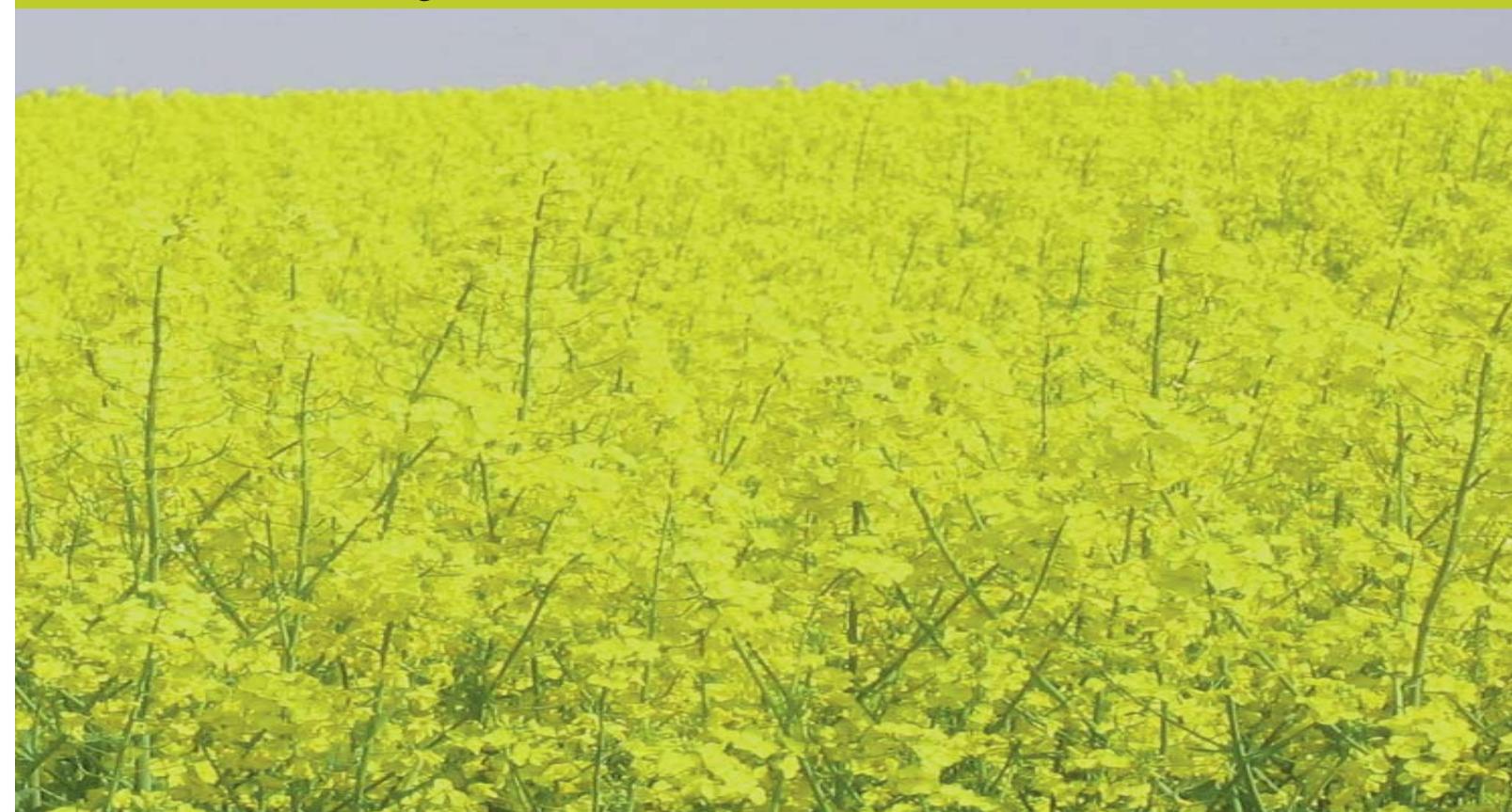


AUSTRIA 2007

terry theise estate selections



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

- P.D. Ouspensky

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

- Michael Ventura

Front Cover Photo: *A field of rapeseed in full May bloom.*

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Introduction

I think I'll be perverse (*me?*) and start at the end. The end was me taking a day off and hanging out with Peter Schleimer and his two boys. Peter's been my guy-on-the-ground in Austria since the beginning. He was freelancing for the Austrian Wine Marketing Board and they sent him to assist me when I was putting the portfolio together. I'd never met the guy, so I sat in the lobby of my hotel and watched a range of guys come in who could have been Peter, and hoped most of them weren't, because they looked like no fun at all. Then this weird lanky guy shows up with a nubby scraggle of beard and a wild-eyed look like an irritated terrapin and I'm thinking *can't possibly be him* and of course it was. To my unending relief and delight, that day and every day since.

Well, we've all gotten older and now Peter has these two amazing little guys and I like being with them, and with *him* with them. So we spent some time at the playground and then took the boys to dinner, where we met their mom. We went to a very Zen place in the Wienerwald, which is a range of impossibly lyric green hills just west of the city. The place is called Hanner, and has rooms and two restaurants, a fancy 2-Michelin-stars one and a simpler one where the kids could get schnitzels and frites and where they could romp within reason and no one would be incommoded – except me since I was envious of those yummy looking schnitzels.

Peter's S.O. Andrea had passed a big exam that day, and it was my final night in Austria and we decided to order off the fancy menu. Drank Selosse Substance; that kind of night. Stayed at the table a little too long, but the kids were remarkably indulgent. Finally we piled back in the car to drive home.

It was a cold night with an imposing full moon that illuminated the hilltops, and Peter was playing Tom Waits singing "Little Man" and the kids were asleep in their child seats back there in the dark car. It was one of those moments of perfection that steals up on you and which you can neither expect nor contrive. Waits' diesel-grumble voice and the unearthly moonlight over the silvery hills, and our own little men all worn out after their busy day; I feared almost to breathe lest I break the spell.

The next morning came the news of a killer frost in the Kamptal, Wagram and Weinviertel regions, temps as low as 27° F on vines dangerously early in what had been a warm Spring. And so it is; one man's beauty is another man's danger.

I got home to a message from a Washington Post writer who wanted to talk to me for a piece she was doing on Georgian wines. I seem to have become the go-

to guy for quotes on swimming against the current and seeding the unknown. When this thing started back in 1994, what little anyone knew of Austrian wine was wrong, and there was a whole new climate of excellence and the story wasn't told. "How is it done?" I was asked. And I hemmed and hedged and tried to cook up a quotable quote, but all that came out was *You just keep whacking your head against the wall until the wall starts to yield*. "Why would you do that?" she wanted to know. (Doesn't it, like, *hurt?*)

The answer is: *conviction*.

Because I am categorically certain there is no country on earth making *better* dry white wines than the best of these. Yet as much we we're selling – and we're selling a lot – I get the sense it hasn't really stuck yet. Yes we had our Moment in the late '90s when Austrian wine in general (and Grüner Veltliner in particular) was "trendy" among young sommeliers, and to an extent we were off and running. Then the shine wore off the trend and even

younger somms went on to even more *recherché* wines, relegating Austria to the ranks of the merely modish. This is a crime against the cosmos.

I saw Austria through different eyes this year, as I had Robin (Riddell) and Michele (Parent) with me, our new regional agents. They'd been with me to Germany and Champagne, but Austria is different. One feels more at-ease in Austria; the culture is

more explicitly youthful, nearly everyone speaks English, and at this point the wine community has discernibly settled in. After many years of experimentation and testing out, it has assumed its true form. Austria is established now. She is a Player. But what does she bring to the game?

The Austrian wine scene is no longer mint, it doesn't have that new-car smell. It's settling in to what it actually is, showing its lines and creases, and what it will sustain.

Also changing is that restless spirit of envelope-pushing, and this is a very good thing. It might be fun to gun the motor and watch the rpms climb but sooner or later you have to cruise and then you want the motor to hum, not yell. The community of Austrian vintners seems to be saying *We are no longer arriving; we are HERE*. It remains a youthful wine culture, and for every grower entering his thirties there's another 20-something coming along. All the Wachau "names" have grown-up sons working at their sides. A new wave of growers is invigorating the Weinviertel. In contrast to Germany, where many things still seem (charmingly, delightfully) *removed*, Austria feels more connected to the internation-



al wine-fraternity. You drive through a town that's like an architectural diamond of the 17th century and arrive at a 21st-century tasting room; you meet a man who can tell you jokes in English and who just came from a tasting of twenty-three vintages of Grange-Hermitage. But when you taste his wines, you taste something quite specific and seemingly eternal. It's a little dysphasic.

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

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

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

- Competitive, snappy, vigorous dry whites at the low end of the market.
- The best values on earth for monumentally structured dry white wines.
- World-class dry Rieslings redolent of soil, unmanipulated, tasting entirely *at home*, and presenting flavors more curly, baroque and 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 . . . *Keine angst!*
- Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.
- The market's preference — abetted by lazy wine merchants and middlebrow journalists — for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can *engage*.
- The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes



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

You don't have to be any kind of hot-shot wine "intellectual" to get at these wines, to sell them, to enjoy them yourself. You just have to be *curious*, you have to want to know what they're like. The complacent, on the other hand, prefer wines that sell themselves (or which are sold by the wine press) and see any new category with wariness. Customers rise to the level you set for them. Your conviction creates their curiosity, and most of them will love these wines if **they're encouraged** to approach them. But if you don't care, or if you are opposed to anything that threatens to increase your workload, you'll tell me there's no "call" for the wines. And then of course there *won't* be. Duh.

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



Weingut Prieler's Goldberg Vineyard.



Close-up of vine at Schloss Gobelsburg.

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.) The operating principle is don't interfere with the wine, so in vintages when fermentations go all the way the wines are very dry. Other times a few slovenly grams of sugar remain. It's as it happens.

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

I approve of a wine culture with an aversion to confectioning, but this is an early stage of maturing into a culture which knows when to be rigid and when to relax. But we're ahead of ourselves. Suffice it to say I have never tasted and cannot imagine an Austrian white wine that was diminished by a *small* amount of residual sugar, undetectable as sweetness, but discernable as deeper fruit, more thrilling flavor (and incidentally



Hillside vines at Nigl.

more flexible at the table). And they could do it if they *wanted* to; Süßreserve (a.k.a. *Dosage*) has been legal for five years now, though I know of no one actually using it. They are very squeamish. I understand, since I'm squeamish too, but we're at different spots on the squeam-o-meter. Sure it's a slippery slope, and if you keep sliding down it you open the door to all kinds of manipulations. If! The fact is there's zero reason to assume this would happen. People need to trust themselves, and their palates.

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

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

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

I just read a bunch of tasting notes on '05s in an Austrian wine magazine and noted one writer's use of the term *Trinkspass*, which loosely translates into "joy-of-drinking," and this was a first. Till recently everyone wrote of the usual things, power-intensity-mass-density-etc, but very few ever asked whether, at some point, wine could also be, a *joy* to drink. When I finished the work last year, I took myself to the mountains for a couple days to clear my head. Jamek had given me a bottle of

Muskateller he saw I adored, and one evening I sat on my little balcony admiring the Alpenglow stealing over the peaks and the fog forming in the valley and even though I had a glass I drank that Muscat straight from the bottle, and every swallow told me, not that the wine had -X-number of “points” or that I was a hotshot because of all the adjectives I could drudge up, but simply that *life was good*, and we humans are meant to be happy.

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

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

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

Speaking of miracles . . .

The 2006 Vintage

They’ve given it a motto already, and it’s on the money: *Easy to drink, hard to walk*. . . and Johannes Hirsch sums it up maybe even better: “People can get drunk for very little money this year.”

It is very important to distinguish the Austrian 2006s from those of Germany. Y’all tend to lump everything with umlauts together, but in most years the two vintages don’t congrue. The great storms that hit Germany in late September and early October passed harmlessly to the west of Austria, and all the growers reported the kind of clement uncomplicated harvest they yearn for.

The last several years they picked when they *could* or when they had to, but in 2006 they picked whenever they desired. “We even got a few Sundays off,” one of them told me. “It was that stable, day after day of perfect weather.”

But Austria and Germany weren’t entirely disparate in 2006. What they have in common is ripeness. And what differentiates them is botrytis. The Germans had a lot, and the Austrians almost none.

I think 2006 will turn out to have been one of those instructive years in Austria, because if there was a single common mistake, it was overripeness brought on by growers’ desires to wait for the physio thing. I confess I’m of two minds as regards the physio thing. In part I agree that physiological ripeness, i.e., ripeness of skins, stems and seeds, is important for many reasons. But, if you wait and wait for it you risk precisely the overripeness with which *some* ‘06s have to contend — especially if you insist on fermenting to full dryness. 2006 was an almost perfectly clean harvest, and I winced at the number of wines lost to this obsession with absolute (I would say *extreme*) dryness; every one of them would have made gorgeous wines with 10-15 g.l. residual sugar



Harvest at Nikolaihof.

and 13.5% alc, but instead we get no RS and 14.5 (and even higher) alcohol, and such wines are unpleasant.

Cards on the table: I **do not like** very high-alcohol wines. Knowing that the line I draw is arbitrary, I nonetheless draw it at 14%. It has to be drawn somewhere and it might as well be there. I’m just not drinking heavy-ass wines any more. My senses don’t like them, my food doesn’t like them, and my entire somatic system is depressed by them. If you feel otherwise, you’ll like many of the Austrian 2006s that I found overstated and grotesque.

Interestingly the problem is exacerbated by more “modern” vinification. Growers who do the whole-cluster-pressed-cultured-yeast-cold-fermented-stainless-steel thing got some wines where the alcohol snarls and scorches. Their old-school counterparts (Hiedler for instance) got wines whose weight was to some extent ameliorated by an omnipresent creaminess of lees and extract. Such wines were, if not exactly my personal cup-o-tea, at least palatable.

There’s a curious paradox in all this. Even if some of the top wines got out of hand, the least of the wines have

never been so wonderful. Unless you prize the “little” wine of 11.5% alc *because* of its delicacy, you’ll be blown away by the weight, substance and vinosity in the bottom-end ‘06s. They have never offered this quality. The drinker receives in effect a 1-2 class *upgrade* without having to spend miles or money to get it! You buy a coach seat and they move you to First – just because they like you.



When I got to Austria I hadn’t tasted a single 2006. Several people told me to expect a “great vintage.” The first wine I drank was a bottle of Gobelsburg GrüVe – one of the little ones we don’t ship – on my first evening in Vienna. It was perfect. The first estate I visited was Berger, whose *LITER* of GrüVe sports no less than 13% alc but wears it with grace. Clearly the vintage would be *outsized*. But great? Great like 1997 was great?

Yes, great, but not like 1997 was great.

2006 is bigger and meatier. Where 1997 is Vosne-Romanee, 2006 is Gevrey-Chambertin. It’s a vintage of muscle and density, often magnificent, occasionally overdone, usually superb. It is an especially resplendent vintage for Grüner Veltliner, but Rieslings are often astonishing as well. And as meaty as most of them are, they are only rarely chewy; they are rather like a gigantic lamb shank whose meat is so tender you can coax it off the bone by mere desire alone.

I think you’ll know what I mean by this; sometimes you walk out of the shade into the sun and you can smell aromas of certain flowers and leaves because they are in the sun-warmth. I call these sun-aromas. They are bakey and fecund and they seem to breathe heat. They are very different from shade aromas, which are more oblique, cooler, “greener,” more silvery. Most of the 2005s, even the ripe ones, had shade aromas, and most of the ‘06s, even the least ripe ones, have sun aromas.

Yet they are seldom “hearty” and even when they go too far they’re never bumpkins. Theirs is an innate fineness even with all that density and richness. Part of this has to do with the absence of botrytis, which is ill-suited for most dry wines and which gives them an unpleasant bitterness. The worst of the 2006s are not bitter, they are alcoholically medicinal and absurdly exaggerated. They are taller than the room they stand in, so that their heads go crashing through the ceiling. But such sporadic misadventures are overwhelmed by the enormous number of simply regal, noble and commanding wines, many of which are as capacious and breathtaking as dry white wine can be.

Put it this way: I added two new estates to this offering, and in both cases I asked to taste a large range of back-vintages so as to ascertain the sustainable quality of the winery. I couldn’t judge by 2006 alone; it is too fabulous and too unusual.

2006 also heralds the return of something I noted at the beginning of my love affair with these wines but which has been missing the past few years. It shows the delayed-finish crescendo again. Huh? It’s when you’re done with the wine (or think you are) and then fifteen seconds later it comes pouring back with a tertiary finish that actually increases in intensity for up to a minute, before slowly fading again. 2006s are very long, and you don’t have to trade very far up to find such very long wines.

“Great” is a word I don’t like to use, so that when I do use it, it is called for. Even taking the many great ‘06s into account, it is too soon to know whether the vintage as a whole is truly great. It’s undoubtedly the best vintage since 1997, but it might lack the easeful, almost mathematical logic and harmony of that classic vintage. On the other hand, there are probably more great 2006s.

And I am well aware the new vintage arrives at an inauspicious moment. The Dollar is in some terminal funk, and you guys spent all your money on Burgundy anyway. I hope you didn’t buy much white, because I could have saved you a BUNDLE if you’d bought top 2006 GrüVe instead of middling ‘05 Puligny. When the dust settles I think a strong case will be made that 2006 Austrian whites are one of the better values in the wine world, and one of the best at the low end. The reds are also promising; the light ones in bottle already are the best they’ve ever been. The big boys, we shall see. Some looked most impressive and others most tannic and gnarly.

WINERY OF THE VINTAGE



It's painful to choose just one. Here are the nominees. *Schloss Gobelsburg*, for the sheer number of masterpieces, including by far the greatest collection of Grüner Veltliner I've ever tasted. *Alzinger*, for a heart-rendingly lovely array of wines that just melt and glow with an almost beatific easiness. *Nikolaihof*, for arriving at an apotheosis of the Zen-serenity they embody.

The prize has to go to *ALZINGER*. Their vintage defies comprehension and credulity. It is so sublime I will not repeat the estate in any of the best-ofs which follow, because they'd scoop all the statuettes

GRÜVE OF THE VINTAGE

The VERY BEST is *Schloss Gobelsburg's* RIED LAMM, and the best among a large group of runners-up (wines good enough to take top honors in a normal vintage) are *Nikolaihof's* IN WEINGEBIRGE SMARAGD, *Salomon's* LINDBERG RESERVE, and *Schwarzböck's* KIRCHBERG.

RIESLING OF THE VINTAGE

An almost intimidatingly sizeable group! But the very greatest is clear to me, albeit astonishing: *Hiedler's* MAXIMUM. It is squired to the Royal ball by, among many worthy peers, *Bründlmayer's* HEILIGENSTEIN ALTE REBEN, *Hirsch's* HEILIGENSTEIN, *Salomon's* KÖGL RESERVE and finally *Schwarzböck's* AICHLEITEN. By the way, for whatever reason 06 seems to have been supernal in the Heiligenstein, every one of whose wines was masterly and glorious.

VALUE(S) OF THE VINTAGE

These are MANY.

Glatzer's WEISSBURGUNDER takes top honors. Running just a half a nose behind are *Gobelsburger* RIESLING, *Hiedler's* GRÜNER VELTLINER LOESS, and *Berger's* BLAUER ZWEIGELT LITERS

THE WINES YOU'D MOST LIKELY OVERLOOK AND SHOULDN'T

Foremost *Hofer's* gorgeous ZWEIGELT ROSE. And I think we'll leave it at that!

THE WINE OF THE OFFERING

Two very different wines come to mind. The first is a regular table-wine of stunning expression and quality, *Prieler's* LEITHABERG WEISSBURGUNDER, and at a different echelon, the best sweet Austrian wine I've ever experienced, *Bründlmayer's* 2004 LOISER BERG GRÜNER VELTLINER TBA.

Cork

I'm happy to report cork is almost a non-issue these days in Austria, as the majority of people with whom I work have moved over to screwcaps with a celerity that should give their German brethren a kick in the pants. Everyone spoke of adjusting SO₂ levels and otherwise monitoring the wines for any signs of distortion in the new regime. But it was such a relief to stop worrying. Any lifetime now they'll forbid smoking in restaurants and then Austria will be the perfect-est place in the world.

First Among Equals



The entire production at Weingut Hirsch is bottled in screwcaps.

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

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

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

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

GRAPE VARIETIES

Grüner Veltliner

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

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

One wishes to be indulgent of the caprices of attention in our ephemeral world. But at some point the last two weeks, tasting yet another absolutely supernal GrüVe, my blood commenced to simmerin'. Where dry white wine is concerned this variety should have pride of place on wine lists. There is simply NO other variety more flexible and none offering better value especially at the high end.

Take any other dry white. Sauvignon Blanc? Lovely, to be sure, but anything SB can do GrüVe can do better. Viognier? Don't make me laugh. Chardonnay? Sure you gotta have it but can you think of a single *particular* dish with which Chardonnay is really the best possible choice? If you can, I swear to you I have a GrüVe – probably *ten* GrüVes – that will partner it better and cost you less. But let's ratchet things up a bit, shall we? *Riesling*? In fact I feel GrüVe is considerably more flexible at table than dry Riesling is, and I can't think of many instances when dry Riesling would be a *better* choice than GrüVe. I love dry Riesling; I drink it because I love it and I resist geeking out over the "perfect" match. But I am constantly running out of GrüVe at home because I'm constantly *reaching for it*, it goes so easily with so many things.

Obviously you're not going to slash away at all your Chards and Sauv-Blancs and all the other easily saleable wines. But if you are who you claim you are, then you have to resist consigning this remarkable variety to the scrap heap of the previously fashionable. In fact you should increase the presence of GrüVe on your lists, and when someone demands to know "What's with the umlauts?" you can bask in the knowledge you're about to RAWK his very world.

Grüner Veltliner is Austria's most populous variety, about a third of all vineyard land. In Italian it would be VALTELLINA VERDE and we'd all sell the *cojones* out of it, but I tried to get Austria to adopt Italian as their official language and they just looked at me funny.

Think for a second of Chardonnay. It makes everything from tingly little Petit Chablis to great whomping Montrachet and nobody kvetches they can't "get a handle" on Chardonnay. GrüVe does the same thing; it can be as

sleek as a mink or as big as Babe the Blue Ox and it works in a whole slew of ways. You can hardly imagine a snappier little thirst-quencher to drink outside (or "alfresco" in Italian) and you can hardly ever find a more *grand* (or "grande" in Italian) dry white for those *big-wine* occasions.

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

I stress again: *Grüner Veltliner is THE ANSWER to all the foods that supposedly are wine-killers*. Artichokes, shrimp, avocado, every manner of obstreperous veggie, the Veltliner loves 'em. Need a white wine for a wild-mushroom sautee? Step right up. Want a wine for a really **peppery** salad, lots of mizuna, tatsoi, arugula ("arugula" in Italian), I have it for you.

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

Tasting terms: like Chardonnay, Grüner Veltliner has many faces.

Unlike Chardonnay, they never need make-up! I needed a whole new vocabulary for this variety, as no amount of rustling down every corridor of my rococo wine-speak 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 perfume, with a feral, almost stinky undertone, but earthy and sexual and subtly musky.

One of Austria's leading wine writers uses "meadow-flowers" in his notes, so this isn't just a little Terry-peyote thing. "**Hedge-flowers**" is similar, but more specifically floral; oleander is a clear example. Mimosa is another. These flowers are less sweet-smelling than, say, roses or violets; more polleny or roasty. **Smells and flavors of green vegetables** are common. Lentils, green beans, pea-pods or even pureed peas themselves. The metaphorical extension of this are words like "mossy" or "heathery" and I have been known to say "vetiver" when the whole thing blazes into great beauty. **Smells and flavors of sharp greens:** again, common. Mustard-greens like tatsoi, mizuna and arugula have resonant echoes of flavor in GrüVe. Sometimes it smells like boxwood, or in more discreet examples, like watercress. Green things. **Fruit smells:** most common are strawberry and rhubarb, followed by undefined citrusy notes. These are simple literal associations. **Mineral notes:** I use "ore" to describe a sense of minerality so dense it feels *compacted*, ferrous. Sometimes the spicy-green aspect combines with mineral to create **peppery** flavors, sharp like white pepper.

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



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

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

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

Riesling

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

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

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

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

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

Gelber Muskateller

Only in Austria (and Germany) are they required to distinguish between this, a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains* or *Muscat Lunel* and its less refined but more perfumey cousin the Muscat Ottonel. Most Alsace "Muscat" blends the two, and usually Ottonel dominates.

"Yellow" Muscat has become sehr trendy in Austria, much to my delight, because I dote on this variety. It ripens late and holds onto brisk acidity; it isn't easy to grow, but oh the results it gives! In good hands the wines are something like the keenest mountain-stream Riesling you ever had from a glass stuffed with orange blossoms.

I love Muscat, and I realize that love is subjective and irreducible and that you might not love it as I do, or maybe not at all. I won't *understand* you, but there it is. But even knowing my slobbering little Terry-luv of Muscat is just me being me, I think there's a claim to stake for this variety.

Muscat can restore us to an almost primordial innocence of the senses. I was watching a young father wheeling his little boy in a stroller. He picked a dandelion and handed it to his son, who was just transfixed, who grinned and beamed at the common little flower, his entire being numinous with pure delight. It doesn't take a great thinker to observe we lose this capacity as we grow up, just as it doesn't require a remarkable soul to miss it. But we don't have to just surrender it with a knowing sigh. Muscat can bring it back.

When I drink good Muscat it is always one of those almost pre-cognitive moments of recovering an embedded and inaccessible memory of just how *wonderful* a thing can taste. It's almost inhuman. It's the needful gulps of sweet cold water when you're really thirsty. It's going into the butterfly house and suddenly all these colorful little guys are fluttering around and you're dumbstruck by how almost comically gorgeous nature can be. It is a limbic transmission of pure delight we barely get from wine any more – from *life* any more.

I'm offering every single one I could get my greedy hands on. Some were already sold out at the winery in late April. Here's what I have. Unscrew that cap, splash the greeny gurgle of wine into the nearest glass; sniff and salivate – drink and *be HAPPY*.

AHS-083 2006 Muscat, Heidi Schrock

ABG-084 2006 Gelber Muskateller, E & M Berger

AFN-132 2006 Gelber Muskateller, Nigl

ABY-190 2006 Gelber Muskateller Auslese, Brundlmayer

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 Alsatiens 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.

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.

RED VARIETIES

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

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

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

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

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

Now of course, between the two poles the truth crouches somewhere. And I'll try to delineate it here, in my Solomonic fashion. Austrian red wine is to be taken seriously, that much is beyond dispute. Yet for every truly elegant grown-up wine there are many others that are silly, show-offy, insipid, even flawed. Trust me, we're spitting those out and driving hastily away. What I am selecting are just what I like best, medium-weight, fruit-

driven wines with poise, grace and elegance but also with length and density. Neither I nor my growers are into shock-and-awe wines; we all know how facile it is to make those inky dull creatures. Even the biggest wines from my producers—what I call their super-Tuscans—never let the flavor-needle lurch into the red.

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

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

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

The other of the hip red varieties is called **ZWEIGELT**. The last word in red wine! Rolls right off



Blaufränkisch grapes

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

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

Burgenland is Austria's leading red-wine region; all of the stars are there. In my portfolio Prieler and Lehrner take their place among the elite, while Sattler makes his way into the kindly group below. But I'm heartened by the changes in Austria's reds outside her red-wine regions. When I began most of my growers offered one or two pretty anemic reds, but these have become quite lovely and sometimes even quite serious. When you think of estates like Gobelsburg or Berger you're probably thinking *white* and would rather give your Austrian-red business to growers who stake a claim on them. I understand; I might do the same. But – I'm left with the wines, and the wines are wonderful.

Below the echelon in which red wine is Earnestly Great, I need it to be delicious. It bores me when it affects the attributes of "greatness" (which usually means

overextraction, overoaking and too much alcohol) and does not deliver. Just because you wear a muscle shirt don't mean you got muscles. I am a great lover of tasty reds, which usually fall at or below 13% alc and which just seem to *drain* out of the bottle, you drink them so fast. For me, a red wine is truly great when it gladdens the senses and flatters the food. That's the baseline. You can add mystery and complexity and atmosphere, you can add length, power and concentration, but you reach a point where an excess of pleasure becomes a kind of soreness. Last week I ordered a bottle of Allegrini's big-boy, and couldn't finish it. Could barely start it. The Palazzo Della Toro is all the wine I require; that I could drink for days.

Austrian Wine Laws

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

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

Austrian labels have to indicate the wine's residual sugar. They're actually a bit off-the-deep-end on this issue. There's a grower in my portfolio almost all of whose wines have a little RS. This is deliberate. The wines are fabulously successful, and nobody finds them "sweet." But another wise sage voiced a note of caution. Other growers (said the voice) notice this man's success, and they imitate his style so they too can be successful. But they do a facile imitation of the most *superficial* aspect of the style, i.e. the few grams of residual sugar, and the next thing you know our

- AGL-115 2005 Zweigelt 'Dornenvogel', Glatzer
- AGL-110 2006 Zweigelt 'Dornenvogel', Glatzer
- AGL-114 2006 St. Laurent Altenberg, Glatzer
- AGL-103 2004 Gotinsprun, Glatzer
- AHF-014 2004 Zweigelt "Vom Kleinen Eichenfass", Hofer
- ASB-008 2005 Zweigelt Pocken, Schwarzbock
- ASZ-019 2005 Zweigelt, Setzer
- ABG-086L 2006 Blauer Zweigelt, E & M Berger
- ABG-078 2005 Blauer Zweigelt Haid, E & M Berger
- AFN-134 2005 Blauer Zweigelt, Nigl
- ABY-163 2004 Cecile (Pinot Noir), Brundlmayer
- AZZ-114 2005 Zweigelt "Gobelsburger", Gobelsburg
- AZZ-115 2004 Pinot Noir Alte Haide, Gobelsburg



Austrian wines are once again headed in the wrong direction. Don't get me wrong (he continued), I like the wines; they're not my style but they're good wines. But everyone doesn't have this man's talent. And so in a sense his wines are dangerous.

Such are the terms of the debate!

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

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

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

DAC

It stands for *Districtus Austriae Controllatus* but what it should really stand for is DUMB-ASS CONCEPT. I know several marketing people and socially they are lovely guys. I even respect their conceptual intelligence. I just think they should be barred from acting upon wine in any way.

Schildknecht did a wicked piece for VINARIA taking the DAC concept to task. I stole a few of his arguments here, and added some of my own.

The initial motivation was innocent enough, as they all seem to be; create something analogous to the French system whereby a wine carrying the DAC is *understood* to be made from a certain variety (or varieties) in a certain idiom. They started with the Weinviertel and its GrüVes. So now you see growers selling "Weinviertel DAC" in place of whatever they used to call those Veltliners. But did you know that only those wines can use the regional name "Weinviertel" on the label? Explain THAT to the poor consumer – if you can. Now we're asking the consumer to not only understand and memorize wine data but also to crawl inside the bureaucratic mind and suss

out the "system."

The only valid system is that which arises organically and empirically from sustainable logic and experience. Codify *that* if you must; I'll forgive some of the mischief that inevitably ensues. But imposing any sort of conceptual system on wine growing seems to always end up putting growers in strait-jackets and consumers in conceptions trying to figure it out.

They'll always cite the "market" to justify their actions, but even the "market" is a mere abstraction consisting of a lot of flesh-and-blood human beings who buy wine. What makes them want to buy wine, i.e., what are we actually offering them (or "marketing" to them)? Let's take a Weinviertel GrüVe as our test case.



First we're offering them *Grüner Veltliner*. Then we're offering them *wine from this particular grower, in a particular vintage*. Then (and only then, and maybe not even then) we're offering them something from the *Weinviertel*, which perhaps is known as a region whence good values hail. Just maybe over here we're offering my name as a kind of imprimatur. Does anyone imagine a buying decision would ever hinge on whether a wine is "DAC?" There are plenty of laws in place to guarantee minimum quality levels. Trocken means dry. Alcohol can't vary by more than a half percent. The wine has to be 100% varietal. I am drawn ineluctably to conclude the DAC was less an impulse to clarify things for the "market" than to let the marketing guys play with their conceptual toys.

I'm not gonna boycott the wines or nuthin'; I'll ship them when I like them. But I'll be relieved to see this thing fizzle out. And I don't suggest you waste a *New York MINUTE* of your precious time trying to figure the whole thing out.

Austrian Wine Culture

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

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

It can be odd to deplane into this lovely country for the first time, climb into your car and head off to your first winery. Along the way you are deep within old Europe in all its stately handsome antiquity, yet when you ring that first bell you're entirely likely to met by a dashing young person who speaks fluent English and knows more California winemakers than you do. His office is chock-a-block with gizmos, he's using a rabbit corkscrew and fancy stemware and his cell phone is programmed to ring with Chris Cornell's voice. But as soon as you taste his wine you're immersed again into a kind of abiding Good. They are "wines as they've always been, only with better machines". They begin with soil, to which they are determinedly faithful, and they eschew confections at all cost. It is quite stirring, these slow, deep wines coming from such cosmopolitan creatures. It is even more encouraging to catch the occasional glimpse of the deeply anchored values which lie below the surface. It says, we don't have to give those up in order to be 21st-Century men and women; it says maybe we can figure out how a person should live.

There are other reasons to be encouraged. A few

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

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

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

adds. Haven't you also noticed the difference between what you professionally evaluate as "great" or whatever, and what you *actually enjoy drinking*? My cellar is full of wines whose flavors I enjoy and which accommodate my meals and don't pall. I'm too old for all those big flavor-jerk-offs that leave me feeling hollow.



When to Drink the Wines

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Note on My Use of the Phrase Secret Sweetness:

This emphatically does not denote a wine with camouflaged residual sugar; in fact it doesn’t refer to sugar as such at all. It attempts to describe a deeply embedded ripe-tasting flavor that *suggests* sweetness but which is in fact the consequence of physiological ripeness. Most of us know by now there are two things both called

“ripeness”: one is the actual measure of sugar in the grape (or must), which can be ostensibly “ripe” even when other markers of underripeness (e.g. bitter seeds or high malic acids) are present; the other is a fuller ripeness when both seeds and skins are sweet. Austrian whites from physiologically ripe fruit often *convey* a kind of sweet echo even when they contain little or no actual sugar. I like my little phrase “secret” sweetness, because it’s a sweetness that seems to hide from you, though you’re sure it is there. But if you look straight at it, *poof*, it’s gone. Look away and there it is again. It only consents to let itself be inferred. This I just love.

Styria, Interruptus

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

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

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

Map of Austria

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



hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

Storing and Handling

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

The Assortment

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

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

Bottle sizes

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

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



weingut prieler

neusiedbblensee-hügelland • schützen

Prieler had the same wonderful vintage everyone had in '06, but theirs was marked by the emergence of a new white wine which is the best they've ever made (or that I've ever tasted), and by a stylistic change in the reds. Silvia Prieler denies this augurs a fundamental shift. It's just how it was for these wines. "We love our gritty tannins!" she says, a little facetiously. But it's true they've never set about to make seductive reds. But these do seduce, and perhaps they will like how it feels.

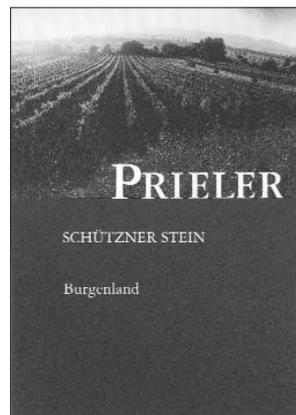
I love Silvia Prieler, and not only because she served me unlimited schnitzels. (And didn't deride me when I ate, like, five . . .) She told me a remarkable fact about their 2005s; the grapes were physiologically ripe before they were sugar-ripe. No one could remember that happening

ever before. So naturally I asked Silvia how it happened. "We don't know!" she answered. And for that answer, for its honesty and friendship, I loved her. The schnitzels came later.

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

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

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



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

First she wanted Pinot Noir, after a practicum at Domaine Dujac. Right! Papa demurred, but it so happened he'd purchased a half-hectare parcel intended

for another purpose entirely, but which was planted with 35-year-old Pinot Noir vines, and which Silvia successfully convinced him to leave to her diabolical intentions.

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

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

into deep seamless beings.

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

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

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

Prieler at a glance:

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

- AEP-042 **2006 Pinot Blanc Seeberg** **+**
 This is a *great* vintage of this always-wonderful wine. Everything the wine can show at its best is here; focused sweet-corn, lees and shellfish, with length, spiciness, flower like acacia-blossom and fruit like mirabelle and even cox-orange pippins; it seems to rise up on the back palate as if to *catapult* the finish, which grows ore-like and ever-more spicy.
- AEP-043 **2006 Chardonnay Ried Sinner**
 Always done in steel with loads of lees-contact and battonage, but no malo this year – “We wanted to preserve the acidity we had,” said Silvia. But the wine has veered off into a strangely compelling direction. It tastes like Sauvignon Blanc. It’s plenty ripe and juicy, but there’s the gooseberry. Less stony and more chummy than the ‘05, but the oxalis notes poise quite piquantly against all the physio-sweetness. Maybe it’s just a stage and I’m a silly-billy. Think I believe that? NAH!
- AEP-044 **2006 Leithaberg Weiss (Pinot Blanc)** **++**
 Stunning, stunning wine, standing easily with the very best Pinot Blancs I’ve ever tasted. Here’s the story.
- Just north of the Neusiedlersee is a range of low wooded hills. If you land to the north flying into Vienna you’ll pass directly over them. They stand back about 7-8 miles from the northern shore of the lake. Their lower slopes are planted with vines, which enjoy two singular advantages over other Burgenland whites. One is soil; these vines grow on a complex mélange of slate and tertiary limestone and gneiss. The other advantage is microclimate; the slight elevation makes for cooler nights, and simply won’t allow the production of palling wines with overripe tones.
- There’s a group of 14 growers who have agreed to bottle separate cuvees from these vineyards, both white and red. You’ve heard of a few of them; Nittnaus, Sommer, Tinhof, and, of course, our current hero Prieler. The wines must be wild-yeast fermented, and oak can’t be used except to round excess tannins. The point of these wines is to be *mineral*.
- I’m known to find such things often merely gimmicky, but I was more than convinced by the amazing wine in my glass, which heralds a new level of quality for Prieler’s whites. It grew on limestone, from 35 year old vines; the wine was done in large ovals and aged till May on the fine lees; one night’s worth of skin-contact. Fragrance like Chablis from a ripe vintage (like say ‘99); palpably thick with fruit and massive minerality; salty, with notes of leeks sweated in butter; the palate is splendidly firm, juicy and concentrated, with a long oyster leek and carrot finish. The price is a BARGAIN for wine of this quality.
- AEP-045 **2005 Blaufränkisch Johannishöhe**
 CORE-LIST WINE. You can smell it three feet from the glass. The palate is plummy-yummy with nuances of Sarawak pepper and even sweet balsam, summer savory and lovage; it’s especially lingering and certainly the most seductive Blaufränkisch from here.
- AEP-047 **2005 Schützener Stein**
 As always 85% Blaufränkisch and 15% Merlot. Allowing for the serving temp (on the cool side) this was carob-y and chocolatey with firm tannin; the fruit is ripe and sumptuous, the empty glass smells wonderfully flowery and the wine will be pretty and perhaps a little stern in its youth.
- AEP-046 **2006 Pinot Noir** **+**
 Silvia says if she has a lifetime she’ll get her baby to where she wants it, but I think she’s damn-near there with this sweetheart. It’s a model of class and restraint in an idiom of ripeness and rich fruit; Volnay cherries and a dark licorice note (like Champans) – I’d be quite happy to obtain this as Burgundy (and would rejoice at its price...). Fine and elegant, not smoky or jammed with toast or incense, but with a marrowy ripe sweetness.

weinbau heidi schröck

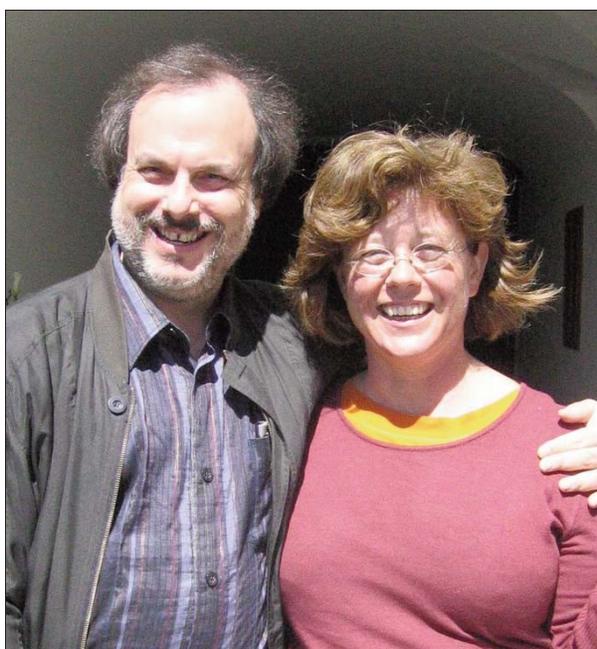
neusiedlersee-hügelland • rust

We had some confusion about our appointment, and when we arrived Heidi's father told us she was out planting vines. I reached her on the cell, and she returned just pitifully contrite and gave me a huge hug. I wasn't angry; I couldn't be angry at Heidi. I offered to come back later in the day, but she'd left one of her twin sons Georg in charge of the planting and all should be well. It was nice seeing Heidi in her schmutzy boots and wind-blown hair.

Later while we were still tasting, Georg and the gang came back from the vineyards for lunch. He was very much the guy-in-charge. Heidi was thrilled; "See, you never know what can happen when something *seems* like bad luck; if I hadn't missed the appointment Georg would never have gotten to be the boss. See how proud he is?"

Heidi's become quite the Star in the Austrian wine scene, and she doesn't have enough wine for anyone including us. I'll write notes for everything I tasted, but most of the wines will be sold out ex-cellar when you read them. Heidi seemed to expect me to cajole her to grow the domain so we could get all the wine we could sell. Instead I did the opposite. I mean, why? She *likes* it the way it is. It's the proper dimension to let her pay the quality of attention she enjoys and the wines need. I'm just glad to know her and be part of such a clearly successful life. I want the whole world to be like Heidi and her winery.

A couple evenings later we went to dinner just the two of us. We asked for a table in the non-smoking room but we didn't get it; I don't know why. There was an 8-top near us with four identical blondes and two gross guys smoking cigars. We hadn't even ordered apps, and these



Heidi Schröck and Some Guy

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

guys were doing their thing. So Heidi abruptly rose and approached their table. The guys were evidently two-and-a-half sheets to the wind already, and Heidi is a paragon of persuasion. They went outside, and when they returned we'd sent them a glass from our bottle of 97 Pierre Peters (yup!) to return their reasonable gesture. Heidi's an intrepid woman. I'm always amazingly happy to be with her.

If you've ever met Heidi you'll know why. She makes it look easy. Much easier, in fact, than it has been for her. But that's how it is with certain people, and Heidi's one of them. Though she's as lusty and earthy as anyone I know, she doesn't seem to know how not to be graceful. It can't be easy being mother to two fledgling rock stars. The twins, now nineteen, are 40% of a metal quintet called Fuel For Hatred, but sitting at dinner with the family all I saw was affection. Mostly we talked music; Heidi has learned more about grunge and thrash than she ever expected to know. A couple nights later we went to dinner in Vienna, just the two of us, and drank (among many other things!) a bottle of '61 Quarts de Chaume to celebrate Heidi's birth year. At the restaurant everyone seemed to know her.

Heidi is one of those very few people who appear to have figured out how to live. She possesses an innate ele-

gance and sweetness. I have no idea what effort this might entail—none, I suspect—but she is naturally conscientious and thoughtful without being at all self-effacing. She invites affection with no discernible effort. Because all she has to do is offer it.

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

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

Says it all, doesn't it.

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

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

Being a wine-girl is a bigger deal in Europe than here, as I've said elsewhere, yet I don't think of Heidi as a "woman-vintner" but simply as a vintner. That said, I like how it is to taste with her. She looks for accord and contact more than she insists on making her point. I know it's all very Mars-Venus, but it does seem reasonable to suggest women have their own ways of relating to that which they grow. She belongs to two girl-vintner groups, one of which I think she founded. She doesn't make a huge deal about it; it's largely a matter of creating a matrix for mutual sisterly support. Yet another guy I represent regaled me with a story of how he gave her a hard time. What about all the women who work hard with their husbands, and who are every *bit* as crucial to the making of wine as all these marquee females with their groups and their brochures? Who's speaking for *them*? Not an unreasonable point

(and bless him, the guy's loyal to his wife!), but it points out an adage I'm about to coin: it doesn't matter what you do, you'll piss somebody off. Hmmm, not bad, but I can do better. How's this; no matter how good you try to be, someone will hate you. That's more like it. You read it here first. Or, maybe . . . They'll hate you anyway, so you might as well be bad. This is fun! Maybe if the wine thing doesn't work out I can get into the fortune-cookie business. "Even if you put the seat down you still won't put it down *right*." "The food on your companion's plate always looks better."

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

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

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

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

AHS-082 **2006 Weissburgunder**

I like how this wine is a moving target, never quite the same from vintage to vintage. If you've ever eaten the French oysters they call *Papillon*, you'll know what I mean when I say this is markedly saline and leesy; it's a bit on the heavy side. Caraway seeds and rye toast. Yet even with over 14% alc it doesn't plod, it zooms. Very long finished positively drenched with fruit.

- AHS-084 **2006 Furmint** +
 I ADORE Furmint. And if Loire Chenin is high on your list-o-goodies then you'll adore Furmint as much as I do. Indeed with wines like this it's as if Mosel Riesling and Vouvray were blended in your glass. The variety, famous of course for Tokay, was reintroduced to Burgenland (once a part of Hungary, after all) in the early '90s by Heidi and others of similar mind. It ripens late and holds onto its acidity and is as graceful as storks in flight and as evocative as the nightcalls of strange birds and frogs wafting darkly over the reeds.
- The wine is especially waxy this year, more like Montlouis. Less rosewater; a really dense and mineral mid-palate, just swollen umami; it's circular, horizontal, shows chervil and sorrel; a remarkable wine, all chords and no melody, and a pensive, civilized *mien*. Such wines don't cry out to be noticed, but they reward us the most; they are very good for our lives.
- AHS-083 **2006 Muscat**
 (Due to very limited quantity, this item is no longer available.)
 OK, so I'm in New York with my then 18-year-old who was looking at colleges, and instead of taking him for the usual pizza or whatever I thought I'd buy him a "nice" meal. The place I took him had Heidi's '04 Muscat, so we ordered it. I figured the staff could taste whatever we didn't finish. Because Max isn't any sort of wine drinker — not *yet* anyway. So imagine my surprise when the bottle was tipped over to pour us the last drops. "Dude, you really held your own," I said to him. "So?" he replied. "Well I've never seen you drink so much wine," I insisted. "That's because they don't always taste this good!" he sensibly countered.
- "Muscat" isn't a grape variety in Austria; those are either Gelber Muskateller (a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains*) or the more come-hither Muscat-Ottonel. Heidi uses "Muscat" as a brand-name for a spicy wine which in '06 consists of 40% Gelber Muskateller, 20% of Ottonel and 40% Sauvignon Blanc.
- Riper and exceedingly pure fragrance, even for Muscat remarkably rich and spicy. "You taste a piece of the stone age, Muscat Ottonel is so old-fashioned," Heidi says. It's very dry and long; iron and minty spice on the finish, where the Sauv-Blanc tones really come on.
- AHS-085 **2006 Ried Vogelsang** +
 (Due to very limited quantity, this item is no longer available.)
 It turns out someone else had registered "Vogelsang" as a trademark, so Heidi's choices were either to call it "Ried Vogelsang" (i.e. "Vogelsang-vineyard") or to invent another name. At least this year there's a noisome little bird yapping away on the label. Vogelsang means bird-song. The '06 is Pinot Blanc, Furmint, Muskateller and Welschriesling, halbtrocken (with 12g.l. RS) even with 13% alc; it reminded me for some reason of Brunel's Domaine de la Becassonne; heady, meadowy aromas; appley with frisky fruit, wintergreen and mirabelle come into the pretty and precise finish. And just as you conclude it's primarily a charmer, it rears itself up and begins a parade of endless nuance into the finish. May be the best vintage yet.

AHS-087 **2005 Grauburgunder**

Pinot Gris of course. I'm starting to wonder whether Pinot Gris and not Chardonnay is the white variety best suited to oak, because the last four vintages of this wine have all *worked*, and I love serving them to people who imagine I detest any wine with oak, whereas in fact I simply detest vulgarity and affectation and falsity. This is all caramelized banana, and the palate is wonderfully juicily fruity, and less overtly oaky than the nose suggests. It's also unusually seamless, possibly because (for the 1st time) it's a wild-yeast wine; still on the fine lees and getting more and more lovely.

AHS-088H **2006 Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**

Pinot Blanc and Welschriesling again. Clean botrytis saltiness and brioche with a little scrape of thyme-honey; it's an easy drink given its concentration; warm, meadowy and polleny, graceful and suave.

AHS-089H **2005 Ausbruch "On The Wings Of Dawn," 12/375ml** **+**

This has become in effect the "basic" Ausbruch, from a *mélange* of varieties; this year it's the first of a sensational duo of sweet wines, the loveliest I think I can recall; it's extra-fine with a precise point of fragrance, at once both herbal and honeyed; this is *wicked*-delicious stuff! Wood in perfect balance; lots of murmury dark tones, with ideally poised richness; candied citrus playing off caramel and chocolate tones.

AHS-090H **2005 Ausbruch Turner** **++**

This single-vineyard 100% Furmint wine is *hors classe*. It's utterly gothic, massive yet piercing and filigree; the wild quince and apple-gelee and salty warm sweetness are noble and poised; there's great concentration without fatiguing mass; there's richness and clarity, and it's also completely delicious.



weinbau sattler

neusiedlersee • tadten

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

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

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

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



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

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

Erich has also changed the label format so it reads horizontally and you don't have to wrench your neck reading it sideways. Small thing, but I like my neck.

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



Erich Sattler

AST-013 **2006 St. Laurent**

One month in bottle, but lovely and classical varietal aromas – St. Laurent can sometimes show a reduced note when first opened, but that never happens here – it's warm and plummy; the palate is really sumptuous and sweet, with soft dusty tannins and charming cool fruit; the delayed finish shows the "dark" Mourvèdre face of the variety. I'm sure there's more in store.

AST-015 **2006 Zweigelt**

Also a month in bottle, but it's more round and also less "sweet"; in fact this is a mannerly fellow with a certain stylish length. Erich says it was more fruit-gushing before bottling, and will recover that characteristic in time; it's a Syrah type with as much extract as the Reserve in a normal vintage; the finish is juicy and almost peppery.

AST-016 **2005 St. Laurent "Reserve"**

++

This is nothing short of superb: quite the nose; damsons and blueberries and cherries and well-integrated oak; enters with an almost flowery sweetness as if he put peonies in the vats; seductive and intricate and enveloping and *very* Burgundian; sings in every register, with bright berried high tones and sandalwoody marrowy low tones, all individually discernible yet melting together. About as joyful and lovely as red wine can be.

AST-017 **2005 Zweigelt "Reserve"**

More temperamental than the St. Laurent, in an odd role-reversal; it's very pretty yet has pebbly sort of tannins below a really *wicked* fruit; it's a little too spicy and minty to be called seductive but it does have loads of angular charm. Whereas there are usually cognates for Zweigelt, this is a lone wolf, like no other wine.

AST-018 **2005 "Cronos"**

+

Here's the "super-Tuscan" which every Austrian red producer seems to insist on having. I quite like this wine, but am bemused by the phenomenon. Perhaps we should have really evocative names for some of these monsters. *Cuvée Armageddon*, or *Cuvée Egregia*. The new vintage is 60% St Laurent, 30% Cab and 10% Syrah (it's like having Burgundy, Bordeaux and northern Rhône in the same glass...) and it's a markedly excellent vintage of this cuvee; like all Sattler's 2005s it has a sweet fragrance; quite complex and pleasure-giving; the palate really reflects (and justifies) the blend – this is the best of these "super-Tuscans" in this year's offering; it's wonderfully fruity and seriously multi-faceted, obviously ambitious but not at all impressed with itself. It just wants you to be glad. Even though it's densely packed it's also lively and transparent.



weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

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

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

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

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

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



Paul Lehrner

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

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

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

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

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

Two final points. It’s somewhat misleading to call these wines “light,” as in fact they have considerable depth. What they are *not* is inky, tannic obsidian dragons which bellow 600% new oak at your schnoz. They have a sort of black-belt surety, a calm contained power that doesn’t have to be *demonstrated* every five minutes. Second, Lehrner’s wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from 2005.

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-052 **2006 "Claus"**
 Lehrner was somewhat less antic for me this year. Part of it was the very tannic 2006, part was the very recent bottling of most of the '05s, and who knows what the other part was. This year's "Claus" smells more like Sangiovese than its usual Côtes-du-Rhône; the blend is the same (a field-blend of roughly 80% Zweigelt and 15% Blaufränkisch) and the wine was bottle-sick like crazy, though a certain luscious fruit was barely detectable. I'm sure lips around the world will commence to smackin' when this recovers.
- APL-053 **2006 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**
 The entry-level BF has ideas above its station in '06. It showed a whole lotta tannin, behind which crouched a weedy blackberried fruit. I hope it finds its typical charm. Till then I defer judgment.
- APL-054 **2005 St. Laurent**
 It's lush, plummy and "warmer" than usual, less Burgundian and more New World Pinot Noir. If you've tasted 100% Canaiolo, it's like that, almost strikingly fruit-driven, but with an iron vein below the stewed plums and roasty duck-confit savor; it shows more sheer vinosity than usual but perhaps less pure fruit.
- APL-055 **2005 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche"**
 This is a brand-name denoting the top "reserve" quality. We were talking about harmony, specifically as related to a 2000-vintage of this we opened to see the effect of bottle-age, and Paul said "Wines cannot become harmonious if they don't start out that way. I've not seen this miracle myself, and I wasn't alive in the time of Christ!" I think what I love most about this wine is its seamless weaving of power and symmetry. And at last, here was the expected fragrance along with a big splash of fruit and violets, lots of sweetness and a blackberried woody char on the finish; tannins are present but manageable; there's a fine lavish *reserve* quality and length even with more bite than the 20-20-20 trio.
- APL-056 **2005 "Cuvée Paulus"** +
 60% Blaufränkisch, 30% Cab-Sauv and 10% Merlot and Zweigelt. He had two options, but I didn't know it when tasting the first. There's a very big "90-point" nose and curiously it's the juiciest and softest wine on the table – the Lehrner I know – it isn't perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of this cuvee but at least it leads with *fruit* and not tannin. However! A second cuvee has lots more pure Blaufränkisch and is firmer and more focused, longer and sweeter, actually quite superb. Why show both, I asked? "I'm trying to convince myself to combine the two lots to get more quantity," Paul said, "but the second one is so good I hate to blend it. Sometimes you have to learn to say no!" Well I for one am glad I did my small bit to encourage this wine to live its own proud life. It is one of the best of them all.
- APL-057 **2004 Blaufränkisch Dürrau** +
 This is a vineyard name, whose fruit usually goes into the Steineiche; it's a **first offering**, and it's outstanding. I think the last one was '02. . . . This is a remarkable terroir-wine showing the utmost mineral, wild herb and black cherry and really amazing fruit and spice – it's like a black mutation of Sauvignon Blanc, actually – with endless complex length and a smorgasbord of rocky nuances; power and precision in light-footed form. THIS is how good Blaufränkisch can be.

weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Glatzer at a glance:

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

AGL-105 **2006 Grüner Veltliner**

Maybe it's the vintage, and maybe it's just Walter settling in, flying at his natural cruising altitude, because along with the usual *energy* this wine shows, the 2006 conveys a kind of serenity. It's plump and yummy with sweet acacia-blossom and cedary and vetiver aromas, "sweet" aromas which lead to a dry palate that's nonetheless thick and creamy, like hazelnut oil with wild herbs.

AGL-104 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"**

"Dornenvogel" (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots, because these marauding lil' tweeters like to eat the ripest grapes. It's regularly the best-value GrüVe I offer. I think I'll just repeat that: THIS IS ALWAYS THE BEST VALUE GV IN THIS OFFERING! Curiously in 2006 this is hardly thicker or more dense than the regular GrüVe, but rather darker, more peppery, more the Provencal olive-oil type; it's riper of course, but texturally leaner and more sinewy. Possibly youth has tamped down the real difference between the two wines; we'll see.

AGL-107 **2006 Weissburgunder "Classic"** +

Glatzer's best-ever vintage of this wine and also **the single greatest value in this offering**; we have only 300 cases so please don't hesitate. There's all *kinds* of sweet-hay and mussel and *batonnage* aromas; the palate is really generous, charming and spicy with a tingly fresh finish uniting mussel-shell, mineral and porridge.

AGL-108 **2006 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée"**

We'll move into this when the '05's sold out, which won't be long. In general 2006 has toastier more grilled flavor, and also just *more* flavor. This has almost ultra-violet primary fruit; juicy and playful and alive and minty and long; gets deeper and sweeter in the glass; the most sheer substance of any vintage yet. A more perfect wine-by-the-glass could hardly be imagined.

AGL-100 **2005 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée"**

There's *wonderful* fruit and a marrowy tenderness; it's tight but not constricted, with grip and not *without* depth and length. Much of the fruit from the best sites went into it in '05, such were the problems with the harvest. I remarked to Glatzer that it tasted nothing like a wine from a "troubled" vintage and he said "Oh no, the wine is fine, I'm very happy with it; it just took a miserable amount of work to make it!"

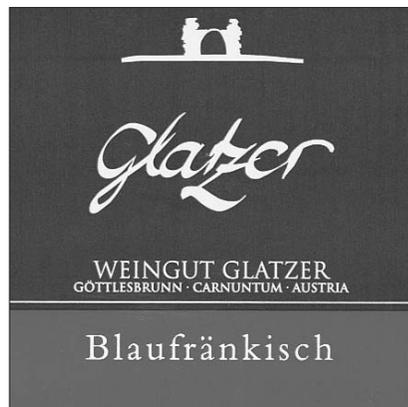
AGL-101 **2005 Blaufränkisch**

The nose is seriously spicy, "twiggy", marjoram and eucalyptus; the palate is very *Dolce* (why don't they make Dolcettos like this any more?), full of campfire and mint. In a way it's like a red GrüVe.

AGL-111 **2006 Blaufränkisch "Riedencuvée"**

Same story; we'll ship this when the '05's gone. For all its quintessential varietal angularity, this is the most *agreeable* idiom of Blaufränkisch of any I know. The nose has that capsuley-metallic twang, and the palate is so full of lamb and mint jelly and rosemary and spice rub and szechuan pepper it's almost silly. There is grown-up ripe tannin and a structure like torn silk.

- AGL-109 **2006 Zweigelt “Rubin Carnuntum”** +
 It's a sort of ad-hoc “DAC” thing, a voluntary region-wide concept to create the *essential* Zweigelt. And this 2006 is an utter sweetheart; gushingly ripe fragrances of cherry and plums (in contrast to the violet and blackberries of the Blaufränkisch); lots of cinnamon and soy; a lovely mid-palate sweetness, and the endless clamoring finish peals sweetly, starting with mint and ending with porcini and duck fat and nutmeg.
- AGL-113 **2006 Pinot Noir**
 The first of these I've shipped; clear sweet fruit and good structure; a down-the-middle classy PN with firm backbone and tight clarity. Fruity finish, and nowhere to go but up.
- AGL-112 **2006 Blaufränkisch “Reserve”** +
Huge burning-leaf-smoke fragrance, with chocolate and stewed plums; the palate just sings in many-part harmonies, seeming to thicken like a reducing stock; it's almost as much beef as lamb this year. I think at anything below the most stellar qualities, Blaufränkisch is far more interesting than Cabernet; this wine is like mint on a sun-roasted boulder.
- AGL-110 **2006 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”** +(+)
 Exceptionally dense, almost opaque, but if past is prologue it should be fabulous, already showing a profound dark-chocolate and carob-y spice. It's Glatzer's genius – and it IS genius – to make generous wines that are never garish or *cheaply* intense; they never grope for affect, but show an authentic animus and meatiness – they *earn* their intensity and lay a valid claim on our attentions.
- AGL-114 **2006 St. Laurent Altenberg** +
 Ripe and smoky; an old leather jacket to which years of pipe-smoke has adhered; this is almost Vosne-Romanée in certain hands, with charm and mushroomy umami, yet with an almost sleek, feathery finish. Hugely pleasing.
- AGL-115 **2004 “Gotinsprun”** +
 This is the archaic name for Göttlesbrunn, Glatzer's home town, and it's his brand-name for his top reds, in this case a blend of mostly Blaufränkisch, a bit of Syrah, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Merlot and the balance St. Laurent. It is all done in (double-gulp!) *new wood*. But this is a very RARE example of a show-off *oakster* that works; you're paying three times more for Priorat that's no better than this - rather worse! Because here is How To Do It; a big concentrated red with *real* concentration and not mere assertiveness, with real power and not just fire-power, with real intensity and not just *alcohol* (it has 13.5, almost demure in this screwed up era); there's iron and carob and balanced tannin; with real fruit sweetness and not mere overripeness; with density and focus. Sure I go on a bit, but there's just SO much crap-ass overdone show-offy red out there we're in peril of forgetting how it can be.



A Little Essay About Nothing Much

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

weinviertel

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

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

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

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

I tend away from the crowd, even when I appreciate what that crowd is crowding toward. It’s easy to go to the established regions and find excellent wine if you have a fat wallet. It’s too easy. I find I enjoy going somewhere alone and finding diamonds in the rough. Alas, Austria is a wine culture in which one is hardly ever alone. The new man in this offering is on the local radar or I’d never have known of him. The entire Weinviertel is known, as Germany’s Rheinhessen is known – as the up and coming new region, DACs and related nonsense notwithstanding.

This started maybe ten years ago, when the first wave of young growers applied modern methods and made far better wines than the innocuous plonk which came before. Attention was duly paid. But with repeated exposure one began to want something the wines weren’t giving. They were certainly “contemporary” enough, all cold-fermented stainless-steel yaya yada, but most of them were lacking animus and soul. With the entrance of another wave of young vintners, it began to change.

It needs a certain

drive, a kind of urgency to want to endow one’s wines with something more than simple competence. The formula for that is unexceptional, and lots of C-students can do it. And make perfectly decent wine. But certain people ask certain questions: How can I unlock what’s in this land? How do I make imprinted wines that people will remember? Why do it at all if it won’t be wonderful? For someone like this, wine isn’t just a formula or recipe; it’s a matter of anguish and relief and mystery and frustration and delight, it is so dimensional as to be virtually human. The more you live with it, the less you need what you “learned” and the better you hone and hear your intuitions. You can always spot such people because they’re much happier in the vineyards than in the cellar. After all, the cellar is full of machines, but the vineyard is full of life. Surprises are few in the cellar but constant in the vineyard. Talk to your land and your vines for long enough and soon you will know when they answer you

back. Every grower like this will tell you he was taught all wrong. “They teach you to act before they show you how to listen.” And in the end their wines become like they themselves are; alive, alert, attuned, questing.



weingut schwarzböck

weinviertel • hagenbrunn

Rudi Schwarzböck assumed control of the winery from his father in 1994, though he says 1997 is really the first vintage I was happy with," before proceeding to blow my freakin' mind with an insanely fabulous Riesling from that great vintage. His wife Anita took her share of the reins in 2003, and the two function as a seamless team.

If I don't go into detail about vineyard or cellar work it's not because I'm short of data, but instead because none of it would surprise you. Most of the really good ones do things a certain way, and I'll need several years of hangin' out time with these good folks before I'll know what lives between the tick and the tock.

Hagenbrunn is virtually at the city-line of Vienna – you'd expect the trams to run out there. Some of the vineyards are on not-insignificant slopes, and most soils are loamy loess, with Riesling being grown in sandstone covered over with loess. They have a modern tasting room where you can buy – I swear I'm not making this up – bars of milk-chocolate filled with Riesling and dark chocolate filled with GrüVe. Now I know where my allocations are going. Rudi and Anita seem in every sense to be a typical young vintner-couple, but even on first acquaintance I sense something more. Rudi seems just a little bit shy, as if he's more at home in the world of the vines than in the tasting room. His seeming uncertainty reminds me of Walter Strub's, in that it reflects less a hesitancy than a modesty built on knowing there's always more information and you're never done experiencing. I'm eager to know this guy better.

Schwarzböck was, as I've already written, one of the two best among five potential new estates I tasted. But it happened we visited the other guy first. That guy's wines were so good we basically knew we'd grab him (assuming he'd grab us back...) and I wasn't at all sure I wanted two new suppliers, good though this Schwarzböck stuff was. But with the first sip of the first wine I knew I needed them.

But *how* to describe them? Theirs is a silky substance not unlike Gobelsburg, in fact. They're not as creamy as

- **Vineyard area: 21 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Aichleiten, Hölle, Kirchberg, Sätzen-Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Loess, partly with sand or marl for Veltliner, flysch-rock riesling**
- **Grape varieties: Grüner Veltliner 40%, Riesling 15%, Zweigelt 15%, Welschriesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Gelber Muskateller**

Berger or Setzer; theirs is a more up-front palate dance. They make a quick and delightful impression. Oh just taste them.

There was by the way a Muscat about as good as Nigl's but it was sold out; it appears I'll have to go to Austria over, like, Thanksgiving if I want to score any of the good stuff; sheesh.

- ASB-001 **Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**
 You'll note this is a **non-vintage** wine, though in fact it's mostly '05 with a little '06. I don't think it matters, and the wine sells through fast enough to ensure it's always fresh. I had to ask to taste it (they never think I'll want their "mere" Liter) but it's SUPER, so expressive it's virtually sweet; lentil and herbs, balsam and tarragon, like GrüVe fruit with a Riesling *granité*, and endless charm and detail. However much they're giving us it won't be enough. Grab this wine!
- ASB-002 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Vier Gärten**
 At this price you're glad if the wine is clean and varietal, but this is much more than just correct; it's stylish and juicy, and so pretty and adorable it's impossible to dislike; as slight as it might first seem, in fact it's very long – the classic endless whisper I so love about wines of delicacy.
- ASB-003 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Sätzen-Fürstenberg** +
 It's two sites in one cuvee, one on loess and the other quite steep on sandy loam; this one is all rusks and tobacco, with excellent detail and *spiel*, mineral and spice in the ore and boxwood direction with a fervidly peppery finish. We tasted also a very *pretty* 2004, so maybe the spiciness of this '06 is vintage-specific. In any case it's a lot of Veltliner mojo for the money.
- ASB-??? **2006 Grüner Veltliner Kirchberg** ++
 Extraordinary GV by any standards; half-half stainless and 1000L casks, still on the fine lees on May 1st; this has such incense-y smoky sweetness, like a pepper flavored with cloves and nutmeg, along with a huge inner perfume showing a hint of the cask; it's all exotic and sleek and pretty, very ripe (14%) but carries it with delicacy and wit.
- ASB-005 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Privat"** +
 This is disparate from its sibs, from a vineyard in the far northeast of the Weinviertel near the Czech border; salty and creamy with weight and length and the sweet plumpness loess brings. The man can make wine!
- ASB-007 **2006 Riesling Pöcken**
 First I was gonna pass on this – did we need two Rieslings? – but lust done got the best o me; this is again so pretty, with a bright, frisky, fruity-salty palate full of herbs and cool minerality and citric zest; long, and wonderful.
- ASB-006 **2006 Riesling Aichleiten** ++
 This is all of the quality of most Wachau Smaragd at what, half the price? The material density of extract registers as an almost lush thickness; it's smoky and immensely sweetly herbal and just crazy attractive, with ripe lime and ravishing fruit – and by the way, with 11 grams of RS. In other words, perfect dry Riesling!
- ASB-008 **2005 Zweigelt**
 A dusty nose almost like St.-Joseph; suave, smart, easy-to-love wine, charming and fruit-forward; soft but not sprawling. My kinda rosso.

weingut h.u.m. hofer

weinviertel • auersthal

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

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

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

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

The wines have a quality of moderation and intelligence; they are clear and reasonable. In “normal” vintages such as `02 and `04 they are exceptionally deft and even charming. In warm years they can flirt with extravagance. They have a kind of firm smoothness that’s cool like marble. There are some lovely reds to show you.

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

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

AHF-011L **2006 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

I fear we may have become victims of our own success here. Cards on the table: *no one* expected this wine to take off as it did, least of all Hofer himself. He has gamely tried to supply it, and inevitably in the scramble there have been issues with its quality.

First he supplies us *his* original wine, certified organic, from his own grapes. When this runs out he produces an organic wine from purchased grapes. When even *this* runs out, he produces a wine from conventionally farmed grapes. He wants to arrange long-term contracts with organic growers to ensure steady supply. Much as I appreciate what he’s willing to do for us, and loath as I am to mess with success, the fact is we need to scale this *back* if we’re to preserve the *quality* that made it succeed in the first place.

I’m telling you this now so you won’t have to tell me later. I have GrüVe in Liters from four other producers – Berger, Ecker, Setzer and Schwarzböck – and yes, Hofer’s is the lowest-priced, but in 2006 it’s also in danger of being the runt of the litter. It’s all happened too fast.

IMPORTANT! This commentary does not apply to the first wave of estate-grown wine we shipped and which has (as of early May) already sold through. That wine was very good. But what I tasted at the winery was merely adequate. Even with 13% alc it was on the slight side compared to the others; good *Heurige* quality but not more. And I need it to be more. Here’s why.

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

AHF-016 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Vom Vogelsang**

You know, if you walked in the vineyards with me and heard the amazingly melodic trilling of the many blackbirds and thrushes, you'd *know* why so many vineyards are called "Birdsong." This is a light-footed, mineral and charming wine, with a subtle gooseberry note, lots of salty juicy friendliness and a wild herbal finish like woodruff and lime. It seems to hop along your palate on thready little bird-feet.

AHF-017 **2006 Grüner Veltliner DAC (Freiberg)**

This was distorted from recent bottling, and needed to sit in the glass 30 minutes before *any* fruit emerged; it did, at last, and got creamier too, but nuanced notes will have to wait.

AHF-018 **2006 Zweigelt Rosé** +

"Really? You want to taste our Rosé?" Why *Ja Yes Oui*, I replied. Pink is the new red, don't you know. On the other hand, without the newly minted modishness of all things salmon-colored I'd have never known how *amazingly* good this is. The color is very pale but there's an extravagant fragrance of cherry-blossom (excuse me: *organic* cherry-blossom), and a pepperminty length; multi-dimensional, even mineral; how can you not adore a wine this pretty and this long and this gauzy, even with 13.5% alc?

AHF-019 **2006 Riesling** +

Whatever will they do, oh dear oh dear! For this wine is "Lieblich" with 30 grams of that vile fructose thing, only you see my darling, the problem is: *the wine tastes WONDERFUL*. It doesn't taste like whatever you thought "30 grams" would taste like; just a gorgeous fragrance of quince and mirabelle and moonglow pear; lovely spice and length; not mineral – this is a fruit-essence of head-turning prettiness, and with a long vaporous finish of talc and lime-blossom. NO botrytis. So all you manly men, bust out those petticoats you *know* you yearn to wear, bake up some petit-fours, draw the blinds and drink a **real man's** wine.

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

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



weingut setzer

weinviertel • hohenwarth

By now I know I'll be happy here. Thirsty, delighted and happy. These are my kinda wines, and my kinda folks.

In a paragraph or two I'll write a small disquisition on the aesthetics of charm, but there are other things to say about this endangered virtue. Endangered? I think so. We have a little carousel at our county's regional park, and I like to pause there midway through a long walk and watch the little kids zoop around on the painted horses. Last week I noticed they'd given up the usual calliope music in favor of, god help me, disco. And it was just so damn *wrong*, all these 3-and-4-year olds riding along to "I Will Survive"; is calliope music supposed to be too *goofy* or unhip or some stupid thing? *THERE'S* someone with a tin ear for charm.

It's also hard to make charming wines. It's easy, really, to make "intense" wines or "powerful" wines; all you have to do is pick overripe grapes. Charm requires you to pay attention to texture. And even harder, you need to attend to flavor in a different way: not how much of it



Hans & Uli Setzer

there is, but how *pleasing*, even delightful it is? I wonder how many courses on charm are taught at U.C. Davis.

Now maybe you're thinking come on, it's not all that impossible; just ferment with aroma-yeasts at cold temps to get those sweet banana aromas and leave a little RS behind and maybe throw a little Muscat into the GrüVe and *POOF* there's your charm. Not so. Lovers of true charm are not seduced by the specious or formulaic. But we know very well the difference between growers asking *How strong can I make the wine?* versus *What is the quality of the fruit?*

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

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

I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic virtues. In people it denotes an effort of behavior whereby you

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

feel appreciated and cared for. In wine or music it creates a response of palpable delight. I find this feeling more pleasant than many other

feelings which seem to have greater *prestige*. Don't get me wrong; there's a place in me for being knocked out, blown away, stunned, impressed, but I find none of these as exquisitely pleasurable as feeling delighted or charmed. Also, charm is a flexible virtue. Charm can exist in big wines or medium wines or little wines. I also appreciate this virtue because it seems less reducible to recipe: any grower of unexceptionable talent can make *intense* wine. It seems much more intuitive to craft wines of charm, less a matter of formula than of constant attending to tiny details. And knowing all the while that your wine won't be the biggest, boldest, loudest rock-em sock-em wine on the table. But it will insinuate, will crawl inside a certain temperament and sing its siren-song, and this is the pleasure for which we live.

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15 minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the sum-

mit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure loess terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram. Yet I feel the wines are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his “competitor,” bless him) called *Vinovative*.

But I don’t want to leave you with the impression this is a “modest” winery producing the kinds of wines

that happen to charm me. Indeed, Setzer is serious and Important, having won many accolades (Vintner Of The Year in a major wine magazine, to cite a conspicuous example), and the GrüVe “8000” has been given VINAR-IA’S three stars. It’s just that I’ve come to discern the difference between “appraising” a wine and “loving” a wine, and it’s a huge blast when you can do both. These wines are *good company*; you could take a cross-country trip with them.

ASZ-016L **2006 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

Hans never imagined I’d want this lowly little wine, so we can only get 200 cases this year – but I’m in the queue for future vintages. I don’t recall a *better* GrüVe in liters; it’s an elegant, almost calm wine; hints of banana, loads of fruit, good grip, and nothing “light” about it. Almost creamy, and very long.

ASZ-014 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Vesper”**

What a fragrance! The Whole of GrüVe is in it. The palate is firm and peppery, less “sweet” than the nose; it’s like heavy suede, it isn’t buoyant, but it lands firm; almost pecan-like, with lots of determination for a light (11.5% alc) wine.

ASZ-015 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Die Lage”** +

This is the artist-formerly-known-as-Eichholz (which will appear on the back-label), and it’s become one of my absolute favorite mid-weight GrüVes for drinking at home. It leaves no wish unfulfilled, neither for weight, complexity, tastiness or food-friendliness; the 2006 has a remarkable fragrance, flower-power stuff, with vetiver, acacia blossoms, stayman-apples and flowering fields and irises; the palate effortless balances ripeness, strength and grace; lots of secret-sweetness, sneaky-long and with a chewy-meaty demi-glacé depth.

ASZ-017 **2006 Riesling**

Shows the toasty, crackery side of 2006; this is all tarragon and dried apricot; it’s minty and crunchy and leads to a eucalyptus finish – it’s more convincing than charming but it is convincing, especially the pheasant-stocky finish – you really taste the sweet veggies and the protein. If you told me it was Riesling from the Dents de Montmirail I’d believe you.

ASZ-018 **2006 Roter Veltliner Kreimelberg**

Been a while since I offered a Roter Veltliner; very few growers make them any more, but those who do are specialists. In essence it’s a GrüVe cousin, making a fuller-bodied and muskier wine; young Rot-Ve tastes like 5-year-old GV, or like GV blended with really bell-peppery Sancerre. That said, Setzer doesn’t seem to know *how* to make a coarse or blatant wine, and this guy won me quite over: 37-year old vines now; it takes the roasted red pepper side of GrüVe and focuses it almost to a point of exaggeration. Parsnips and chervil; it hasn’t the pith or grip of its green cousin but it has a roasty veggie power and a smoky cardamom finish. It is *at least* as interesting as that pretty Basque wine y’all like, and you sussed how to pronounce *that* – so why not this?

ASZ-019 **2005 Zweigelt**

Sweet black cherry and blackberry aromas; a little of the violet and steel and then an immense fruit-sweetness (not sugar, obviously); the palate mirrors, and adds a marrowy charm and length – this really is sheer deliciousness! A suave liqueur of kirsch, wisteria and violet.

The Wagram

The road from Vienna northwest to Krems is probably the only boring country road in all of Austria. It follows the flood plain of the Danube, and is dead-flat. About half way along, you notice little hills to your right about 5 miles in the distance. These are the loess terraces of the WAGRAM. Nearing Krems, the terraces draw closer and you're in the Kremstal, while directly ahead the dramatic hills of the Wachau beckon.

The loess hills of the Wagram are said to be unique in Europe for their depth, up to twenty meters (65 feet) in places. Wagram's the loess leader har har har. But the sandy-loamy ground is so thick that vintners can dig cellars in it without joists, yet this same soil is amazingly porous. This is ideal soil for GrüVe, and where it changes to red gravel or primary rock the vine changes to Riesling or Sauvignon Blanc. Vineyards are mostly on terraces or gentle slopes, facing south,

far enough from the river to avoid botrytis in most years.

Can you taste it? I can't, at any rate. I am certain I couldn't identify any flavor markers for "Wagram" per se. The wines resemble Kremstal wines to me, at least

those nearer the Danube and also grown on loess. Still, they had to call it something, and "Wagram" does sound like one of the bad-guys from Lord Of The Rings.



weingut ecker

wagram • kirchberg-mitterstockstall

Ecker was one of the two best (of five) new growers I tasted, and he was the best of three very good Wagramers. Apparently I was not the first person to have remarked upon this, for when we made our bid for this portfolio I learned that three of the wines I really wanted were sold out – in May! I mean, this is not FX Pichler here, but it is Austria; everyone knows where the best stuff is.

So, not counting a gorgeous Muskateller I should never have fallen in love with in the first

place– but did anyway – there was a lovely Riesling, and a superbly good GrüVe “Schlossberg,” and a remarkable GrüVe “Berg Wagram” from 40-year old vines which could easily have passed for Nigl. So, welcome to our brand spankin’ new business model: telling you all the wines you *can’t* buy.

Three fine wines remain, and I’m in the queue for next year, and it feels very odd indeed to hold out my begging bowl for wines that aren’t all that easy to sell you guys. The things we do for love. And these really were lovely wines across the board. “Has it all,” I wrote. We were entirely ready to work with another Wagram grower; his wines were on-the-money, but then we tasted these.

They exceeded the entirely worthy wines of the other fellow by dint of their charm, clarity, sweetness and soul.

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Schlossberg, Mordthal, Steinberg, Berg Wagram**
- **Soil types: mainly Loess, partly with gravel, primary rock in Steinberg vineyard**
- **Grape varieties: Grüner Veltliner 50%, Zweigelt 20%, Riesling, Weißburgunder, St. Laurent, Blauburgunder, Roter Veltliner, Sauvignon Blanc, Gelber Muskateller**

AEC-01L **2006 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

12% alc. Between 40-70% of the fruit for this wine is purchased; all the more amazing how good it is; super-clean crisp quality; varietal and gleaming; a slim mineral length and spring-water clear honesty. Textbook GrüVe.

AEC-02 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Von Stockstal**

Of course we were highly attuned to quality at this popular-price echelon, and this was Best Of Show, and only the Gobelsburger trumps it as a GrüVe value. It’s from a mix of vineyards; superb flowery aromas; this is really a kind of miniature perfection, blossoms and minerals in the form of the little dancer in the music-box; as she moves you realize she is alive just as you are, and you were a fool to think otherwise. Don’t ignore this tiny being; she has a thing to tell you about happiness.

AEC-06 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Prämium”** +

The little sketchy note I wrote in the prelim tasting said “plump and long and dense and scallopy; wonderful,” and when I studied the wine more closely at the estate I learned it’s from 45-year vines in a (locally) renowned site called Mordthal; it’s less playful than Ecker’s other wines, with more *gravitas*; it’s church-organ music instead of the little tinkle of the music box; the wine Means Business with its smoldering smoky spice and minty finish.

kremstal and kamptal

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

Austria’s best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals. This may be partly due to the giant shadow cast by the neighboring Wachau, and the determination of the best Kampers and Kremsters to strut their stuff. For the price of really middling Federspiel from a “name” estate in the Wachau you can get nearly stellar quality in Kammern or Langenlois, and the absolute best from a Nigl or a Bründlmayer is substantially less expensive than their Wachau counterparts. And, every single bit as good. Remember, “best” value does not automatically denote “lowest price;” in fact it needn’t refer to price as such. These two regions give wines at

the absolute TOP quality level, and at that level they are the least expensive. Thus, “best” values.

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

ÖSTERREICH (do I need to translate it?) The usual sensibilities apply; like-minded producers, often idealists, band together to establish even greater stringency

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

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

Other than the profound individuality of certain sites (Heiligenstein comes first to mind) there’s little of regional “style” to distinguish these wines from Wachau

wines. In fact Willi Bründlmayer told me all three regions were once one big region called WACHAU. Ludwig Hiedler points out Langenlois is warmer than anywhere in the Wachau, and he believes his wines need even more time than theirs do.

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



weingut erich & michaela berger

kremstal • gedersdorf

Berger's wines are wines of humor in the classical sense (not that they're funny-ha-ha), wines of grace and pleasure, gregarious and celebratory. Please consider: Often when we drink a wine for "celebration" we forget what we're actually celebrating and end up celebrating the wine. Be honest now, you know it's true! But whatever it is, your novel got published, you have an anniversary, your biopsy came back negative, your disposal is fixed, you finally got laid, don't you really need a wine that won't draw attention away from the reason you opened it in the first place? If you want to drink a great wine, or Great Wine, then celebrate THAT. Otherwise, drink a wine in which celebration lives. Reach for Berger. His wines exist to do nothing but make you happy.

Erich and his father always made charming tasty wines, cool, "sweet", feminine and alluring — never big or show-offy or obvious. Then Erich told me he wanted to make a small change, toward a more overt style, less inferential and aloof and more positive and definite. I liked these new wines and told him so, but lamented the passing of another proponent of *charm*; there are never enough of these.

But 2005 and 2006 have seemed to *compelled* Erich back to the old style. He couldn't help make creamy charming wines from that material. I'm sure he'll revert to his old-new idiom next year, and I won't be sad to see it, but for now this gushing group of '06s is about as delightful as wine can be.

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

sloppin' down. A few years ago I began to see the occasional dichotomy between what I offered to you as Great Wine and what I actually *bought* for the private stash; what I need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

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

- **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**



Erich Berger

how the wines taste:

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

ABG-081L **2006 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

Our original big-format GrüVe, and often still my favorite. The 2006 is strikingly ripe (13%!), with sweet aromas, toasty and almost vetiver, with notes of boxwood; the palate is juicy and almost *intense*; more determinedly spicy than usual; almost too much mojo for mere liters, but markedly expressive.

ABG-082 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lössterassen** +

Oh this is pure fun, massively delicious yet not remotely massive; sorrel, banana and flowering-field; the palate is firm and spicy and both lip-smacking and *crazy*-long, even muscular, with the swelling billowing finish I've missed in recent years. Joy and purpose here, and the purpose is joy.

ABG-083 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Gebling** +

Striking varietal aromas; veriver and verbena and plantain chips; firm and intense but not at all overstated; rather a cool, focused, fennely snap, and with a neon minerality and a mid-palate like toasted lentils and roasted cod; it's a spinach-y wine, like liquid iron and meadow-flowers. You *know* you need it for the liquid iron and meadow-flower flan chef's coming up on today.

ABG-084 **2006 Gelber Muskateller**

This is really just sick. Lemon and orange blossom aromas, a wee bit catty and a wee bit mineral; on the palate is a pure bright spice, a bracing freshness that's also incredibly fetching and alluring; hints of salts and sweets, aloe and mint, and amazing length. 100/100 on the just-plain-fucking-good-o-meter.

ABG-086L **2006 Blauer Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter**

Oh I know you won't believe me, but wines like this remind us of How Wine Should Be. Again perfect charm and fun yet you don't sacrifice a *bit* of length, body or stylishness; there's almost a Meunier note here, along with blueberry and *quetsch*; soft integrated tannin. You want not to "drink" it but to *SLURP* it.

ABG-078 **2005 Blauer Zweigelt Haid**

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

weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

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

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

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

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



Martin Nigl

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

- 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

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

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

Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I once saw—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles are wines with a high, keening brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate, as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there.

It's all well and good for wines to be filigree; refinement is good. But too much refinement can be arch or precious. *What* are we refining, that is the question. What impresses me about Nigl is his depth of texture. There are layers upon layers of the loveliest raw-silken fruit-mineral jazz, a little nubby and not so smooth the palate can't

adhere, and just as you fall happily *through* all those cirrusy layers, you notice how crystalline it all is. I remember a music reviewer praising a pianist's delicacy of touch by saying "You can hear his fingerprints on the keys." It's like that.

2006 is a curious vintage for Martin, something like 2000 without the botrytis, or like 2003 but with more structure. In keeping with '06 in general, everything is ratcheted up a notch – or two notches. This is wonderful

for the low-end wines, which have never tasted so rich and complex, but at times the top wines seemed like caricatures of their usual selves. When I think of Nigl's astonishing 1998s, which were so keen and brilliant in a vintage where many other wines were ablaze with alcoholic vulgarity and botrytis-bitterness, I wonder what's changed since then. I hope nothing, and that '06 is an aberrant year where a couple wines went awry.

Nigl at a glance:

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

- AFN-125 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit** +
 The nose is less flowery than the 2005, plumper, with more legume and hyssop, but this is almost like Martin's *Alte Reben* from a normal vintage; dense and "sweet" and sweet-pea and somehow *solidly* creamy. It's a 2-class upgrade in '06, by far the most important-tasting of any Freiheit vintage in memory.
- AFN-127 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri** +
 Primordial iron here, like wisteria growing on black ore; unusually juicy and typically detailed, chiseld and silky; it's analytical, studious, you can feel the gears turn, like looking inside a spring-wound watch; again that sly sideways smile of sweetness, and again the clinging length. Much of the quality of a regular vintage *Privat*.
- AFN-130 **2006 Riesling Senftenberger Piri** +
 Piri's terroir print is strong this year, almost trumping the varietal, though this is more filigree than the GrüVe – now you're looking inside the watch with a magnifying glass; it's both delicate and strong, with a nubby sort of fluidity and burning-leaf smoky length. Ultra-fine Riesling.



AFN-126 **2006 Riesling Kremsteil**

Away from Urgestein now, this perennially fruit-driven Riesling comes from a steep site near the mouth of the Kremns on loess. In '06 it's exotic (as if botrytis or perhaps actually so), very strong as if it were blended with 10% of its own grappa; there's massive fruit but keep it clear of open flames. For its weight it's remarkably well-structured and not really fatiguing but I peered around looking for Helen Turley's invoice for the consultation.

AFN-131 **2006 Riesling "Privat"****(+)**AFN-131M **2006 Riesling "Privat" MAGNUMS**

In an odd way, this almost pastiche of a Riesling Icon actually manages a sort of balance – it isn't grotesquely over-fruity, but it's a sort of iris and iron porn, redeemed somewhat by a compound-butter richness and by its freedom from botrytis, ample physio-sweetness, and *actual* RS of 5 g.l. It's not for lovers of subtlety. . . .but that's a small society.

AFN-132 **2006 Gelber Muskateller**

Now that's more like it. A sleek, crisp, mineral-faceted, hugely charming orange-blossom fragrance leads to a wine with tons of crushed stones and agreeable phenolics; wonderful length to this gleamy-piercing wine, which so perfectly embodies the notion of drinking-JOY.

AFN-134 **2005 Blauer Zweigelt**

A year in large ovals, and about as delicious and loveable as wine can be; sweet-cherry almost Pnot Noir fragrance, or even Ripasso-Valpolicella; the palate is juicy and tasty, and given its fundamental (and wonderful) simplicity it has considerable length and a tasty finish.

AFN-133H **2006 Grüner Veltliner Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml****+**

This is in effect the liqueur of the Alte Reben with clean botrytis and enormous firm intensity. I wasn't going to offer it at first but there are so few of these, and this one really sings.



salomon undhof

kremstal • stein

What with Erich Salomon's recent health challenges, this family could use some good news, and this is it: 2006 is likely the best vintage in their recent history. It certainly is exponentially better than anything since '97, and may equal that all-time great year. When I started it was just Erich, waiting to see whether either of his daughters would indicate an interest in maintaining the estate. Bert was the wizard at the Wine Marketing Board — they're brothers, in case you didn't know. I warmed to Erich immediately. Either he is virtuosically charming or else somehow the two of us agreed in some basic way. I like to think it's that.

Bert left the Board and came to Stein to help brother Erich out, and he's gradually received the Torch, though I sense Erich is eager to get back into the fray now that he's no longer hobbled

by illness. The two of them are sweethearts—there's really no other word, and though I'm sure they get as ratty and truculent as we all do, they start from somewhere closer to beatific, at least closer than I. Nor are they a couple Prince Mishkins; they are in fact sharp cookies. They're just incredibly nice men.

The new tasting room is done and all signs of construction are gone. The linden tree looks fully recovered from its skirmish with the forklift. Do you know that story? Apparently one of the construction crew backed a forklift, into the linden and tore off some bark and may have penetrated the wood. So Erich set about to heal the tree. He layered the torn bark back over the wood and held it in place, I don't recall precisely how. But the

"bandage" had to be changed every so often, which he did, and the result is a lovely old tree nursed back to health by a man who loves it. And a man who will care for a tree from sheer affection is the sort of man I want making wines for me.



Erich and Berthold Salomon

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

A few years ago Erich decided to modernize his

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

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

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

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

Erich is quite selfless in his promotion of the wines of

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

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

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

There’s a Knowing text for The price list, a bit of which I’d like you to see. “Great sites and careful work in them are the basis for good or great wines. Our wine-

making is based on this principle; give the wine peace to develop itself. Charming, elegant and long-lived wines are our goals — wines that blossom with food and help food blossom. We’re uninterested in Powerwines with 14% or higher alcohol.”

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

Erich’s condition was fragile, I was told, and we might not get to see him, though he knew we were there and sent regards. He’d had a really debilitating flu which he’d caught in a weakened state from treatment for his other illness. Yet there he was, almost bounding across the courtyard, looking thin but not peaked, and quite entirely bald. “It’s my Bruce Willis phase,” he announced with a grin. We sat and schmoozed for a few minutes. He declined tasting, and seemed to feel himself in our way. When he excused himself I was sorry to see him go, though of course I understood. Whatever effort of energy it took to come out and say hello was touching beyond words. I watched him retreat back across the courtyard and felt my eyes grow moist. This isn’t at all lachrymose; I have every confidence I’ll have other chances to sit and kibbitz with Erich again. It was just so characteristic of his innate consideration to emerge to greet my colleagues and me.

This is a good man, I heard myself think. How many times in our lives do we think those words? It seems like a small enough thing, to be a good man. But when you meet one you realize it is both rare and no small thing at all. I want some day to be a good man myself. Erich makes it look like the easiest thing a person can do.

how the wines taste:

Since 1997 these are modern wines, more filigree than juicy (except perhaps the Riesling Pfaffenberg), and with delicate transparent textures. This is how they RENDER what are often highly expressive fruit-terroir statements, falling somewhere between the demure and the ostentatious.

ASU-084 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Hochterrassen”**

Jeez, what a vintage; this “little” wine sports a tidy 13% alc; a nice plump fragrance; in fact the whole *thing* isn’t as lean and chiseled as usual; it’s dimpled and friendly and unusually long. 4-square in a good forthright way. I mentioned to Bert I wished for this wine to show more pure fruit, and this one does.

ASU-088 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Wachtberg**

The site is loess over an urgestein bed; a fine fragrance almost like Nigl’s Piri; the palate is spicy and classically peppery, nice and full and zippy, with lots of ore. *Outstanding value.*

- ASU-090 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lindberg “Reserve”** ++
 From the vintages I’m familiar with, this is the greatest GrüVe in the history of the estate; perfect varietal aromas, and a rich, animated and intricate palate, like a salad of 15 greens and herbs and 10 edible flowers, mixed with Reggiano, candied ginger and a quinine note like certain Savignins, though this is creamier and sweeter-seeming. By the way, the genetics of GrüVe have finally been isolated, though it hasn’t solved the mystery; one parent is Traminer and the other is an unknown vine that’s never been named. But I for one will drink a glass to the unknown, any time.
- ASU-091 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Von Stein Reserve** +
 This is noble, and nobly difficult; more smoldering and pulsing, less straight-lined than the Lindberg, possibly even greater, albeit more oblique. But what stark mineral and what meaty smoke, like Iberico *jamon* and cherry-tobacco.
- ASU-085 **2006 Riesling “Steinterrassen”**
 A clean, keen apple-y Riesling, correct and down-the-middle, with a slight phenolic kick: a stand-at-attention wine.
- ASU-086 **2006 Riesling Kögl** +
 The best at least since the `99 and maybe even longer back; classic site aromas (iris, wisteria, white pepper, peppermint, parsnip); this wine is spiffy and turned-out; wry and long, an arch young cat who knows he cuts a figure.
- ASU-092 **2006 Riesling Pfaffenberg**
 The great Grand Cru was a little grumpy on the day; bottle-sick. Its nearly 8 g.l. acidity played a role. It seems hard-core, a little angular; I had to coax it to get to the dried apricot fruit and mealy umami. I think this wine is better, maybe a lot better, than it seemed this day.
- ASU-087 **2006 Riesling Kögl “Reserve”** ++
 This really does recall the supernally great `97, with fervid spice and “sweetness,” a neon buzz of fire and ice, a second layer of wintergreen and key-lime, and a splendid minty-mineral finish – this is *great* wine folks.
- ASU-093 **2006 Riesling Pfaffenberg “Reserve”** +
 The label says “Metternich und Salomon” because the families collaborate in co-proprietorship of the vineyard. And the wine was so good I wrote “How much can one man *stand*?” It’s a bonfire of complexity but you can’t pick it to pieces and all it does is glow and burn. There is a rhubarb note, something of roasted red pepper and even candied lemon, but overall is smoke and lilac and incense.
- ASU-094 **1962 Pfaffenberg Riesling** ++

In the process of moving into a place of his own and out of the Undhof (which Bert & family now occupy) Erich has been doing some spring-cleaning of his cellar.

We got three wines to taste, blind. No way could we possibly have guessed them. The first was a 1977 *Muscat Ottonel* which was freaky-young, still green-leafy on the palate, dry and lovely and no weirder than today’s Zippy The Pinhead strip.

I got remotely close to the next wine; thought it was Traminer. It was in fact a 1969 *Müller-Thurgau*, to my slack-jawed astonishment. The wine’s supposed to have a “drink-by” date on the label!

The next wine was the one above. There are only 20 cases, so we’ll have to piddle them out. Still 45-year old Riesling doesn’t come down the pike that often, from its original cellar in utter mint condition. I could easily have written many hundreds of words about this amazing wine, had I the time to watch it unfurl in the glass and the silence to hear it without distraction. Superficially, it showed a profound old-Riesling nose, mossy, still minerally palate, dry, herbal, and that was the text of the first five minutes. It’s a wine of meditation, as still as a garden in the moonlight. I was a child of eight living in New Delhi in 1962. Where were you?

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

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

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

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

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

Yes I want to tell you about the wines so that

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



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

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

Now let's talk about Willi.

weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

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

I'm also impressed by Willi's decision to hold his biggest wines back from release until he feels they're more ready. The 2005 old-vines GrüVe and Riesling and the monumental Lamm GrüVe weren't seen till early 2007, a principled choice with financial consequences, that only a market "leader" could make. But our thoughtful and charming friend is deceptively mild in his social persona. Beneath the surface lies courage and a bedrock integrity.

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

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

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very alert. He follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the "Wine Professor" because of



Willi Bründlmayer

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

his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are, come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

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

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

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

Visitors to Austria are encouraged to enjoy a meal at Bründlmayer's *Heurige*, especially in outdoors-weather

where the smokers won't shorten your life by ten years. The food's great, the wines are wonderful, the vibe is genial and you'll have a great time provided you are able to breathe.

I also think Willi's wines are changing somewhat from the time I first encountered them, or perhaps it is I who have changed. They are like an extremely good-look-

ing woman (or man!) who wears very understated clothes. They are almost completely without affect, but with great candor and transparency. I also appreciate the willingness to risk, even when I'm unconvinced by the results. I'm sure Willi would say "It keeps things interesting."

Bründlmayer at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

ABY-164 **2004 Bründlmayer Sekt**

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

The same base as last year, with *dosage* made from a 1983 Spätlese, running to about 8-9 grams. Unlike Gobelsburg's fizz, Willi's is made from the Pinots Blanc, Noir and Gris plus a little Chardonnay. With another year of age it's leesier and more sweet-straw, but still bright and high-relief; it's longer than I recall, with a lot of tactile action on the palate.

ABY-179 **Bründlmayer Brut Rosé**

We owe the existence of this lovely wine to Willi's equally lovely wife Edwige, who likes pink fizz it seems. In fact it's all 2004 though the label won't say; one-third each Pinot Noir, St. Laurent and Zweigelt. It's very likely *one of a kind*, for those in search of the unique, and it has absolutely lovely Rosé aromas closest to Lallement in its fervent blackberry and violet nuances; it's quite racy and Champagne-like with tight bright fruit, a pleasing tartness, good length, and a texture like torn silk. Dosage is 9.5 g.l. from a mix of wood-aged still Rosé plus St. Laurent grappa!

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

- ABY-175 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Kamptaler Terrassen”**
 As always a cuvée from various small parcels and from young vines in the Grand Crus – Willi won’t use their names unless the vines are old enough to convey their characters. Willi was only the second guy I visited, so I was struck by the way 2006 electrified the “everyday” wines; this is all toasted straw and hay with wonderfully juicy green-beany length.
- ABY-181 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg** **+**
 I put me a big ol’ “TT” next to my tasting note cuz I’m *buy me some* of this puppy. You know, there’s lots of good wines just like there’s lots of good movies on DVD. Yet some I rent and some I own, and the difference is whether I know I’ll want to watch them over and over. It’s the same here; I know I’ll never tire of this wine; it is wonderfully brilliant and mineral, with a kind of civilized ferocity; amazing length, focus; lentilly and fenelly and full of mizuna, and the *slight* RS brings a chiseled keen piquancy. The wuthering schisty terraces seem predestined for Riesling, so this becomes a GrüVe for Riesling lovers.
- ABY-180H **2006 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml**
 More primary rock now; all vetiver and lavishly juicy and lush, and that straw and hay thing that seems to be a signature of Willi’s 2006s.
- ABY-182 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** **++**
 At first I thought I’d wait on this, since we still have the lovely 2002. But Austria being Austria, there’s a good chance I’d miss out on it entirely, and that just can’t happen with such a symphony of mineral density and peppery brilliance. I’m willing to take my chances with the (excellent) ‘06 Ried Lamm – but not with this.
- ABY-113 **2002 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** **+**
Thank you all for restoring my faith that a “back-vintage” wine could find an eager clientele based on how it tastes. You bought a lot of this last year. It’s still good. This ‘02 has density, strength, grace, length and fragrance, *real* growing-up wine fragrance. It has “only” 12.5% alc, so all its density comes from *inner* material; it’s a touchstone wine, a passionate introvert. I’m thrilled to be able to offer it.
- ABY-114 **2002 Grüner Veltliner Käferberg** **+**
 I’ve been drinking this at home when a big White Burgundy type is called for; it’s nice to have something even better, fresher, cheaper, and friendlier to my food. Käferberg is always the creamy one, but with the 2002 aromatics starting to unfurl this is some glorious wine indeed; it will blow away any skeptics who may still be out there. GrüVe is the shit!



- ABY-189 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg Auslese** ++
 Friends, Willi doesn't make dessert-wine very often, but starting with his jaw-dropping '98 series, when he does, he makes some of the *best sweet wine on EARTH*. And this wine is one of those "doesn't get better than this" experiences; verbena and lime blossom aromas; the palate is snappy, spritzy and exotic – almost brings Loewen's *Thörnicher Ritsch* to mind – Crenshaw melon, minty spice, not at all "sweet", but neon-brilliant and full of rare flowers, and it all leads to a dry finish. This is certainly the greatest non-dry GrüVe table wine I've ever tasted.
- ABY-191H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Käferberg BA, 12/375ml** ++
 In essence it really isn't possible to make better sweet wine than this, in Austria or maybe anywhere. It's perfect GrüVe and wonderful "dessert" wine, not remotely creamy but pointedly focused and varietal and adamantly spicy. Actually this is a wine for cheese rather than dessert.
- ABY-192H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg TBA, 12/375ml** +++
 Oh, um, well maybe it is possible to make even better sweet wine. My bad. This is the kind of wine that both melts me and galvanizes me, because it shows what is *possible*; you can make sweet wine that isn't just another honeyed figgy syrup, but instead a wine that is the quintessence of the Auslese, with all of its clarity and minerality intact and visible, not hidden under a same-old same-old botrytis blanket. Indeed this wine is all *green*, all Loiser Berg, all streamlined, focused and ecstatic. You need this in your life, but please don't buy it all until my dibs are in.

RIESLINGS

- ABY-183 **2006 Riesling "Kamptaler Terrassen"**
 Again this toasted straw thing; it's ripe and pulsing with warmth; peony and mineral and hedge-flower; it's more "horizontal" than usual but oh-so-tasty.
- ABY-184 **2006 Riesling Steinmassel** +
 From these high windy slopes on schisty granite comes one of Austria's great *unexceptional* Rieslings, showing instead the basis for their greatness. And this is the best vintage in many, many years; pure wisteria and less "mineral" than precious stones. This morning at my breakfast buffet they had three carafes of water with various semi-precious stones in the bottoms; I had water over amethyst and it was...just water. This on the other hand is just saturated with petals and minerals.
- ABY-185 **2006 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein** +
 ABY-185H **2006 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**
 Rieslings from this Grand Cru are so remarkable in 2006 there's something of a flattening whereby even the "basic" wine resembles the old-vines in a normal year. Certainly this bottling is arrestingly dense, complex and spicy, fervent and passionate and very long. A few pages further on I have a profile of this site and its neighbor Gaisberg wherein each vineyard's signature flavors are described; this wine is all Heiligenstein.

ABY-186 **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein “Lyra”** +
 The name refers to Bründlmayer’s trellising method, a Y-shaped system that looks “as if the vine is throwing its arms up toward the heavens,” says Willi. This system also more than doubles the leaf-surface exposed to sunlight and encourages quick drying of leaf and grape alike after a rain. Willi also wants to demonstrate you don’t *need* old vines to make great wine.

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

What a lovely thing to say.

Yet with all that, the 2006 stages a curious and lovely role-reversal. Normally Lyra’s the *yellow* or *orange* one, but this year it seems *greener* than the regular bottling; a lyric of laurel and woodruff and thyme blossom with unfathomable length and an end-palate mint that comes out of nowhere.

ABY-187 **2006 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein Alte Reben** ++
 At times this wine has been too much for me; too alcoholic or too brooding or too botrytisey, but this ‘06 is mind-bogglingly great Riesling; minerality seems to stretch from the beginning to the end of time; it’s bodily and pheromonal and erotic and also spiritual; there’s a stinging lash of mint and pepper and an anvil of density that occupies the palate and doesn’t yield; subtle sagey notes season a kiloton of stones; the finish goes on for an hour and the mineral notes act as if they’ll *never* leave. Gravity, genius, incandescence – all here.

THE BEST OF THE REST

ABY-188 **2004 Pinot Noir “Cecile”**
 I have “permitted” some of Willi’s reds to be shipped though I myself have been cool toward them, but if you tasted and liked them then I won’t stand in your way. THIS one I like! There’s a superb Burgundian nose like the old Pousse d’Or Santenays; in fact this is super Pinot Noir, juicy and long, a *little* bell-pepper (like some Beaunes) and a lot of leek and crispies from the fat-cap of a pork-roast; almost a licorice note; nubby, thready tannin and wonderful length. For me the best Willi-red I’ve tasted; less aloof, more amenable.

By the way, what’s with the common plural in “tannins?” Is there more than one? *How* many are there? Isn’t “tannin” just as apropos a usage as “tannins?” Yes I know about grape versus wood tannin, but it seems to me someone thinks “tannins” sounds *smarter* than just-plain “tannin.” Why stop there? How ‘bout *fruits* instead of boring old “fruit?” *Vinosities* instead of “vinosity?” We can all sound like geniuses of palate and prose if we just make plurals out of everythings.

ABY-190 **2006 Gelber Muskateller Auslese**
 Not “Auslese” in the German idiom; more *feinherb* – but wonderfully zingy, spicy, varietal and balanced, as if you took Moscato d’Asti and threw in some dry Alsace Muscat – albeit with botrytis (or even better, *botrytises*) – herbal, balsam, charming and gorgeous.

NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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



Heiligenstein vineyard

weingut schloss gobelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

We're sitting in the tasting room and the windows are thrown open on the mild Spring day. The omnipresent birds are trolling for mates (thrushes and blackbirds all day and half the night; I got to the point I hoped to be awakened at dawn by them) and a brisk Spring wind is enchanted with flowers, all forming an aural backdrop to the verdant young wines in our glasses. But soon we heard a new sound, voices, little-kid voices to be precise, and we wandered over to the window and saw Michi's little daughter giggling away with her tiny friend. Remember, a Spring day, breezes and birds, and now this impossibly beautiful little girl in her cotton frock and bonnet, chirping and laughing and scolding. I watched Michi gaze at his girl. He was in the middle of serving me the greatest collection of Grüner Veltliner I've ever experienced, and he's very

much The Guy right now in Austria – FALSTAFF cover-portrait as vintner of the year, everyone saying his estate is top of the rock...but for a moment he was just a dad gazing on his tiny daughter trilling away to her friend in the enormous Spring.

You know, life sometimes arranges these delicate convergences, which ignite and send out tiny streamers. A couple nights ago at the ballpark there was a pair of ducks who wouldn't get off the infield dirt; they were driving the groundcrew nuts, and the game needed to start, and there was quite the conflation of dirt and feathers and arms waving and ducks quacking and at one



Michael Moosbrugger

point one of the groundscrew guys just lost it and bent over laughing, and soon the others were laughing too, and the umpires were laughing and finally the affronted ducks waddled off blithely. I watched them fly over the outfield, under the lights. Ducks. Soon the *game* would begin.

There is certainly no one *better* in this offering. I am awed

by the dedication and long-term idealism of Michael – Michi – Moosbrugger, and I am keenly thrilled by his wines. But perhaps even more, I am touched by the grace and kindness of Willi Bründlmayer's gift to us all. Bründlmayer? Explain. Schloss Gobelsburg has a centuries-old monastic tradition, during which, as Michi puts it, "There were periods when the wines were great and periods when they weren't; after all, not every generation of monks had the same passion or skill. But what was always true was

- **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**

the quality of the land." When Willi first told me the story he too pointed to the vineyards. "Terry, it is some of the absolute best land in the Kamptal," he said.

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

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.

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

Gradually, one step at a time, Moosbrugger has

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

Michi is aware of the gravity of a Great Tradition, but rather than weigh him down it seems to prod him on. If he is aware of occupying a place in history, I imagine it's to hope that, hundreds of years from now, someone will read a chronicle of Schloss Gobelsburg and cite his era as one of enlightenment. He is certainly an example of leaving the world better than you found it!

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



how the wines taste:

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

AZZ-070 **NV Brut Reserve**

I have enjoyed bamboozling my friends when I serve them this blind; they are certain I'd be serving them Champagne, me being me and all, and they wrack their brains trying to figure out varieties and sub-districts but they are *sure the wine in their glass is Champagne*, i.e., they don't promptly conclude "This can't possibly be Champagne." In fact I think it's the best non-Champagne fizz I've tasted, and wonderfully it is nothing like Champagne — it's 15% Riesling, 15% Pinot Noir and 70% Grüner Veltliner thank you very much. Riesling and GrüVe derive from pre-harvests in the Grand Crus like Lamm and Gaisberg (!). The current disgorgement (1/07) is based on 2002-2003-2004, and it remains silky, focused, loveable and classy, with perfectly judged dosage (8g.l.); it's plump and dimpled and just *cooing* with fruit.

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

AZZ-102 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Gobelsburger"**

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

You've sussed what an *astounding* value this is, smart guy. I keep looking intently at Michi as if to ask "You can't really keep offering me this quality at this price can you? I mean really?" And he looks bemusedly back. This 2006 is as crazed as you'll by now expect; it's nutty, lentilly, full of sorrel and dill, almost nutmeg — "It brings out the Traminer genetics of GrüVe in this vintage," says Michi — And there is a kind of Savignin-Auxerrois spice and pepper. Again miles above its class in sheer length and expression.

- AZZ-105 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz** +
 The first of the great GrüVes at Gobelsburg, from a high plateau south of the palace, on tertiary gravel along with huge rocks from the original Danube, all blanketed below a layer of loess. This '06 seems to beat from some sort of quartz battery, receiving signals of extraterrestrial minerality; hyssop and green-apple, wonderful *cut* and spice and secret sweetness; minty high tones, grassy mid-tones and tropical low tones. At least as good as the remarkable '05.
- AZZ-106 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Renner**
 The site lies at the foot of the Gaisberg where the stony gneiss soil is deeper and contains loess; the vines were planted in the 50s, from old original plant material — this is significant in Austria, where the post-war years saw the plantings of various modern garbage-clones whose only function was to yield like crazy. Starting with the 2001 vintage this has been a highlight of this assortment, a big-scaled Grüner Veltliner of amazing value and contained elegant weight and power, with detail and economy. The nose is doughier than the Steinsetz's; more lemon, but still with an oyster shell overtone. In 06 it isn't just shining, it is *beaming*. Endlessly, juicily happy. Intense like you can't stop laughing. Go on, TRY to find me a better GrüVe value – hell, a better *white wine* value!
- AZZ-107 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Grub** ++
 No it isn't *food* made from GrüVe, though in most vintages it has seemed to collapse under its leviathan solidity, and I haven't offered it. This miraculous 2006 is huge and dense but also deft and graceful; "sweet" and Burgundian (Puligny) with a deep well of vinosity, and the well is also full of apricots and seckel pears and cox-orange pippins; it's as rich as an avocado, and its 6g.l. RS does it no harm I can discern.
- AZZ-108 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** +++
 AZZ-108M **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, MAGNUMS**
 This is becoming one of the supernal and monumental GrüVes in Austria.
- Great wine always indicates a contrast between strength and delicacy, between intensity and precision. That's why great wine doesn't come along very often. This is mind-warping quality; brilliance and intensity at an insanely high pitch; monstrously exotic and spicy but fervidly clear; absolutely symmetrical and proportioned; squeaky-clean (no botrytis!) and transparent. All of Lamm's signature flavors are here (rosemary, lamb, rye-bread rusks) and all just incandescent. What a wine.
- AZZ-109 **2005 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition"** +
 This is a deliberate attempt to replicate the style of 50 years ago—conventional pressing on the skins, no must-clarification, no temperature control, and 18 months in old casks with frequent rackings to encourage secondary flavors. It's not a pastiche so much as an *homage* to an old dialect of white wine disappearing from the modern world.
- He's done it five vintages now with GrüVe and I admire the *gratitude* these wines embody. This is charming, "sweet" and vinous, banana-sweet, peony-pretty; less sinewy than the 04, more enveloping, with the Renner sweetness (the wine always comes from Renner) – yes that's three references to "sweet," but this is just adorable wine.



RIESLINGS

- AZZ-100 **2006 Riesling “Gobelsburger”** +
Hel-LOW! No no no; it can't be this good; it isn't allowed; it is all the zing and spice and crystalline fruit of Austrian Riesling; absurdly fine and expressive at an absurd price!
- AZZ-104 **2006 Riesling vom Urgestein**
AZZ-104H **2006 Riesling vom Urgestein, 12/375ml**
From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heiligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it's really complex on a scale of its own. Abstract from body or alcohol, there's a symposium of flavor happening here, the tropical-mineral Heiligenstein, the berry-mineral Gaisberg. In effect it's like a *bonsai* of Riesling; it isn't supposed to be “big” but instead to enthrall you with its detail. But the fruit of this '06 is so creamy it doesn't taste like young vines at all; in fact it tastes like Gaisberg – lilac, blackberry, wisteria – but there's an exotic, almost animal note of Heiligenstein; iridescent, eager, aloof all at once, like the breath of a peacock.
- AZZ-111 **2006 Riesling Gaisberg** ++(+)
In bottle 5 weeks so I suspect I'm understating its fruit – but not its deranged minerality; itchy-salty complexity with a mass if iris, orchid, green tea, tilleul, blackberry – what a vintage!
- AZZ-112 **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein** +
Here is otherworldly Riesling, nothing of any fruit or flower, just this mystic smoky incense-y *atmosphere*; minty and firm, complex and wild, roses and red pepper come on with time in the glass, but this is really *savage*; we're talking Star Trek terroir here.
- AZZ-113 **2006 Riesling Alte Reben** ++
From 59-year old vines in the Gaisberg; power with wings; sublime fruit, some amazing amalgam of raspberries and *fraises de bois*; clarity, grip, flower, mineral, mint; it will dilate your pupils; sweetly green, lime blossom, wisteria — *enough!* “Terry has a tendency to gush,” wrote someone on one of the online boards: fair enough. But you *weren't there*. What, I wonder, is the appropriate response to such extraordinary beauty?
- AZZ-116H **2006 Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** +
A concentrate of the mineral and flower of the vintage; it is shapely and salty and refined and I am clean out of words. I've gushed my final gush, until tomorrow.

BEST OF THE REST

- AZZ-114 **2005 Zweigelt “Gobelsburger”**
A Burgundian fragrance napped with Zweigelt violet and milk chocolate; medium-weight but sumptuous palate; soft but not spineless: tasty! Any reasonable human being will love drinking this.
- AZZ-115 **2004 Pinot Noir Alte Haide**
Made in part from 45-year old vines in an oblique slope of the Heiligenstein, and it's a very pretty Pinot, again *Burgundian*, silky, soy and sandalwood, immensely sweet aromas with a slightly dusty touch like Clos st.-Denis or even certain Bonnes Mares; there's a classic intensity here, and I love its easeful length and grace. A makes-it-look easy wine, though we all know it isn't a bit easy.

weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

We went to Hiedler directly from Nigl, having been forewarned that Ludwig's wines were also outsized in 2006, and maybe not my style. But big though they certainly were, something in Ludwig's basic approach made them not only palatable but successful. Their size is permitted by their creaminess; another way to say it is they have enough sauce to wash them down. Extract, remember, buffers every other component in a wine including alcohol, and no one's wines are higher in extract than Hiedler's. But more on this later.

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

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

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

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

Ludwig is sensually identified with his GrüVes and



María & Ludwig Hiedler

Pinot Blancs, yet his Rieslings are usually much better than he thinks they are, because he doesn't really *gestate* them as he does his others. They emerge from another body, as it were, but they emerge as nothing but miracles, some of Austria's most stirring Rieslings. Yet they seem less like his own children than like nieces and nephews, still blood, but one step removed.

When I tell him his Rieslings are great he is pleased enough, but his expression indicates *Well O.K., if you say so...*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ferent yeast culture for each grape variety, the first time I have seen this.

Or *used*, I should say. Because his latest experiments are to do spontaneous fermentation without enzymes or even SO₂, which he did with 95% of his '05s and all of his '06s. This is part of his — and Austrian vintners generally — retreat from "internationalism." When they arrived on the world stage they were, naturally, eager to join the prevailing currents; they spoke with colleagues from all over and went back home full of notions and ideas. All of which is harmless, and maybe even good. But not as good as stepping away from the plausible norms prevailing any-old-where to revisit what's *uniquely* yours. "We want to return to our cussed individuality!" said Hiedler, laughing.

This is why I love his wines, and him.

Hiedler at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

AHL-120 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Loess"** +
(swirl, swirl, swirl. . .) . . .this *should* be good. . . it sure smells good. . . it *IS* good; wow, it's almost the size of the *Thal* in most years; it's muscular and plump and entirely out-sized (12.7 % alc vs. 11.5% for the '05) and full of pepper and barley and bread-dumpling — another upgrade! Do you know how lucky you are?

AHL-121 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Thal**
I never get the same answer twice when I ask about the soil here; this time it's *urgestein* and the next time it's *loess* and Ludwig's fact-sheet refers to "red sand," so maybe it's simply "weathered triceratops dandruff from the Paleozoic age" or something. In any case the wine is always juicy and exotic — the Viognier cognate is especially vivid here. Old vines (around 70), and weighing in with a cool 14%; it's massive and charred and smoky but it does its creamy-tropical thing as always, and it's supported by a teensy bit of RS; it's markedly dense and stocky, if perhaps a bit too emphatic.

AHL-122 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "November"**

AHL-122M **2006 Grüner Veltliner "November" MAGNUMS**

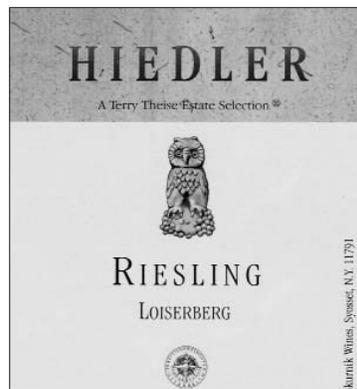
Even at 14.7% alc it preserves some kind of wackoid balance; roasted corn, bison, meringue, dark chocolate; the big creamy extract permits the high alcohol — the wine didn't get its first racking till the beginning of March — and this salty wine is *slathered* with vinosity; it's roasted but not scorched. Yes it's exaggerated but not really overdone.

AHL-123 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum"**

This is a laugh, in every way almost a send-up of the "intense" school of winemaking; the thing is nearly hallucinatory in its sweet power; wildly aromatic, full-throttle roar of richness; goes back to classic vetiver aromas in the empty glass; herbs, apples, green nuts; a weird miracle to be sure, but not an easy one for a pensive guy like me. I was happier among the Rieslings.

- AHL-126 **2006 Riesling “Urgestein”**
 This replaces the old *Loiser Berg* because now it contains 15% from a new parcel in our friend *Steinmassel*. The wine is herbal and rocky like the upcoming *Steinhaus*, with lime and wintergreen, but less pure apple and more caraway, fennel and dill; it’s juicy and dry and nettley, with an herbal note like dandelion greens.
- AHL-125 **2006 Riesling Steinhaus** +
 Ludwig calls this a “rampant” vineyard; it has amphibolite and gneiss in the higher terraces and loess in the lower, and it always gives him a singular Riesling that hints at Sauvignon. Flint and *kirsch* and eau-de-vie; this is wonderful Riesling, somewhere between Piri and Steinerthal; mint, irises and mountain bacon; shimmering and juicy and with a lovely yin-yang of salt and (slight!) sweetness; marvelous zingy length.
- AHL-127 **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein** ++
 AHL-127M **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein, MAGNUMS**
 This is really primordial; like some smoke from burning extinct plants. The fruit is singularly fascinating; chiogga beets and rhubarb; there’s a heavenly sort of serenity and luminosity, and a sweetness like *prosciutto di San Daniele*: gorgeous length and real Grand Cru complexity; the wine is an ethereal chorus of pure love and gratitude.
- AHL-128 **2006 Riesling “Maximum”** +++
 This I did *not* expect!
- A symphonic aroma, supernally green, wintergreen, white chocolate; it’s the chorus with the men’s voices removed; it smells like dessert but tastes like dinner; it has that sweet-animal fragrance of a really good Salumeria that reeks of Reggiano and Parma; there’s notes of balsam and freesia and salt, and a superbly *contained* power; in fact less “power” than a kind of purpose and capaciousness. One of the greatest big-wines I’ve ever tasted, and Ludwig’s Riesling masterpiece.
- AHL-130 **2006 Sauvignon Blanc**
 15.2% alc, yet for some reason I didn’t find it annoying, at least not that day. It was picked at 110° Oechsle and I can’t tell you why it works, and I’m wary if it even does, but in the service of candor I liked the sweet-roasted red pepper and I’ll just have to taste it again and see if I was bamboozled or whether maybe even my sacred principles are more flexible than I thought.
- AHL-124 **2006 Weissburgunder “Maximum”** +
 On the gross lees till mid-April, and this is a great big vintage of this world-class Pinot Blanc – often I suspect it may be the world’s greatest – 51-year old vines; a wild corn-fritter fragrance and the lees are almost honeyed; there are certain almost GrüVe notes, white pepper and flowering fields but also duck-skin and plums and scallions; it’s quite heady and you don’t gulp it unless you’re eager to lapse into a coma, but it’s a wine of plenty and overt generosity.

By the way, if you’re wondering where the 2005 went, we appear to have received an offer for a few cases some time last Fall, and didn’t jump on them fast enough. Austria!



the matter of “globalization”

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

why I should care.

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

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

And we romantics need to realize certain things too.

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

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

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

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



weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

Hannes could be forgiven for appearing a little preoccupied when we visited; his wife had just given birth to *twins*. So they've got *three* kids in diapers; the most recently arrived answer to Florian and Josef, and they fall asleep hand in hand. "After all, they were in the womb together," Hannes says; "They're used to each other."

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

'Hannes is one of around five or six vintners who decided to join the biodynamic frater

nity two years ago, and who are in the multi-year process of certification. In the vineyards all is well. In the parlors all is — political.

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

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

My wife, who's a doyenne of the sustainable agriculture movement for some thirty years now, says you gotta tough it out. I'm sure she's right. But my heart goes out to the lone wolves of the world. Politics always reduces to a lowest-common-denominator. If I were ever asked to join some Riesling conclave (like *that* would ever happen . . .) I'd politely decline, even if I agreed with the principles and supported the work. Because my work is *living* the principles, at least I hope it is, and it's pleasant to consider a world of *individual* people each trying to do the right thing. As opposed to the grim spectacle of a bunch of people quarreling about how much cubic zirconia has to go into the cow horn.

A lot of you have met 'Hannes, so you know he's sharp and funny and makes really *sizzling* wines. But you may not know what a sophisticated thinker he is. Nor what cool-bloodedness it took to hear all the virulent gossip about how his winery was on the brink of ruin thanks to screw-caps. All of this could obscure the wines themselves, but it doesn't have to. These are intelligently conceived wines of scintillating expressiveness and bewitching spice from a man who knows exactly what he's doing, and why.

• Vineyard area: 24 hectares

Annual production: 10,800 cases

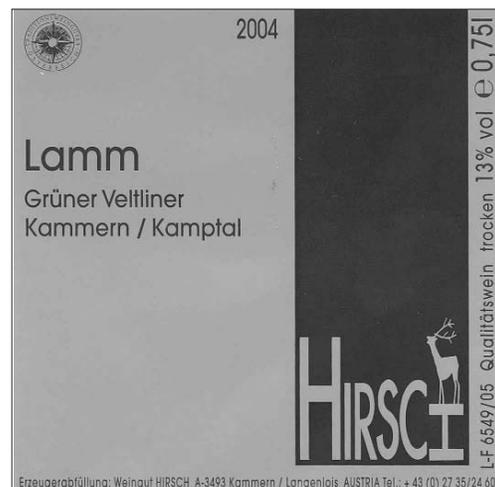
Top sites: Lamm, Gaisberg, Heiligenstein

Soil types: Loess, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles

Grape varieties: 60% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling, 5% other varieties

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 out-



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

I asked Johannes Hirsch if he thought he had a watershed vintage or breakthrough year, but he said no, just a steady climb up with small refinements and incremental improvements all the time. The wines are whole-cluster pressed with all that implies. There's plen-

ty of land in great vineyards.

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

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 2006s constitute the twelfth consecutive "1st Growth" vintage from this superstar.

how the wines taste:

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

AWH-060 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Veltliner #1"**

The first of what became a wave of cheap & cheerful GrüVes now rampaging through the market like the bulls in Pamplona. I remember Hanes and I "conceptualizing" this wine; we knew we wanted something fetching and aromatic, we knew we didn't mind a few grams of sugar you can't taste but which elevates the wine, and we knew we'd pay the little bit more it would cost to whole-cluster press it. I didn't know how witty the wonderful sequence of labels would be, but I love them changing each year. The 2006 shows the roasted-pepper side of GrüVe, and the palate is firm and stony and generous; an accommodating and easy wine.

AWH-059 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein**

AWH-059H **2006 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

Ripe and creamy '06 fragrance; iris and plantain; this is a PAR-TAY! GrüVe; it salivates with fruit; it's peppery and juicy, a classic mid-range GrüVe, the kind of wine where you don't need anything else ever, or so it feels.

AWH-061 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lamm**

+

Quite different from Gobelsburg's, and actually more like his *Grub* in its sweetness and clotted-creaminess; black-bready, minty finish and an oddly elliptical length, almost angular; it *seems* clipped until you realize it isn't. I suspect this may be one of the tardier 2006s.

AWH-062 **2006 Riesling Zöbing**

More mineral, less fruit than the '05; wild herb, marjoram; quite long in a minty way; it obtains a kind of plumpness with air; a *rieslingy* Riesling with a point of focus that's like coconut-milk over sun-warmed stones.

AWH-063 **2006 Riesling Gaisberg**

+

Oops, I seem to have used a naughty word in my notebook. "Not just stunning nose but *fucking* stunning nose," I seem to have written. Oh dear, that's just so not me. Tightly packed mineral and wisteria, molten silver; the palate is almost constricting, crazily tight, ultraviolet; also leesy, and weirdly also chocolate and jasmine and tarragon; it's a wild ride of neon and flower and mineral; it seems to attach jumper-cables from the glass to your palate.

AWH-064 **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein**

++

The first vintage where this has shown better earlier than Gaisberg, and one of the greats in the community of Heiligensteins in this offering. It's almost pathologically exotic, animal-exotic; peppers and (again) mint; dense, stormy; the palate is haunted, obsessively spicy, incense-y and mineral; a tremendous showing for this usually tardy wine; it takes your palate and slams is against a wall of smoky minerality; it doesn't finish since it *won't LEAVE*.



wachau

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

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

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

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

eral run of rather ordinary vintners who seem content to coast in the slipstream of the region's renown.

Indeed this problem is getting worse, not better. Even if one yields the point that the best Wachau wines are the best Austrian wines of all, the second level of Wachau wines are nothing out of the ordinary and they're highly overpriced. I begin to wonder if Wachau wines don't really reach their sweet-spot of ripeness below the "Smaragd" level. Below 12.5% alcohol a great many taste malnourished and incomplete. We threw a Wachau-ringer into a tasting of wines from the "lesser" region of Donauland, and the two Smaragds were—appropriately—among the very best wines. But the three Federspiels were among the limpest and least interesting. No importer only wants to buy a grower's few best wines; we want good quality across the range.

The Danube cuts a gorge through a range of hills

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

The locals talk of a "climate fiord" brought on by the gorge-like configuration of the landscape and the collision of two climactic phenomena; the Pannonian current from the east with the continental current from the west, all of which make for extreme variations of day and nighttime temperatures. The autumns, particularly, are clement and usually dry, enabling growers to harvest quite late with little fear of botrytis. Early November picking is routine. (Though one sly grower said: "There's nothing romantic about picking in November.") The western section of the regions is said to give its finest wines, due in part to cooler nighttime temperatures as the breezes blow down from the hills. The wines become fuller-bodied and more powerful as you move down-

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

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

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

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.

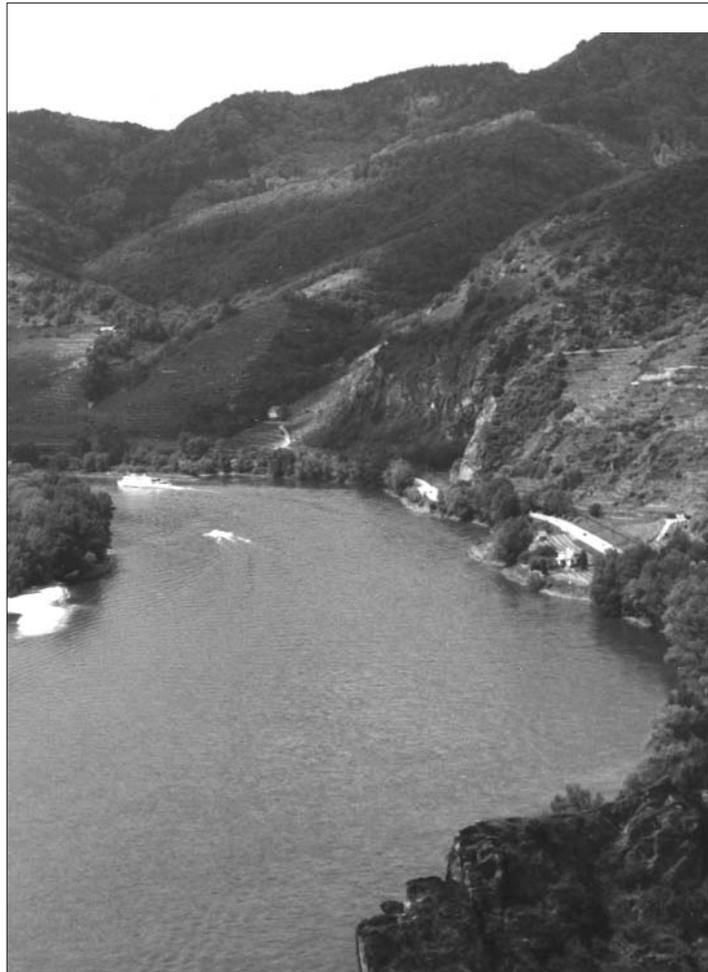
Members of the Vinea Wachau have a nomenclature all their own to describe their wines. The least of them (referred to as "dainty" in the promotional brochure) is

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!

called **Steinfeder**, (after a local strain of grass), for musts between 73° and 83° Oechsle, always, dry and never higher than 10.7% alcohol. Steinfelder wines *can* be very attractive if they are physiologically ripe. Sometimes they seem misguided. Good ones, though, are little miracles, fresh and innocent, though too slight to ship abroad.

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

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



The Danube

leo alzinger

wachau • unterloiben

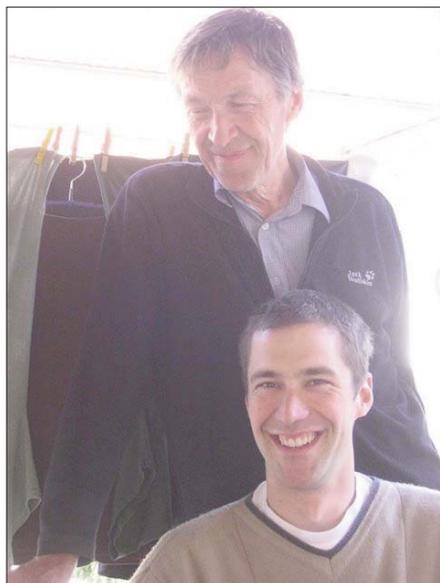
We went to Alzinger in the early afternoon, having spent the morning doing the preliminary run through the five potential newbies. Again I wondered, after tasting all those Wagramers and Weinviertlers, whether some existential truth of Wachau would be apparent. And again, if it was, I couldn't read it. But I am beginning to feel this has less to do with "Wachau" in general and more to do with Alzinger in particular.

2006 is a very great vintage for this grower, as I am told it is for the entire Wachau. But whatever its greatness it hasn't distorted the fundament of Alzinger's wines in any way. They're not more powerful, or forceful; they aren't any longer or riper. What they do is take the serenity with which they're endowed and pass it upward through a kind of apotheosis, beyond which they are

beatific and glowing. You wouldn't be surprised if the cellarmaster were the Dalai Lama. Alzinger's wines almost never push and assert; they are instead amazingly sanguine and calmly lovely.

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

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



Alzinger, son and father

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

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.

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

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

bunch of years.

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

This is the only winery I visit where I taste a lot of cask-samples. Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The beauty of his 2006s 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.

Though quantities were as homeopathic here as everywhere in 06, Alzingers reported a curious phenomenon whereby their Grüner Veltliners planted closest to the terrace walls were less affected by failure-to-set because these spots were warmer and flowering began earlier, before the extreme heat which inhibited it later on. Still it's a mingy bit of wine we're getting. But wine of a beauty that would wring tears from a toaster.

Alzinger at a glance:

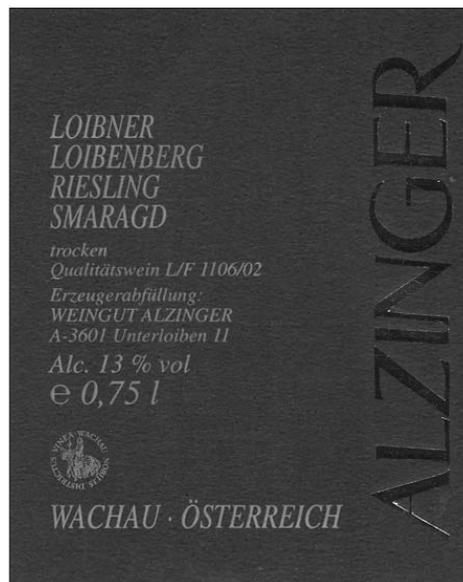
Sleek, clear, winsome yet authoritative wines from the kindly hands of the newest Wachau superstar! Every vintage since 1995 is amongst the best collection in Austria.

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-063 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel**
Beany, with a saline note like fresh Dover sole; spicy legumey length; indeed it's a light Smaragd in most years, with the vinous thickness that implies.
- ALA-064 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd** +
Despite its dense ripe power it's curvaceous and focused, and almost demure, chiseled, delicate – how do you present power with delicacy? Here's how.
- ALA-065 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd** +
Immediately complex aroma with call-and-response of ripe plums and pungent herbs, yet it's a quiet, monastic, chanting aroma, not blatant but *searching*; it enters with a volley of leaves and flowers but quickly lights a flame of spice; the finish is all feathery again. No less ripe than usual but way more *green*, shady. Yet 13.9% alc....which never tasted so lithe and supple.
- ALA-066 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd** +++
Oh good god. Key-lime and aloe vera and balsam and candied lemon and coconut milk; the palate slams at you with minty energy and yet still with Alzinger's melting cashmere refinement. This my friend is How Great The Grape Can Be, and if you dare to suppose GrüVe is/was merely "trendy", a '90s thing," a flash in the pan, *SHAME* on you.
- ALA-067 **2006 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel**
I waited years to be able to score this and then the first couple vintages were atypical; here's why I love this wine. Bright, green great palate-coating minerality, stony length and mirabelle-y charm; ridiculous character and length.
- ALA-068 **2006 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd** +
A soil like the Gaisberg's – mica-schist and gneiss – there's iron and pepper as always, but the palate is just *shrieking* with mineral; blackberry and purple lilac; implacable length and as dense as titanium, yet with a lovely twisty structure – the wine seems to curl like a garter snake – and little knots of mineral and secret sweetness and a serpentine herbal juiciness.

- ALA-069 **2006 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd** **++**
 Lotta words bouncing around the table: "apple, tea, raspberry, white peach, honey-suckle, chocolate, lemon blossom, jasmine, gardenia. . ." Want more? Wine's got a *schnoz*. A hummingbird would come to it. And the palate blows all that sweet pollen but grips like old rocks; a wine that sings to all of you. Blown away by this vintage at times like this.
- ALA-070 **2006 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd** **++**
 Grand Cru nose; somehow it's vertical yet vast, silvery yet with a late-day sweetness, malt-light, church-light, a deep interior brightness, a thing that only blossoms for ten minutes before sunset; it's also minty and powerful and leaves an endless whisper of incense on the finish.
- ALA-071 **2006 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd** **+++**
 Wine doesn't smell better than this! Malt, turbinado sugar, wintergreen, lime blossom; the palate is ringently firm, stony and minty yet meltingly and caressingly sweet; I was on the edge of losing it, and couldn't possibly spit; mint and herbs and crushed rocks and apple-skin and I was babbling to keep from weeping and scribbling as fast as I could. . . but please remember, it isn't about power: it's about *euphoria*.



weingut josef jamek

wachau • joching

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

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

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

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 cellarmaster 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



winery I ever visited, and I was as entirely happy as I have ever been with a glass of wine in my hand. So this was Veltliner; this was

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

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

- **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**

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

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

One has to understand Jamek’s restaurant as a kind of compass guiding the style of the wines. It seems to be the fulcrum, not the winery. “We have a winery and also a little restaurant where we serve the wines,” is decidedly not the case. “We have a restaurant and also a winery which supplies it” is closer to the truth. Altmann agreed when I said I thought his wines were deliberately fashioned to be useful at table. This doesn’t preclude them being profound—they have their own noble tradition to observe—but it does suggest they’re not chasing those 90-point scores. Good for them! The wines are profound *anyway*.

The doyen handled his holster on to a new generation, specifically to his youngest daughter and her hus-

band, who assumed responsibility for the cellar with the 1995 vintage. The vineyards constitute as fine a collection as exists in all of Austria.

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

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

I didn't find what I expected to find among these '06s, which I feared might be overly burly. Perhaps they are, at the very top levels. You will note I am not listing either of the great monuments, the Achleiten GrüVe Smaragd or the Klaus Riesling Smaragd. That's because they exist in two forms and I chose the lighter. Which impaled them on the horns of a dilemma; in the Wachau Smaragd begins at 12.5% alc though in practice it seems to begin much higher. In any case, Jameks made their usual "Federspiel" wines from both Achleiten and Klaus, but these were too ripe for that category yet there were already Smaragds of much greater ripeness from both vineyards. What to do? *Bottle them suckas.* Just as they are, with neither

"Federspiel" nor "Smaragd" on the label. And how did this sit with the overlords at Vinea Wachau. "It did create a certain. . . discussion," I was told. I love when nature asserts her anarchic vagaries over our tidy little rules and regs. The two wines are wonderful, which is all I finally care about.

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

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

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

Jamek at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

- AJJ-065 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Stein Am Rain Federspiel**
2006 again; the "little" wines are oversized and lovely; lots of lentil and sorrel and rye-toast here; balanced, clear and tasty and with remarkable outline and focus.
- AJJ-064 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Achleiten** +
Just *Achleiten*; YAY. It has 13% alc (which is as much as most Smaragds really need) and tastes perfect, pure terroir, all rye-crackers and loaded with *spiel*; clear but not blatant, dense but not musclebound; expressive but not adamant. Achleiten is easy to spot but hard to describe, but this is wonderful GrüVe.
- AJJ-066 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Liebenberg Smaragd**
The nose is maybe too minty and radishy – recent bottling has tamped down the fruit – but the palate is like an elixir of iron, cress and spice and very crisp fish-skin; the finish, all hundred miles of it, has eucalyptus and boxwood and mizuna.
- AJJ-067 **2006 Riesling Jochinger Berg Federspiel**
You won't win many awards with this unless they give one for the bottle that *empties* first – the truest sip is the last, don't forget – but this is just perfect Riesling at peace with itself and the world; iridescently lively and ultraviolet; fibrous and herbal and freshly, ecstatically alive. We have to love such wines especially if we live in shticky climates like I do. Think of the phrase "cultivate a love for...": *cultivate*. Make something live and grow, bring into being, nurture. What is it we're cultivating? Our very lives.
- AJJ-068 **2006 Riesling Ried Klaus** +
Again as good as it *should* be and needs to be; it surely can be more monumental, more "intense," but more expressive? More specific? More focused and clear? The only thing certain Smaragds add is a mid-palate umami-sweetness that's absent here. But the saltiness, and the fruit-richness when it's over its bottle-shock!

nikolaihof-wachau

wachau • mautern

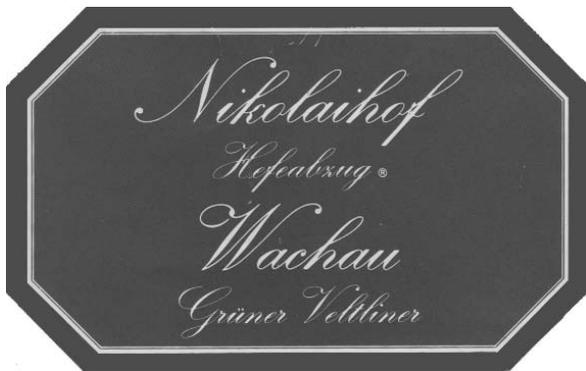
I believe Nikolaihof is one of the greatest wine estates on earth, and among them there are none more meaningful. This sets me something of a quandary each year as I sit to write this text. I want it to be my text-to-end-all-texts, and of course that pressure makes me self-conscious and I strain to rise to the exalted level I set myself – and fall short.

Once we were seated this year, I asked Christine Saahs, the matriarch of the family and the property, “When are you happiest in your work?” I thought the question was straightforward. Others to whom I’ve posed it have said things like *I like it best in the vineyards*, or *I really enjoy the blending*, *it fascinates me to taste so analytically*, or things of that nature. Christine seemed quite undone by my innocuous-seeming query. Oh I don’t know how to answer a question like that, she said, and “No one has ever asked me that question.” She was so shy I was unbearably touched.

Finally she said she enjoyed the times when she felt *useful* because at such times she was aware of the gift given her – the power to be useful. Whether in the family or in the vineyards or the garden or in the restaurant they also run, she liked to feel she could put her providentially endowed power to good use. It suddenly struck me she embodies the Buddhist idea of enlightenment; to be cheerful and useful. It is certainly the least neurotic approach to one’s life!

Since everything is unified within these walls (and outside them also) it is very clear to me that Nikolaihof’s wines *also* embody that enlightenment. “Cheerful and useful” would be a perfect way to describe them. Even at their most profound, and they attain such profundity quite regularly, theirs is never an intimidating or haughty Greatness, but rather a sapid companionability that’s almost affectionate. The wines talk not only to your senses, they talk to your *life*.

I arrive in a condition of blankness, prepared for anything that happens. If I arrive expecting a rarefied spiritual circumstance the expectation blocks it.



Sometimes it’s affectionate, kindly and fun. Sometimes it’s quite workmanlike. Sometimes it is very mysterious indeed, as it was a few weeks ago, induced by the amazing group of wines. But I’ll return to this later; first let me

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 cases**
- **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**

tell you about the estate.

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

This can be confusing to a certain kind of wine-freak who obsesses on the wine-object as such, but in the end I am comforted by the desire to integrate wine into all the things that emerge from creation and give us pleasure.

Saahs’ preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn’t seem to hail from a concern we’d call “environmental” in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall approach to sharing life with other *forms* of life, and also from their sense of time. There’s an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in their courtyard which is a pretty nifty symbol of time; thick, slow, sturdy, gentle, ultimately patient. I’m fond of this tree, all the more so because of those before and after me who’ll have enjoyed its tolerant friendship.

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity's sake I'll call it just "Nikolaihof") is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first Demeter-certified wine in the world. She and her husband have farmed and made wines organically for over two decades; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Mr. Saahs, is a believer in organic production as a guarantor of **superior** quality. He's one of the only ones to say this. I myself am often asked whether I believe organic or bio-d creates *superior* wines, which is both a loaded question and an irrelevant one. Frankly I don't care if the wines are "better." Organic or bio growers are seeking a certain relationship with their land. Very often these sensibilities conduce to the making of excellent wines, but not necessarily. They are, however, quite healthy for both land and the humans who work it. Do we need to ask for more?

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

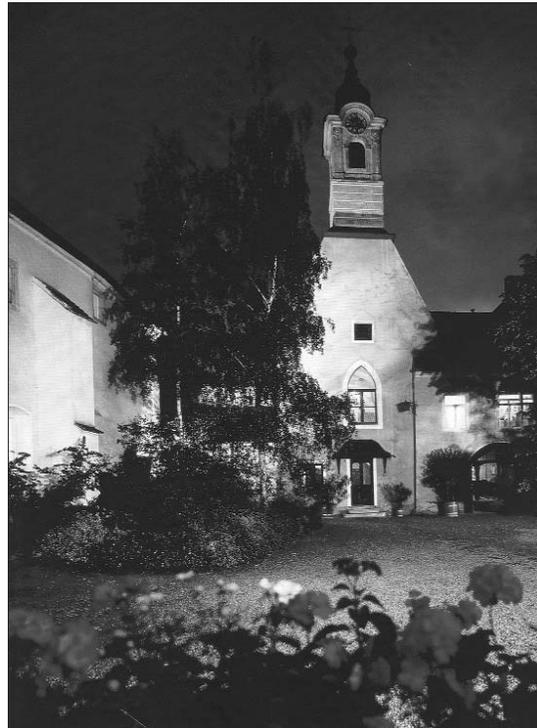
Everything about Nikolaihof is determinedly PERMANENT (when you say "old fashioned" you create images of something either anachronistic or cute, and Nikolaihof is neither). "I've never 'styled' a wine," says Herr Saahs. Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average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

It takes more people to farm organically; the Saahs

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

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

Or perhaps their simple rootedness appeals to something lonely in us Americans. We are such spiritual and emotional nomads. We seem hesitant to lay claim to this world, perhaps for fear of having to surrender to it. When



I am with the Saahs' I always feel a jolt of recognition; this is the anchoring I seek, or imagine myself seeking. But *could* I live as they do? I don't know.

Again we sat in the chapel and began the tasting. Again they sat me (embarrassingly) at the head of the great table, and again the spell stole over me, and I was

glad the others were there to chatter away so I could write and wonder. Believe me, I don't arrive *waiting* for this to happen; I rather think it won't. But it does, somehow. I wonder if it begins with the hug Christine gives me, which is just two seconds too long to be merely polite, an embrace containing kinship, an embrace that welcomes and accepts me. It is no small thing to be accepted by such a woman.

One year I wrote these words: "And after all the bim-bam-boom of the past ten days, all the sizzlin' young wines from the young hotties, I sank back into the stillness as if I'd come home." I relax there no matter what; it's because the thing *makes sense* as a Unity. It makes sense to taste those wines in that place with those people. A couple nights later we ordered two older vintages of Nikolaihof (1983s, in fact) at dinner nearby, and I felt the strangest sense of being *taken elsewhere*, to the place within the walls, the silent dark cellar, the handsome tree and the birds who nest in it, the little chapel where we taste. It both creates a kind of loneliness (*where am I?*) and at the same time slakes it (*Ah; somewhere, always somewhere*). When you sit at Nikolaihof and taste their wines, you may feel sad; I do (*why can't my life be like this?*). Or inadequate (*why don't I have the courage to live this way? Why do I compromise so much?*), or sometimes, in brief flickers, connected and charged (*so THIS is what I have longed for*) but whatever you feel I have no doubt you will feel something. You are not just anywhere. And you may wonder at the odd notion of "living with meaning" as if meaning were a thing you could stuff into your backpack. When you see it done it looks so simple. That's because it is. All you have to do is assume our actions have purpose and consequence. And the first task is to value that which is authentic. And to floss every day, and don't forget to read Dilbert.

Some of these wines are as still as silent ponds, and each nuance of flavor is like a small pebble dropped in the silvery water, and you watch the tiny silent ripples flow slowly toward shore. They seem utterly without *affect*, but instead serenely themselves. They are numinous in their very lack of thrusting and pushing. The wines we taste are not merely meditative; they tell truths you cannot see in the lab; they speak calmly of unnamable sureties. They are candid and modest. They are all the reasons we *should* love wine but few of the reasons we actually do. We are very busy measuring our pleasure, locked away in our self-conscious cells. These wines don't so much meet you halfway as *show you a third place* that's neither You nor Them, but somewhere you meet in truth only by dissolving your respective walls. The *wines* have done it; now it's your turn. I cannot tell you *how* these wines stir such a calmness of spirit. Other wines are perhaps more poignant, or more exciting. "Wow," you say, "this is exciting wine; I have to tell others how *exciting* this wine is . . ." But I have never tasted wines more *settling* than these. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet



Christine Saahs

breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.

It's hardly surprising that 2006 is a great vintage here. What's surprising is what *kind* of great vintage it is; not powerful, but purposive; not intense, but beautiful; not overripe or loaded, but serene and sublime. It's a shame that words like "sublime" can lose their music and force through squandering, and I know I'm part of the problem. But the quality of sublimity in Nikolaihof's wines has to do with their basic characters; hale, trustworthy, unaffected, substantive but never tiring, explicitly *connected* and numinous with a gentle force. A force of loving kindness. It isn't about making you love *them*; it's about what they can do to ease your way, by whispering their tender steady reminder of the sweet secrets of the world we share.

After tasting we sat under the fluttering leaves and had lunch. I was craving greens, and said so, and what arrived a few minutes later was an amazing salad of "seventeen greens and five edible flowers," plus a bowl of delectable stinging-nettle soup. I was very happy.

- ANK-064 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Hefeabzug”**
 This is a sur-lie GrüVe that’s become an icon for Nikolaihof, and this 2006 is the best vintage I’ve ever seen; sweet lees and cressy Springtime arugula snap; it’s as sweet as deep-winter spinach, and so thoroughly pure and good you almost weep for joy. Flute-notes of nuance and a powdery-foamy length; a pure bringer of joy.
- ANK-065 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Im Weingebirge” Federspiel** +
 I don’t know how to be more charmed and delighted by a wine than by this; it’s like a wry and sprightly melody you can’t get out of your head. The wine has mid notes of creamy meadow-flower and low notes of bibb-lettuce and mineral; it’s markedly long for being so light-footed; it’s infinitely helpful and gracious yet also obdurately complex.
- ANK-066 **2006 Grüner Veltliner “Im Weingebirge” Smaragd** ++
 The ripest of Saahs’ 2006s – 13.5%! – and I’m so grateful I want to sink to my knees; though the fragrance is toasty-warm the palate is shady-cool, with a fluid verdant energy that presents as sweet, thanks to a fine clean botrytis, “*which we see as a gift from nature, and which brings a spiritual dimension to the wine,*” says Christine. “Botrytis originates in the soil, it doesn’t come out of the air, and if you give it care and love it will visit you as a friend.” This wine is a perfection of strength and grace, not merely balance, but easeful harmony.
- ANK-067 **2006 Riesling “Vom Stein” Federspiel** +
 ANK-067M **2006 Riesling “Vom Stein” Federspiel MAGNUMS**
 Oh what a vintage: it is so full of love, the way a clean silvery stream loves the stones it plishes over; it is also keenly alive and animate, sweet-natured, mineral and blossomy; a wine that holds your hand and hums as you walk together along the cool moving water.
- ANK-061 **2005 Riesling “Vom Stein” Smaragd** +
 You take the green-creamy diction of `05 and deepen it — it’s like white lilacs and the tenderest mineral; the wine wriggles delightedly on the palate but resolves into a daydreamy finish that uncovers things you forgot you knew; what fine quietude. You want all night with it. A year later it’s all charcuterie, wisteria, hyssop and spice, and a rich crunch like plantain chips.
- ANK-050 **2003 Riesling Steiner Hund “Reserve”**
 By the way, it’s “reserve” because the vineyard is actually in the Kremstal (thus no “smaragd”) and they dislike the word Spätlese. From a tiny but supernally great Grand Cru, this can be one of the world’s profoundest wines — from any grape variety. The `03 is all boucherie, with roasted beet and redcurrant accents; again it’s a wine of *atmosphere*, hugely ripe and exotic, as if five different incenses were burning simultaneously.

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

+++

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

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

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

ANK-054 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg “Jungferlese”**

+

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



hans reisetbauer

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

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

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

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



Hans Reisetbauer and his stills

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

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

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

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

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

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

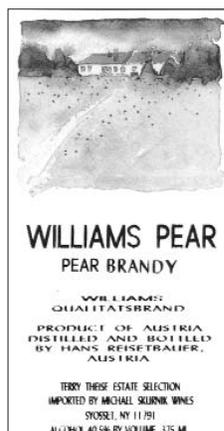
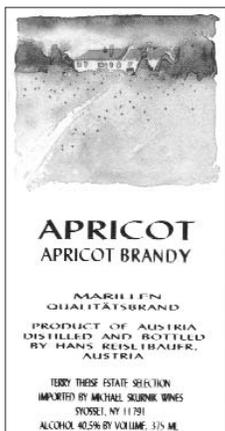
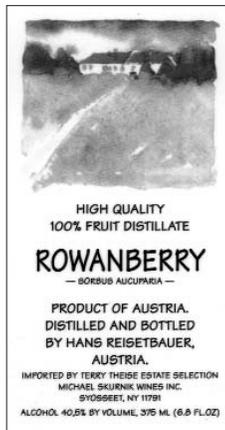
I'm just an *amateur*, I must stress, and I'm not especially well-informed, but that said, what strikes me about these spirits is their honesty and power. They're not especially seductive. If they were Wachau wines they'd be F.X. Pichler rather than Alzinger.



Young pear trees at Reisetbauer

Reisetbauer offerings:

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



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

-Lawrence Osborne

Back Cover Photo: *A field of rapeseed in full May bloom.*

