeasts, minimal SO₂. The wines are not fined. I raised the question of malolactic fermentation as I'd heard it was standard practice at Jamek - and might be responsible for a certain old-fashioned touch the wines were reputed to possess. NO, it is by no means regular, came the reply; very seldom for white wines, only in unusually unripe vintages, yes we do it on occasion for red wines. But then why? Everyone seems to believe you do it, I said. No. We don't. And truth to tell, among the many vintages I've tasted I have never specifically identified that special malo butteriness in any of Jamek's wines and I don't know how the question assumed the status of an urban myth.

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

You might notice a relative paucity of GrüVe in the

offering below. This was a winery where the 2000 Rieslings were markedly a class above. Altmann professed his affection for the vintage's Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay, and they were mouth-filling and complete. But nothing shimmies like Riesling. I begin to feel Hans Altmann (who's just the world's nicest guy) likes his wines on the meaty side. Riesling don't wanna go there.

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

2000 is successful here. The Rieslings have splendor and authority. A potentially great Veltliner was in the throes of bottle-shock.

Jamek at a glance:

Renaissance in quality from this most venerable of Wachau estates. Remarkable array of Grand Cru sites, and superb Riesling success in the 2000 vintage.

how the wines taste:

Jamek's wines appeal to drinkers who like wine-y flavors. They are very grown-up kinds of wines, without the 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-31 **2000 Riesling Federspiel Jochinger Pichl**
As always, sleek, crinkly, minerally, the fundamental stony skeleton of Riesling as clear as it can be. Cool, ultra-violet. No hedonists need apply. *Epicures*, yes, thrill-seekers keep out.
- AJJ-32 **2000 Muskateller Federspiel Ried Kollnitz**
Muscat is, to me, self-evidently desirable if not outright irresistible. I can't imagine why more people don't drink it; it's so pretty and charming. This one's more like a highly aromatic Riesling, with its cool mineral backdrop and fine length. It was much the best of all the Federspiels.
- AJJ-33 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Ried Achleiten**
Grand Cru time. This was encased in cement from recent bottling, but real Wachau roasted-veggies and secret sweetness are here; horizontal structure, mid-palate mineral depth, and an unusual (for 2000) lingering, fine finish. Almost certainly better than this note indicates.
- AJJ-27 **2000 Riesling Smaragd Dürnsteiner Freiheit**
As always, this shows the golden summer-fruits, mimosa, oleander, and a strong pulverized mineral backdrop. It's capacious and impressive with 2000 sterness on the finish. It is the juiciest of the three big Rieslings.
- AJJ-28 **2000 Riesling Smaragd Ried Zwerithaler**
The Freiheit could almost be Alsacien, but this could ONLY be Austrian; *what* spicy terroir here, so snappy, high-strung and long, with an endless salty finish a la Nigl, like drinking a powder of irises and minerals. +
- AJJ-29 **2000 Riesling Smaragd Ried Klaus**
This ought to be as famous as Zind-Humbrecht's Rangen or Brand. It's a terroir-wine where the variety is nearly irrelevant; it smells like a pork loin roasting with parsnips and Jerusalem artichokes; it's firm but serious, less explicitly but more profoundly mineral than the Zwerithaler; wonderful complexity and stature. +
- AJJ-30h **2000 Muskateller Eiswein, 12/375ml**
Picked December 23rd at 165 degrees Oechsle (TBA-quality) with *15 grams per liter of acidity*, but this is ravishing and gorgeous rather than spiky or steely; sensationally clarity and beauty, all over-the-top floweriness and no cattiness at all. Absolutely fabulous. +

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

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

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

Christine Saahs lives according to the bio-dynamic calendar (which may be why she never has a bad hair day), and the day of my recent visit was pronounced a "neutral" day for tasting. If I'd tasted these 2000s on a "good" day I doubt if I'd have been able to stop yelling;



they are that good. They are also oddly *moving* wines, with a tenderness unusual for this sometimes brusque vintage. They often made me think of Nigl in their spicy fruit, mineral-submersion and almost seething transparency.

Visits here can begin to take on almost mystical dimensions, and the Saahs are an inspiring couple, yet the wines are, or can be,

mortally imperfect. "Ah, Nikolaihof," one experienced Austrian taster and writer told me, "sometimes they miss the target but when they hit, they are really incomparable, perhaps the very greatest wines in Austria."

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity's sake I'll call it just

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

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

"It isn't the integrated regime in itself we find unsatisfactory," they told me this 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, and 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 fungicides. I asked Mr. Saahs if there was anything he could say to reassure these well-meaning growers to take the plunge. He pondered the question. "Actually, it's very difficult!" he finally answered. "There is a risk you'll lose some of your crop. You have to work many times harder in training the vines and cutting leaves away to get the air moving through the grapes." In other words, he can't honestly tell a nearly-organic grower "go on, it's easier than you think," because in fact it's just as hard as he thinks.

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

Everything about Nikolaihof is determinedly PERMANENT (when you say "old fashioned" you create images of something either anachronistic or cute, and Nikolaihof is neither). You might dine under an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in the courtyard, so dense it will keep you dry if it's raining. You will certainly hear the birdsong of the three families of hedge thrushes who live in the leafy place. You might taste in a twelfth century chapel that the Saahs have recently restored. You will certainly eat nothing but delicious food from ingredients produced organically and procured from suppliers known personally by the Saahs from a *local* network of farmers. A seasonal menu is a matter of course.

"I've never 'styled' a wine," says Herr Saahs. Indeed, until a few years ago the grapes were still pressed in an antique wooden press; the one concession to modernity is a pneumatic press. Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of forty-five years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the **secrets**, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: "The secret of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology - which in any case barely exists - as in the special care of the vines." He quotes Herr Saahs as saying, "You shouldn't shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself." Fermentation (natural yeasts,) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time - up to 4 months - on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that *wine is a foodstuff*. "I like to **drink** wine, not study it," he says. "We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don't wait for overripeness." His wife inserts; "There's nothing charming about harvesting in November."

Conservative wines, one might say. Yet such conservatism is becoming trendy these days - at least until its actual costs are reckoned with. Among these costs is

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 2000s, the last wines I tasted, are improbable and glorious. Even the little Steinfeder we drank while

the TV crew filmed us was a kind of ur-Veltliner. I felt the earth breathing. When we were done working we gathered at a long table in the courtyard and waited for supper, under the enormous linden. Looking up through the mosaic-canopy of fluttering young green, I felt as if I were standing inside a copper wire with electricity buzzing through it. I could still taste the final wine. I was softened by the beauty of these 2000s. Sun was illumining the topmost leaves. Birds were fussing and singing and remonstrating. Food was on the way.

Nikolaihof at a glance:

Nikolaihof would shake their heads in perplexity at the very idea of “at a glance.” Organic, bio-dynamic winery whose wines express the earth, the whole earth and nothing but the earth. Spectacular 2000s, possibly the winery of the vintage in this offering.

how the wines taste:

Nikolaihof's wines are often incredibly thick, dense and uncompromisingly stony in character. I don't know if the curvaceous charm of the vintages 1999-2000 signal a change of style or if it's just those vintages. Do you know the Clos de Goisses Champagne from Philipponat? Not the most charming Champagne on the market, but surely among the most PROFOUND, and capable of enthralling development with long aging. Same here; JUST GIVE THESE WINES TIME. They'll do everything for you that great wine can do, if you are patient. Early on you'll easily see their sheer *intensity*, but specific details can be lost in a monolith of concentration, an opacity that can be perplexing if you don't know what's ahead. Thus detailed tasting notes are difficult if you feel the need to delineate skeins of flavors with sequences of associations. Here you just stand on the prow and feel the mighty wind and look at the immense and swollen waves of vinosity and hope you aren't swept overboard. And hope you are. . .

- ANK-25 **2000 Grüner Veltliner “Hefeabzug”**
Literally “sur lie,” a light Veltliner Saahs produces each year along Muscadet lines. This one's almost as good as the 1999, which was perhaps the best one ever. Another fluffy-leesy mass of keen, dry Veltliner, quite chewy, even phenolic. More streamlined shape than the 1999 but even denser in composition.
- ANK-27 **2000 Riesling “Vom Stein” Federspiel**
Really remarkable, the most complex and fruit-driven of any Saahs Federspiel I can recall; spicy and precise, but lavish (a few grams of sweetness does no harm!); tilleul, wisteria, lime, fennel-seed; certainly the best I've tasted. +
- ANK-26 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd**
Super! Nettles, caraway, boxwood; palate has the virtues of great Piri from Nigl with even more viscera, so racy and vigorous and spicy; a harpoon-shot of GrüVe action, boys! My companions liked it even more than I did, and I was frothin'. +
- ANK-28 **2000 Riesling Im Weingebirge Smaragd**
Alas we must wait a year to see what became of the 2000 Steiner Hund. “It's an Auslese, wait a while,” is all I could wrest from Saahs'. But THIS baby could well be the wine of the vintage. Again that refined purple lilac-y spice, recalling Nigl, but the quality of FRUIT here is just hypnotizing and its length is greater than ANY show-offy blockbuster. As polished as they can ever be, a thrall of interplay you've never tasted so clearly; a great triumph of the vintage. + + +
- ANK-20 **1999 Riesling Im Weingebirge “Jungferneinwein”**
It means the virgin-crop from a new vineyard, usually very small and concentrated. What did I think the analysis was? I tasted it and bulls-eyed it. It is PERFECT Riesling, whatever it is. It has 27 grams per liter of residual sugar and you never tasted anything so piquant and pretty as this: iris and white lilac and beets and rhubarb. It clamps on to every cell on the palate as if it had thrown a grappling hook; lovely, kinetic dialectic of fruit and mineral, and an echo of strawberry. Yum yum yum. +

dinstlgut loiben

wachau • oberloiben

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

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

It's a teeny co-op as co-ops go, around 230 hectares farmed by 400 small growers. Objective observers have become aware of the fine upward spring of quality here the past several years. 1997 was a real jaw-dropper in many instances. 1998 has the botrytis-thing at the top levels but the little wines are even better than the little 1997s. 1999 was just crazed, over the top. And 2000 . . . is good and sometimes very good.

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

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



Loiben at a glance:

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

AAC-47 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Schütt**

This is always the forthright, chunky one; you get a lot of juicy Veltliner *gras* for not much money; the 2000 is glossy, mineral, with quite a bit of mushroomy *umami*, less pointed thrust than the 1999 but you haveta luv that *juice*.

AAC-46 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg**

Quite polished now, an elegant gentleman with superb coordination of fruit and mineral, stylish and very long with lovely complexity; a dear and affectionate wine.

AAC-42 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Spätlese**

Sensationally lively, robust nose, morels sautéing in bacon fat, red beets; the palate confirms and then some! Long, precise and succulent, splendidly varietal; if your restaurant does a beet and chèvre salad, I will personally prosecute you if you don't pour this. +

AAC-44 **1999 Zweigelt Reserve**

Yummy-plummy, an easy wine that's commercial without pandering, but long, velvety . . . good Crianza Rioja from a ripe year, with less oak . . . actually not much like Rioja at all! More like Côte Chalonnaise Pinot Noir. Fumble around enough, I get it eventually. Story of my sex-life, come to think of it. . .

AAC-48 **2000 Riesling Loibenberg**

Again classy and focused, a calm logical Riesling with sneaky length. Especially expressive nose once it opens; violet, guava; good grip, even a touch phenolic; complex, ethereal finish. +

AAC-37 **1999 Riesling Loibenberg "L"**

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

AAC-38 **1999 Chardonnay Loibenberg "L"**

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

AAC-45h **1999 Riesling Loibenberg Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml**

There's almost none to be had, and it's an amazing syrup in any case, but you've never seen such transparency allied to such richness and the quality of clean raisiny fruit is arresting.



leo alzinger

wachau • unterloiben

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

I grinned in recognition. That's Alzinger. Of all the overlords of the almighty Wachau (with whom he indisputably belongs), Alzinger *must* be the sweetest and humblest guy. His wines, too, are loving and kindly, more like Knoll or Prager than like Hirtzberger or Pichler, but possibly the

silkiest wines in all the Wachau. Slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, I'm getting more of them to share with you.

This is how it works in the Wachau. The first year I was granted an allotment of twenty cases of the least of three Veltliner Smaragds. I duly (and gratefully) accepted them. Last year a second Veltliner was made available, along with a few cases of Riesling Smaragd. Last year, a generous one, I received four Veltliners, two Federspiel and two Smaragd, and a Riesling Smaragd, much more wine but still not much wine. This year the floodgates are open and there's a whopping 200 cases for the lower 48 plus Hawaii. (If you're fortunate enough to live in California you'll even maybe glimpse the two great Smaragds of the 2000 vintage.) 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!

His is a retiring, sweet and gentle personality; which may be why he gets fewer wreaths and garlands, but those In The Know *Know*, and Alzinger's best are just as

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

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

- 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

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 2000s 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-10 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Frauenweingarten Federspiel**
The vineyard is on loamy alluvial soil near the Danube; this was the best *smelling* GrüVe I'd seen yet. It has classic lilac, rhubarb and wisteria; it has lilt and lift and quite a whomp of body for a Federspiel, with unusual length for a 2000; a wine of finesse and substance.
- ALA-11 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel**
Beany, typical, herbal-earthly finish, like hen-of-the-woods mushrooms. Stylish, a little soft, but finishes well.
- ALA-12 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Weingärten Smaragd**
Clearly riper, currant and rhubarb, and this is stunted from bottling, so that a small bitter note shows, but the fragrance and finish are A-O.K. When I've re-tasted these six months later I'm always abashed to have so underrated them.
- ALA-13 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd**
Massive fragrance of oleander. This is impressive wine that threatens to overreach but just barely doesn't. Molten ore and spice in a voluptuous body. Fine focus and ripeness. +
- ALA-14 **2000 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd**
(this is exclusively for sale in CA) Resonant interplay of mineral and fruit with fabulous length. One of the stars of the Veltliner vintage. +
- ALA-16 **2000 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd**
Quintessentially site-specific nose (violets, mineral, papaya), and a magnificent, grandiose palate, charged by powerful mineral into which threads of fruit are woven. Immense echo-ey depth. A plain-and-simple Great Wine. Primordial hedge-flower and mineral finish. +
- ALA-17 **2000 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd**
(this is exclusively for sale in CA); mysterious nose, banana and mineral. The palate is just otherworldly - *what* complexity and what pointed gorgeous mineral, nearly salty, with amazing integration. One of the world's great Rieslings; grinning with secret sweetness. + +

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. My erstwhile brother-in-arms Mark Hutchens was more of an aficionado than I, and I hoped he'd be happy to lead the charge. He was.

As we repeated the news to various growers they were all agape with disbelief. "You got

Reisetbauer?" they all cried. "How'd you do that? You got the best." I'm going to quote liberally from an article in the Austrian magazine *A La carte*, in which Reisetbauer gave a detailed interview to Michael Pronay, the greatest narcoleptic journalist I've ever known. "With Reisetbauer we see a unity of man and occupation such as one seldom sees. The friendly bull lives schnapps, speaks schnapps, makes schnapps and loves it like nothing else."

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

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

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

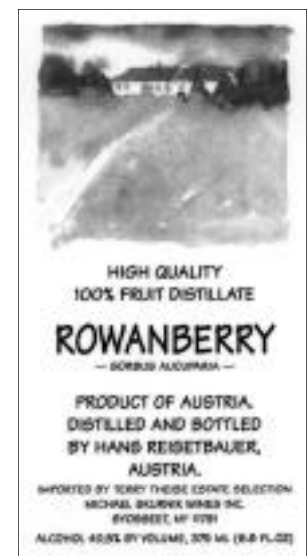
It's a whole sub-culture, just like wine. The same

fanaticism, the same geekiness, the same obsessiveness over absolute quality. Reisetbauer wants to start vintage-dating his eau de vie because "the fruit quality is far from identical from year to year." I seem to have a tiger by the tail here!

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

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

XHR-002	Williams Pear
XHR-003	Apricot
XHR-004	Cherry
XHR-006	Rowanberry



THE END

Or is it . . . ?

THE HORNY FUNK BROTHERS:

Fact or Fiction?

The answering-machine light was blinking. The voice was Johannes Hirsch's. "Are you sitting down?" his message began. "You better be. Because . . . (dramatic pause) I am holding in my hands . . . a newspaper . . . containing an actual picture of the **HORNY FUNK BROTHERS!** Shall I send it to you?"

Hmmmm. I think not. I don't want all of my seamy fantasies suddenly evaporated by the stiff wind of reality! Who needs that? No, I prefer to have my perfect vision of the Good Brothers. I lull myself to sleep thinking of album titles ("Rub Some Spit On It!"), song titles and names of the band's members.

Something like:

"The HORNY FUNK BROTHERS consist of: on drums, Willy Nilly! On bass, Mr. Rim Felcher! On lead vocals, the Sultan of Slop, Mr. Kareem Majeens!! On keyboards, Rampant Johnson! And the horny horn section: Dudley Plunger and Claude Meatus! The Bros. will be featuring tunes from their premier release "Pickle In My Diapers," including . . .

"Spank Yo Spam"

"Humping In The Way She Moves"

"Ain't Too Choosy"

"Made Me A Big Ol' Mess"

"Maybe A Labia"

"Anything That Moves"

"A Man, His Goat, And A Saturday Night"

