

GERMANY 2008



terry theise estate selections



# these manifesto

*Beauty is more important than impact.*

*Harmony is more important than intensity.*

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

*Distinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.*

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

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

*FRONT COVER PHOTO: Breumel in Den Mauern, one of Muller-Catoir's top Grosses Gewächs vineyards.*

*Things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness. As dusk approaches in the hinterlands, a traveler ponders shelter for the night. He notices tall rushes growing everywhere, so he bundles an armful together as they stand in the field, and knots them at the top. Presto, a living grass hut. The next morning, before embarking on another day's journey, he unknots the rushes and presto, the hut deconstructs, disappears, and becomes a virtually indistinguishable part of the larger field of rushes once again. The original wilderness seems to be restored, but minute traces of the original shelter remain. A slight twist or bend in a reed here and there. There is also the memory of the hut in the mind of the traveler—and in the mind of the reader reading this description. Wabi-sabi, in its purest, most idealized form, is precisely about these delicate traces, this faint evidence, at the borders of nothingness.*

**-Leonard Koren**

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

**-Abu Yazid al-Bistami**

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## LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

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

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

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

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

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

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



After a month on the road you accumulate a *shitload* of stuff, and the final day entails a radical triage of all the accretions you didn't get around to chucking away. So there we are, sifting through daunting mounds of paper and pamphlets and scraps of phone messages, and I see a little booklet, one of those Hallmark-y things containing *Homilies To Live By* or some such, and I'm getting ready to hurl it into the trash-pile, but suddenly I can't remember how on earth I obtained it. So I open the front cover and am stopped short. It was given to us (my wife and me) by Lisel Schneider, the Grandma of the house Jakob Schneider, and she inscribed it, thanking me for my visit and noting that I'd been visiting for "generations."



And so it is; my first visit there was as a long-haired feckless youth of 25, nearly thirty years ago, in May of 1978, when I made my first journey to German wine regions. Old Hans was The Man then, followed by his son, and now by his grandson Jakob, who is almost exactly the same age I was on that first visit. And so I will indulge the commonplace life-lessons contained within the little book's pages, because that inscription touches me like I can't begin to tell you.

If you're a 20-something reading this, believe me, you have no idea how you'll feel in your fifties. At least I don't think you can, because I feel nothing like I ever thought I would. Using wine as a metaphor, at first I found it complicated and had to master it, and then I found it beyond mastering and grew humble, and then realized that humbleness was just another affect, and then started to grasp the simpler and more elegant outlines of the *gestalt* of the thing, and only then, as wine seemed to simplify, did it start to reveal its evanescence and its true complexity. Remember, there's a crucial difference between complicated-ness and complexity. The former requires you to direct a beam of mind to picking your way through, while the latter—complexity—asks the opposite: now you have to *relax* your mind and see what happens. I'm not sure this state of affairs is available to most of us, at least those who weren't born the Dalai Lama, until we reach a certain, ahem, age.

Something I've always thought was fun was to play among varieties of experience. I'd make tape-mixes (antediluvian-alert; he's talking about *cassettes*) in which I'd deliberately go from blues to chamber music to jazz to manic banshee rock, trying to tie it into a thread of logic, even lunatic logic. I'm going to bring this to wine, fear not. A few months ago someone on one of the internet wine-boards was asking how a German wine newbie should stock his cellar, and the thread quickly devolved into a Theise-versus-Wiest skirmish. Silly, but that's the net. So I wrote in and said I found our two portfolios mutually complimentary *because* of their differences. I have never sought the "elite" as a sort of divine-right-of-cherry-picking, though I do assert that right *within* wineries, where I choose my favorites and leave the oth-

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

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

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

I'm a wine guy too, obviously, but it's been years since I worked at wine. I work with it, naturally, and it's fun work, but I'm sure after a certain point, the more we work at our pleasures (it's no accident we say we "pursue" our pleasures) the more they'll retreat from us. Show me someone who "plays hard" and I'll show you someone who's forgotten how to play at all. And so I wonder whether assembling a portfolio that's all about the "best" wines isn't really about the guy and not the wines. Because life's various pleasures apportion themselves in diverse ways, and wine's pleasures are no different. The "Schneider-pleasure" is not identical to the "Dönnhoff-pleasure," but I would argue they are *equivalent*. In one case we cultivate an appreciation of the highest refinement of beauty, in the other we cultivate an appreciation of the joys of honesty, integrity, goodness, companionability. We don't have to choose. We get to have them both. As long as we're not cowering inside our dread and insecurity insisting "only the best is good enough for me, or rather, for *me*."

Germany was dreary and wet but I still drove fast. When else do you get to drive on perfect roads in a responsive car at a natural speed? But one of my traveling buddies was pulled over by the cops when he failed to slow down quick enough coming into a construction zone. When he told me, I missed Michele Parent (my colleague who covers the West) and her antic phrase book. I can just see it; cop approaches the car, you whip through the book looking for the right phrase. "Hello Officer, how 'bout this weather?" "My, that uniform fits you well below the waist." "How firm you are; do you



logism “Low yields = better wine,” as if this were always true and existed apart from every other parameter. But let’s imagine it was invariably true: Then what?

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



It is also misleading to speak of yields in strict terms of hectoliters-per-hectare (i.e., tons-per-acre) because this figure is very often specious. The best text I have seen on this subject was written by Christina Fischer and Ingo Swoboda from their book RIESLING, and it goes in part like this: “*Decisive here is not so much the yield per hectare, but rather, per individual vine. With Riesling, the average value . . . is between 1 and 2.5 liters of must per vine.*” The authors go on to explain new methods of pruning and foliage management to encourage fewer bunches, along with crop-thinning about a month after flowering. Then comes this passage, which everyone in the wine-world should see: “*The so-called green harvest, which normally takes place mid-August, has proved a failure with Riesling. Since nature seeks equilibrium, it shares out the available nutrients to the remaining [bunches] where a reduction of quantity has occurred. There then appear large juicy grapes, whose relatively thin skin can no longer take the strain, . . . squeez[ing] each other and burst[ing] . . . and particularly liable to rotting.*”

Wine, I think, can be a lovely means of training ourselves to examine a question from all angles, but only if we’re not terribly eager to assert value judgments, or to find any one matrix by which wines are either right or wrong. This isn’t easy. We’re all asking what we should care about, what we should believe in, what positions we

should take, and it’s somehow *unsatisfying* to be told the best position is to consider the whole dialectic in all its difficulty. But otherwise we’re liable to become insufferable, smug, simplistic.

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

*Many producers here practice what we call sustainable or “integrated” viticulture, with a minimum of treatments, very little fertilization (most of it organic and tight restrictions on nitrogen whether in organic or chemical form). Herbs and weeds are controlled mechanically and only “mild” herbicides permitted. All of this is governed in a program that pays small subsidies for steep-slope farming. The viticultural research stations issue a list of “can-use” treatments and methods AND they make random checks so it’s not just lip-service.*

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

Still, the Mosel is a real test-case for sustainability versus doctrinaire organics. Its steep-as-all-hell vineyards in a wind-sheltered fjord with high natural humidity augur against strict organic treatments both



because it’s in essence too difficult, and even if someone were willing to do the work would the consumer be willing to *pay the price*? Steep-slope production costs are already many times higher than in airy flatter vineyards where mechanization is much easier. So, note to self: Steer a value-weighted way through that, smart guy.

Don’t mistake my meaning; there are many places where values belong, and when you’re in those places you’re a coward if you don’t assert yours. But when you’re asserting value-judgments over work you yourself don’t actually do, you risk sounding fatuous. And the greater need to see wine as a warren of opportunities to decide rights and wrongs is a blind-alley and a hindrance to both knowledge and appreciation. I thus assert the value of knowing when asserting values is called for!



View of the Mosel.

I haven't looked at lab analyses of my wines for some time now, and fewer people try and show them to me. The modern young grower is more interested in the forest than the trees. It was Helmut Dönnhoff who first graduated away from obsession over wines' analytical values, the first among my crowd to push away from deconstructing the aesthetics of wine's flavor. Because I respect him and he intrigues me, I realize he has influenced me.

But even seeing what he's moved away from, we should consider what he might be moving toward. What are we trying to do here? Why *shouldn't* we exercise our cerebral cortex rooting around in wine's flavor and structure if that's what floats our boat? Seems innocent enough.

Here's what I think we're after: a point of utter receptivity because we're seeing only the wine instead of seeing *ourselves* seeing the wine. Oh it's all very Zen. But I am ever-more persuaded it is the way to pleasure and sanity. If we don't see past ourselves, our discrete palates, we can't get past *What am I getting from the wine*. The process starts and ends with "I." What am "I" getting, what do "I" think (how many points will "I" give this wine), and all I can say is if you drink wine this way I sure hope you don't *make love* this way, because your partner's bored.

Try this. Next time you drink wine, ask *What is this?* Not what "I" get: *what THIS is*. "This," the thing outside you, the not-I.

Perhaps you'll experience the loveliest of ironies; when you relax the "I" and receive the world, the world charges you with its perfect reality and suddenly your "I" becomes larger than you ever imagined. But you have to be calm. Trust your senses. Let the wine in. You might find it becomes more vivid now, and you slowly cease to care about the brain-game of dissecting. Who cares what's on the lab report? Peter Jost put it well. "Describing a wine by its analysis is like describing a beautiful woman by her X-ray films."

Lately I've thought a lot about evanescence. This is a natural consequence of relaxing the analytical facility to try and welcome—not to grasp, but instead to welcome—the whole. The totality of a wine quickly states its personality; it's gregarious, or witty or sardonic or pensive, and sometimes, rarely, it conveys a serene beauty just a slight membrane away from where you could touch it. Even more haunting, there seems to be a quality of *truth* in this impression, as if some accretion of arti-

fice were scraped away. These are wines that express without asserting, wines that show the little penumbra *between* joy and serenity, *between* brilliance and luminousness. We have all tasted them, or I hope we have. Such wines are sometimes a little unnerving because they resist being grasped and they don't make statements. It also seems impossible to contrive them. And a certain kind of drinker likes to vivisect how wines are contrived. I still do it, we all do, it's a kind of palate calisthenic, but you'll never see the forest if all you do is count the trees.

The truth is I don't know how certain wines are like this, I don't know why, and I am very sure if I did know I still wouldn't know how they get that way. What I do know, or think I know, is that while brilliance, explicitness and assertiveness are wonderful things for wines to have, there's a point at which it *stops*. It is an amusement, sometimes a very fine and even noble one, but withal it is entertainment. But there is a kind of beauty that is unconcerned with whatever pleasure it gives us. If and when we are aware of this beauty, it can lead to a rare kind of gratefulness. A compassion that isn't sentimental. It says the world finds you when you are prepared to admit it, but will assault you if you are not. It says we are not merely life-support systems attached to a tastemotor. We are humans who can bring our entire selves to a glass of wine. In the quiet of these calm, exquisite wines we hear a kind of divinity.

Sometimes I want to call this the "Oh so that's what it's about" moment, because it feels both entirely natural and also unequivocal. Once I sat on the warm terrace of Nepenthe (that most sublime of restaurants) in Big Sur, enjoying a moment of solitude and a badly-needed morning tea. The Pacific was 800 feet below me and as still as a mirror on the windless day. Whales spouted, big-winged birds floated, and the beauty was almost a rebuke: *Don't you dare think you can do without this, Buster*. I felt like I was who I was meant to be, and that feeling always seems to be stunning. But the best thing of all is you don't have to contrive some big vast rapture in order to know this moment: It can live, and lives very easily, in a single sip of wine.

One year when I traveled with a group of customers to Schmitt-Wagner, he brought out a treasure remarkable even by his standards, an Auslese from the great 1937

vintage. I had tasted the wine once before (this is a generous man) and I waited for what I knew would come. As the wine was poured the group inhaled audibly at the color, and I saw many faces grow meditative as they sniffed those first mysterious fragrances. But when you expect to be moved you're too self-conscious and you can't be moved. That was me. My guests had walked through that little tear in the curtain out into the other world. I was happy for them.

Someone asked Herr Schmitt, "Did you make this wine?" "Oh my goodness no, I was just a child," he answered. Then he grew pensive and said "But I do remember being a boy of six, picking the grapes alongside my grandma," and then I lost it. I was looking at his hands just then, as it happened, the hands of a vigorous old gentleman still ruddy from a life in the open air, and I suddenly saw the child's little hands inside them. And saw the child trotting along at his grandma's side, happy to be included in the general activity, proud to be useful, there among the vines. And now it was sixty-four years later. The wine in our glasses was enthralling enough to us, but to our host it was the pure blood of memory, bound to the filaments of his earliest joys, with affection and usefulness. *This is a man of Wine*, I realized. This is what it means to be a man of wine.

This '37 called to us from across a passageway to a world we barely know. But to Bruno Schmitt it called across each of those sixty-four years from small sweet memories. I was so lost in my vision of the boy that I registered the 70-year old face of the man to my left with a small shock. He had passed his life in wine, I thought. He didn't choose it because he thought it was gracious or sexy or romantic. He chose it (if it were indeed what we would call a "choice") because it needed to be done and it pleased him to do it.

Wines made by such people glow with the value of human care and enterprise. These vintners don't seek to reinvent Wine. It is enough that the beauty of wine renews, always, that every year threads its way into a great story. It nourishes us to take such wines into our bodies, because by doing so we are connected to the deliberate rhythms of the world, and to our human place in it.

These ideas have started to become my schtick; they've crystalized out of my experience over the years into something that looks like a contribution I can make. Thus I write and talk about them. If you actually read this catalog (you have my sympathies) you might imagine I think about these things a lot, but the truth is I hardly think of them at all. I do if I have to, and I have to now. In my daily life I think mostly about baseball, sex and guitar solos. So, when I all-of-a-sudden am blindsided by an incandescent example of everything I think is important about wine, it wipes me out. And thus, I sat weeping in front of eleven of my customers and tried not to let them see.



I think it's useful to be faithful to ones temperament because an integrated fella is also a more effective worker, and the work I do is finding good wines and selling them to you. It's maybe more accurate to say that's the *job* I do. But try as I might I don't always integrate with the ease I look for.

I often feel stratified. One layer is the garden-variety mercantile wine-guy dealing with all the "issues" surrounding the zany categories with which I work. We both know those issues: education, marketing, perseverance, dog-and-pony shows, "working the press." I try to be good at those things, or as good as my fallibilities allow. The other (perhaps higher) layer is less concerned with the job and more concerned with the work. I have a voice which always says "Yes: *and*?" Thus if I ask myself, what's the net effect of what I do, this voice compels me through ever-more big-picture considerations.

I sell wine. Yes, *and*? I help ensure the prosperity of good artisan wine growers. Yes, *and*? I contribute to the continued existence of cultures containing small artisan wine growers. Yes, *and*? To remain sustainable I need to tell people why this is a good thing. Yes, *and*? In telling people why this is a good thing, I have to detail the reasons, which compels thoughts of terroir, of family, of a person's proper relationship to nature and to his human history. In short, I have to assert values. Yes, *and*? In delineating these values, I find I can't escape matters of soul. Yes, *and*? If soul enters the equation you can't select what it inhabits, because soul inhabits either all of it or none of it. So what

I finally end up doing is placing wine in the context of a life of the soul. Yes, *and*? So now I am defending and delineating the idea of living with conscience, gratitude, eros, humor, and all the things soul imbues us with. And further, I'm placing wine squarely within this matrix and insisting we don't have enough time to settle for less. Yes, *and*? And we seem to need certain things: To know where we are. To be connected to something outside ourselves. To be connected to something inside ourselves. And the only wines that actually speak to our whole lives are *authentic* wines, which are themselves both located, and connected. And confected wines are not designed for human beings; they are designed for "consumers." Which do you want to be?

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

It's different when you go there; all wine is. Otherwise it's just a bottle and a label (and a flavor you can quantify if you're into such perversions), disconnect-

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

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

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

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

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

The growers themselves are seldom aware of their roles as protectors of an ancient verity. They just do what they do. But the net *result* of what they do, FOR CIVILIZATION, is to protect and nurture individuality against a rip tide of uniformity, to protect humility in the face of an arrogance that presumes we have dominion over nature, and to protect humanity, the connection of the worker to the work. Their wines aren't Things, but rather Beings: the grower knows them, knows each plot of land, each vine in many instances, knows how the grapes looked and tasted when they were picked, knows everything that went into the growing season, knows how the must behaved before and during fermentation, and knows in some inchoate way the connection between the land and the wine because he is steeped within the nexus of that connection all the time. He has absorbed it into his basic experience of reality, it is no longer an abstract idea he thinks about. It is simply how things are.

"Whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn't a fish!"

But you can only know this by paying attention.

And you can't pay attention if you aren't close in.

Only the artisanal grower has access to "the murmurings of the earth" (in Matt Kramer's phrase) and only his wines permit us to listen in.

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

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

What is wine trying to tell us about the earth? What is it in wine that transmits the message? (Andre Ostertag has a great line: "With Riesling, all the stones of the world find their unique voice.") Why does the earth want us to hear its message? Why was wine chosen to convey the message? Now I'm not of a particularly speculative bent myself; I don't worry about these kinds of questions. Yet I presume upon a world in which they are LEGITIMATE questions, and I *do* think that wine is a conveyor of meaning. Certainly not all wine, maybe not even *much* wine, but a few wines, those that express a spirit of place and which are uncompromisingly, distinctly, themselves. "Made" wines — wines intended as Products, wines fashioned according to commercial formulas, wines made in very large wineries, wines made by technocrats, wines made without reference to a grape's natural habitat and/or without consideration of a sense of place — such wines have a kind of half-life; they are without *soul*. They might taste good; they often do. They *show* great. They can show the ASS off your palate — but they are meaningless. Wine-like substances. Junk-wine.

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

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

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

**TT:** You are certainly correct that all vinification (and some viticulture) is manipulation, and in my Austrian catalogue I make the very same point in talking about residual sugar. Yet it is very clear to me where the line needs drawing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Continuing New Approach to Tasting Notes**

*At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to [Simone] Weil, requires us 'to give up our imaginary position as the center . . .' What happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things . . . they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space . . . or they lift us . . . letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede ground to the thing that stands before us.*

-Elaine Scarry

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

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

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

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



effect to look away from the flavors and see what the wine has to say when you're not trying to nail the sucka down. The benefit of this approach is it brings you closer to the truth of the wine, but the liability is it's very hard to verbalize. And I'm a verbal kind of guy.

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



Otherwise, sorry; I don't want to read your tasting notes. I don't like reading my own. Think about it: to what pur-



pose are you going to put descriptions-of-flavors? On March 13th at 10:35am a certain wine tasted to a certain person like candied yak spleens dipped in sorghum. What's the value of this information? Will the wine smell and taste identically to you, weeks months or years later?

Put another way, if I'm trying to describe Scheurebe to you, which is the more useful description? 1) Scheurebe has flavors of red and blackcurrant, sage, pink grapefruit, passion-fruit (when very ripe), or . . . 2) Scheurebe tastes like Riesling would taste, if Riesling were a transvestite? Well sure, both of course, but what if you could only have one, and what if you needed to make someone *curious*?

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

I know you sometimes use me to discern what you want to buy, and believe me I want to be helpful. But do you really buy wine because it tastes "like boysenberrys and pork-snouts?" Wouldn't you rather know the wine



"danced like Gandhi would have had there been discos in Calcutta?" Well it's what I'd rather tell you, so get over it. That, or I'll take my cue from shampoo bottles, and if I like a wine just write, "Open, drink, repeat."

I used to care a great deal about writing tasting notes as much for my own writer's ego as for the actual wines. I

searched for ever-more esoteric associations so you would be impressed with my palate. I strove for pretty language so you'd think I was a good writer. Sometimes I actually wrote well, and sometimes the wine actually *did* taste like "polyvinyl siding in direct sunlight on a Fall day with an approaching cold front" (I no longer represent *that* agency), but mostly I fell victim to my own affect.

And of course I still do, because words hold me in a certain sway, and wine acts on my feelings. But I have begun to feel that writing tasting notes is *sometimes* like pausing to describe the giddy ecstatic running of a dog to whom you've just thrown a stick. The grinning beast lopes back to you with some big ol' drool-covered stick in his slobbery maw, and he's *looking* at you as if every scintilla of his happiness depends on your *throwing that stick again*, and what are you doing? You're writing! Put down the pen and **throw the damn stick**, man.

It's an odd business, this tasting and conveying through words. It makes a wine into a precious object of attention excluding the rest of the world. Who bloody *cares* if it's white peach or yellow peach or peach pit or



peach skin or the BARK from the peach tree? That plus it's *fruitless* (pun intended!) because it's tautologous: when you describe flavors in terms of other flavors you eventually hit a wall. "This wine tastes like peaches." Fair enough. What do *peaches* taste like???

I'm pretty sick of the macho business of "getting" more things than the next guy does, not to mention the desperate striving for *original* associations ("The wine boasts a compelling nose of beer-battered kiwi fritters," that sorta stuff). At one point we thought we'd go entirely non-verbal, and created a sequence of pictures of spontaneous reactions to wines which really says it all. I'm into atavism. Let's return to those halcyon days of snorts and grunts.

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

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

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

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

This year I consciously chose to not worry about what I wrote. I had pedestrian days and good ones, but I was done beating myself up to "make a wine sound attractive" or to "be entertaining;" I simply wanted to say how it was, in whatever language came naturally. I was more relaxed and I think that's why I was *smokin'* in the blind guess-the-vintage department. I mean, I never had a year like this one (and I'm sure I'll make a complete dope of myself next time; wine *does* like to keep you humble), to the point one grower was sure I'd peeked at the label. Until he saw the bottle didn't have a label! He'd pulled it from a dated bin in the cellar and with the first whiff I knew it was a '73. It smelled that way. I don't tell you in order to impress you with my adorable genius but rather to extol the virtues of relaxation around wine.

Someone wrote on one of the internet Boards that Hugh Johnson's recently published memoir was useless because "he never says how the wine tastes; he only says what it was like to drink it." Well sir, that there's just the *point* of the thing. I'd far rather read the genial musings of a humane spirit mulling over the little nimbus between his soul and the wine in his glass than to see how many arcane adjectives some anal geek can string together.

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

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



ages are as sweet as Sauternes and three times sweeter than the Riesling Kabinett most likely to raise the sardonic eyebrow of the fashion fascist."

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

One night returning home to my hotel, I turned off the car and got out, and heard something I hadn't heard in many years. Three nightingales were singing their dark and eerily beautiful song. Suddenly the world went silent, and it was the beginning of time. I walked in the hotel's garden and listened to the three tiny birds until it was too cold to stay out longer. Inside, I opened my windows—they were still singing there in the middle of the night—and snuggled under the comforter, and let them sing me to sleep.

And now I'm writing about making the case for German wines. As if they *need* me to do so; *nature* makes the case for German wines constantly, with every lark, thrush or nightingale, every snap and crunch of apple, every swooningly fragrant linden tree in full blossom, everything that makes us pause when we are visited by the electric hum of the world. German wine is a small bird that sings in the darkness, a seemingly minute thing that can tingle your pores, and haunt you your entire life.

Last summer my wife put a hummingbird feeder on our balcony, and lo and behold, they came, most often in the first and final hours of daylight. One morning I was answering some emails and looked up and there it was. In motion, as you know, they are extraordinarily kinetic; I don't recall how many wingbeats-per-second, but it's a lot. Yet in repose they are remarkably graceful and still, almost like miniature doves, and this little bird looked like a small happy saint, peering around with the pleasure of the world, and a full belly. I was moved to see this little life pause and muse. They are so small you could crush one in your hand, but this bird was ten feet from me, and calm.

It is precisely that equipoise of energy and delicacy I love most about German Riesling. No other wine is quite the same. As I've gotten older I seem to have excavated some kind of compassion for little beings, a tenderness that wasn't there before. I feel it when I think of Mosel Rieslings, especially a Kabinett or Spätlese with 7-8% alcohol, so slight you think it might not really be there, beating its wings faster than your eye can absorb, singing and singing.

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

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

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

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

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

There are wines you could swear had rocks passed through them, or which sat on a bed of rocks at the bottom of the tank or cask. Other "mineral" wines show a more inferential, pebbly profile, while still others seem as if the rocks were literally pulverized, and the powder strained through the wine. The very finest pass beyond the mere sense of stone into flavors mysterious enough to compel thoughts of jewels. Minerality, I would argue, is a higher form of complexity than fruit, because it doesn't yield to literal associations. It compels the imagination (dare I say the soul?) to ignite. And it will not answer your questions. Search for "fruit" and you'll find it eventually: some combination of apples and pears and melons and limes and there they all are. But search for the *detail* in mineral and you grope fruitlessly. This makes me happy, and it's not as paradoxical as you might suppose. An answered question *halts* the process

of thinking, but an unanswered question leaves wonder awake, and this is why I prize minerality highest among wine's virtues. Because these wines pose beautiful mysteries, thoughts of which alert us to the gravity and loveliness and ambiguities of the world.

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

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

What people think they taste and what they actually taste are sometimes divergent. What they say they like and what they actually like are often divergent! Nothing new here. Apart from which, it's really tedious to be on



*Stones at Weingart in the Mittelrhein.*

the defensive regarding sweetness. *Somebody please tell me what's supposed to be WRONG with sweetness?* When did it become infra-dig? We SNARF down sweetness in every other form, why not in wine? It's in most of the food we eat. What do you think would happen if we *turned the tables*; put them on the defensive for rejecting sweetness?! "Who told you it wasn't cool to drink wines with sweetness?" we could ask. "Man, that idea went out with double-knit leisure suits."

Quick-cut to June 2003, at the Aspen *Food & Wine*

Classic. I'm standing behind my table when an incandescently radiant young blonde approaches, boyfriend in tow. Said boyfriend is buff and tanned, a manly man. Woman has spied a bottle of dessert-wine from Heidi Schröck in its clear bottle and inviting gold. May she taste it yes she may. I pour. And you, sir, I ask: some for you? "No," he says, "I don't like dessert wine."

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

"Excuse me?"

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

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

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

"Well, I . . ."

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

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

"Well?" I insist.

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

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

I don't know a single human being who doesn't prefer a ripe tomato to an unripe one. Shall we share a basket of unripe strawberries? Even a Granny Smith apple has some sweetness; we'd spit it out otherwise. Somehow the wine world seems to insist we ignore an otherwise routine animal tendency, and affect to despise sweetness. If we were true to our TRUE tastes, we'd fall over one another to get to German rieslings. Then there wouldn't be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it's probably good the way it is. . . . But if you're one of those perverse people who is certain you hate sweetness then please come on a picnic with me, so I can eat all the pink ripe strawberries and you can eat all the fucked up little green ones at the bottom of the basket.

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

"There's too many different wines." This is true, but it's inextricable from the jewel of the German wine experience, just as it is in Burgundy. Comtes Lafon could equalize the casks and produce one white wine and one red wine, as he might were he a Bordelais. It would def-



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

initely simplify things. Would you want him to? Would the gain in simplicity outweigh the loss of fascination? You tell me!

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

As such I think Riesling, can give the "discriminating" palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But



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

there's confusion over this issue, and it won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster,



*German wines and food: perfect together!*

as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

I'm not just being facetious. I do believe cultivation of the German Riesling type conduces to civility and courtesy. That is because we cannot enjoy wines of delicacy and finesse without appreciation. And when we

appreciate, we are calmed and grateful. Might the opposite also be true? That is, when we enjoy those wines of coarser virtues do they also color our approach to life and our fellow humans? Hell, I don't know. Nor do I presume that everyone who likes big bruiser wines is a truculent oaf. (Only some of them <wink>.) But I do glean, just a le-e-e-etle bit, a tendency for people who like the shock-and-awe wines to expect the wine to perform for them, to give them a vinous lap-dance; *Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about! That's damn sure 97-point fruit there! Oh yeah, come to papa.* Meanwhile, us German wine lovers are reading Tolstoy and drinking cups of jade-oolong tea with our pinkies extended.

### **Making the Case for Auslese**

Last year I offered a bunch of old vintages in response to your many requests. I asked the growers for

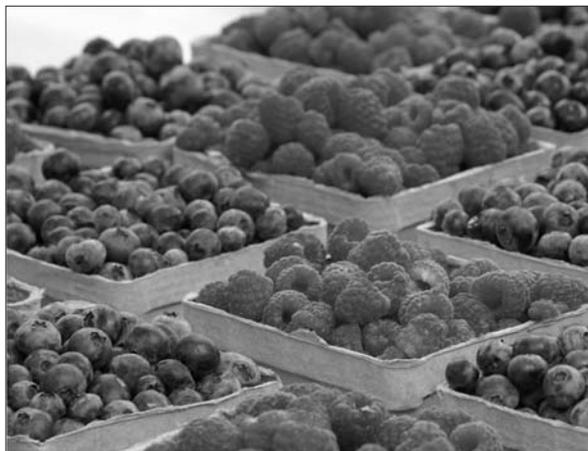


*German wines and a chair: not so perfect together!* "yore" I mean

Kabinetts and Spätlesen (I wanted everyday drinking wines) but several of them showed me Auslese, and when I balked, they pointed to the analyses of the wines and I was viscerally reminded of something I'd only been paying lip-service to. The Auslesen of yore—and by

anything older than around 2001, was less ripe and less sweet than the Auslesen of today. Rumpf showed me a 1992 Auslese that had the sweetness and must-weight of his current *Kabinetts*. These old wines were indeed wines for the table, with no need to prove their usefulness. Today's wines are . . . something else again.

Whose fault is this? Let's find someone to blame! First of all it's the *press's* fault. They're easy to hate. When the biggest richest sweetest wines get the highest scores then all the growers start aspiring to that style, and no one makes an "ordinary" Auslese any more, a wine people can actually use but which is eternally damned with "88 points." So boo-hiss to the press. But don't think *you're* getting off the hook so easily, dear reader. The press is only influential insofar as you *cooperate* in the seduction. Another possible culprit is the VDP auction system, which tends to reward the most ostentatious wines with the highest bids, and which can



*Unripe berries, anyone? Not!*

inculcate a "show-reserve" mentality among the growers. Take a normal Auslese and "enhance" it with some Eiswein or BA, and send your fifty liters to auction and get your name in the paper for the price your wine fetches. This is obviously not ubiquitous but neither is it unheard-of.

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

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

wines was a more sophisticated matter than merely serving “sweeter” food with the Auslese. ) But this works with Schmitt’s Auslesen because he’s old-school, and doesn’t make them in the current buxom form.

A restaurant I really like – Luther, in Freinsheim in the Pfalz – ran an appetizer of mache with little strips of venison and a pumpkin chutney. We ordered a Dönnhoff



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

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

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

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

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

Visit everyone, taste everything, select what I liked the best, and then tell why. Nothing new or revolutionary.

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

My own portfolio is slowly changing to reflect changes on the “scene” and amongst the growers. Generations change, a few people coast on auto-pilot as

they get older, new ones come along. I want to be loyal to my growers, and I’m fond of many of them and friends with quite a few. It always hurts to cut an estate, but the person most deserving of my loyalty is you, dear reader and customer.

At first I was deliberately ecumenical. I wanted to show you many facets of German wine and many different ways for it to be good. I still do. I am fond of the quirky. But I’m also realistic about how the wines are sold.

You can’t visit each estate one-at-a-time like I do. Such visits have advantages and disadvantages. You see the wines in context, as they should be seen. But you don’t see them in “peer-group” conditions; i.e., with a bunch of similar wines from other growers. We show the wines in portfolio tastings wherein a big ol’ *slew* of wines are lined up to be tasted alongside one another, exactly *contrary* to how they should be tasted or to any aims their makers had for them. But what choice do we have?

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

This, by the way, is the final argument against point scoring; though it might work in very strict consumerist terms, it certainly does not in holistic terms. To use one example, are riper wines inherently better than less ripe wines by *dint* of their additional concentration? I submit the answer is very probably yes if one is obliged to score on an absolute scale, and no if one permits notions of relativity and equivalence, i.e. a zippy Mosel Kabinett on a warm summer evening can be a “perfect” wine in its moment. The inherent limitations of all scoring systems is they cannot account for wine as it is used, but only as it is judged.

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

Selecting was easier in the old days. German wine was unpopular and therefore inconspicuous, and it was a buyer’s market. I was at liberty to take only what I wanted. These days, we’re selling more and are therefore more consequential to the grower; if I pass on a certain wine it can play havoc with his plans. And bruise his ego. It’s all very *Realpolitik*, I suppose, and I sometimes wonder why I care

so much about my precious “standards,” but always I come to the same answer. **It’s because I want to keep faith with you.** We may disagree, you and I, we may not like the same wines, but you deserve to know that I like what I say I like, and I won’t ask you to buy a wine I don’t endorse.

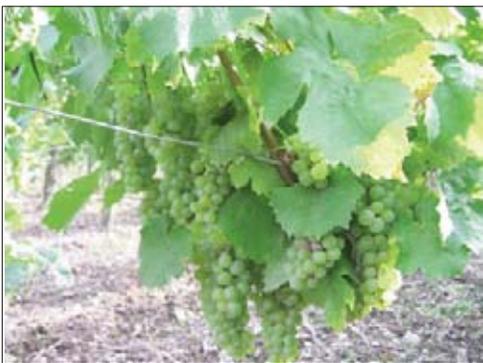
**A CAUTIONARY NOTE:** one thing I will not do is to try and seduce agencies from competing portfolios. It isn’t right and it isn’t even necessary. This year’s *Gault Millau* guide—a kind of classification of estates updated annually—shows nearly **150** estates of “classifiable” quality in the most important six regions ALONE who have no American importer. Most of my competitors are honorable people. One dude has been paying heavy court to a number of estates in my portfolio. When he can’t get the wines he sometimes gray-markets them. I’m tempted to call such behavior evil, but it isn’t. It’s just pathetic. Still, the man has taste!

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

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

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

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the



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

People also claim that monopoly creates opportuni-

ties for greed. Seems very logical, again, especially to us Aquarian-Agers who mistrust merchants innately. But the logic falls apart on closer examination. Say you’re the sole Jim Beam distributor in your state. You gonna crank up the prices? After all, no one else is selling Jim Beam, right? **WRONG.** No one is selling Jim Beam, but someone’s selling Jack Daniels and someone’s selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is out of line with the other guy’s price for his bourbon, you’re not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let’s say) Christoffel, it wouldn’t be long before y’all noticed Fritz Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

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

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

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

Here’s how it should not happen. I broadcast emails to every retailer in Belgium offering them the wine, bypassing the importer my partner wants to work with and ignoring any wishes he has about how his wine gets sold. Some friend I am! *“It’s a BRAVE NEW WORLD,*



BAY-BEE; eat my dust!" Out of one side of my mouth I'm pontificating about the "free market" and touting my credentials as "consumer-champion" and out of the other side I'm just a hyena scavenging for business because I smelled carrion somewhere, blithely disregarding any norms of courtesy toward a grower whose loyalty I asked for!

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

There is only one true reason to defend gray-marketing, and it's the one I promise you will never hear. Gray-marketing happens because certain people cannot stand anyone getting between them and the product they want. "Who is the gormless *importer* to tell me what I can and can't get!" ("Um, he is the person the actual *producer*



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

o f said wine wants to have selling it exclusively," I might suggest, if I thought it'd be heard.)

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

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

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

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

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

3. I am essentially apathetic with respect to growers' associations. Many of them are sincere and they sometimes mean well and do good, but just as often it's a way to strut, and life's too short for that crap. Growers associations can be helpful in prospecting, but all I really care about is what's in the glass, not on the capsule.

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

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

### **Core-List Wines**

The core-list, with which we have been very successful, was created to ensure greater continuity and help you build brands. It began as an empirical record of having consistently selected a certain wine over many years. The wine needed to be in "good" supply (by small-batch standards). Yet for all that it's been fabulously received, it's created many "candid exchanges of views" (in the parlance of diplomacy) among my staff and me. I want you to know this: *no wine will be offered merely because it's on the core-list*. Every wine will continue to earn its way into this offering. In the (extremely unlikely!) event a core-list wine is yucky in the new vintage, off it goes. If we've done our jobs properly, that will almost never happen. Core-list wines will be clearly indicated in the text (with



notes in **bold print**) and I'll explain why each wine is on the core-list.

### **Dry German Wines**

I taste each year at roughly the same 40-some estates, and thus I can compare apples to apples. I know the view I receive isn't comprehensive but I'm sure it's

representative. And I was happily perplexed to see how much better the dry Rieslings had gotten in the past year.

Some of this is surely due to the accommodating 2007 vintage, of which more later. Some of it may be the wines the growers opted not to show me. But the general increase in quality was enough to revisit my vituperation against Trocken, to see if is still justified.

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

So now they're staging tastings where their top dry wines are pitted against blue chip examples from Austria and Alsace, to demonstrate their own competitiveness. The results are generally rubbed in my face. They think I'm intractable, but what I actually am is empirical. I generalize based on the evidence hitherto. *Truth means that all ravens are black, until you see a white raven.*

So let's give credit where it's due. I am tasting a larger number of excellent and worthwhile Trocken Rieslings than I ever did before. I have little doubt that top producers are making sure their Grand Cru dry Rieslings are superb, as many of them are. Regardless, there are two difficult questions that need to be addressed. First, what about the number of foully bitter and grotesquely unbalanced Trocken wines at lower echelons of quality? The ceiling may have been raised but the floor is still awfully damn low. Second, even if the wines are improving, do we need Germany to be yet-another-source for dry Rieslings when she is the *only possible* source for Rieslings of the type she used to make? Let's go deeper.

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

Then I started to wonder.

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

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

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

Because the basic rap against dry German Rieslings is too many of them are shrill and bitter. I detest such wines and don't select them. Yet I do select good dry German wines whenever I encounter them, I know the Trocken wines I'm selecting are literally extraordinary. The prevailing human palate will usually reject that which is inherently unpleasant. Yet with exquisite perversity, The Germans wish to establish their market on inherently unpleasant wines.

The proportion of off-sweet wines in my portfolio last year was around 21.5%, and if you take the Mosel out of the equation (for even the driest of the apostles of dryness concede the style works less well there) it jumped to 28%. This year I suspect it's even higher. And very often the dry wines I select are top-of-class in the local German wine guides such as Gault-Millau. Speaking of which....

Gault-Millau likes to do what they call a Ten Years After tasting. (No, this doesn't involve Alvin Lee in any way I'm aware of.) Armin Diel told me when they tasted the top-rated Trocken wines of the 1994 vintage "It was striking to see how thin and sour many of them were compared to the wines we're making now." He is quite correct; modern German dry Rieslings have improved in the last decade. Yet I wonder whether tasting today's wines in ten years will bring about yet another moment of perspective and clarity.

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

Dry German Riesling is a worthwhile variation of the theme. It would properly occupy about 25% of the total production of German Riesling, and be prized for its particular virtues. At 50-degrees N. latitude, with a late-ripening high-acid grape, it's thrilling to beat the odds and make a good dry wine.

Would it were so.

I think that fifty years from now some wine historian will write a book about the strange phenomenon that gripped German wine drinkers in the last quarter of the

## a new way to measure sweetness

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

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

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

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

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

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

**ONE** signifies barely discernable sweetness.

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

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

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

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



twentieth century. RAPED INTO DRYNESS could be the title (and thanks to Armin Diel for the wonderful phrase!).

“Yes, we can shake our heads in bewilderment now, since the plague has passed and things are normal again,” he’ll write. “But spare a thought for the waste and devastation that walked the land in those sorry years; all the GREAT, RIPE VINTAGES which might have given legendary wines we would still be enjoying, instead of the twisted perversions which now, with historical perspective, we can justly deride.”

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

Peter Geiben told me a revealing story. He was visited by a trio of consumers who wanted to taste and purchase. What did they wish to taste? *Trocken*, of course. And so a line up of dry wines was duly assembled, along with a single “feinherb” and a “sweet” Kabinett at the end. “It’s necessary you taste all the wines,” said Peter; “those are the rules!” And when all the wines were tasted, the buyers said “Actually, those last two wines were quite attractive . . .” and when the order arrived the next day, “Not one single bottle of *Trocken* wine was ordered; only the sweet Kabinett.”

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

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



*Are today’s german wines being “raped into dryness”?*

hypnosis, and if this is true of fashion imagine how true it is of dogma. “Wrong?” I think not. Misled, and therefore dishonest with themselves.

Often even the dogma is supported with dishonest (or at least false) explanation. I am automatically suspicious when a German starts in with the whole “traditional” rap. As I see it, “tradition” is a moving target, usually determined by the time you start from and how far back you look.

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

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

It’s recently been suggested (by a writer who ought to know better) that the great dry German wines of yore were swept away by oceans of cheap sweetened swill in the ‘50s and ‘60s, when *dosage* could be used to pastiche what were formerly rare and truly precious sweet wines. This argument sounds pretty ideological to me. Sure there were lots of yucky wines made sweet in the 50s and ‘60s. Which only says there’s plenty of yucky growers and only a few good ones. The same guys are making yucky dry wines now. At least the yucky sweet wines

were *palatable*. But for every true wackoloon who really gets *off* on bitterness, there are hundreds who are *losing* the ability to discern disharmony; consumers and growers alike. Taste with them if you don't believe me!

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

If you still don't believe me, you should hear the chatter about Halbtrocken wines. I'm well aware everyone hates the term; I hate it too. But most of the German wine folk with whom I spoke hate the entire *idea*. "Dry should be dry and sweet should be sweet!" they intone. This semi-dry stuff is what? Mongrel? Some sort of useless compromise? I feel almost timorous when I try to remind them to consider *how the wines taste*. Schildknecht bulls-eyed it when he wrote "It's not soup, and it's not a classic reduction, so don't expect me to taste your so-called 'sauce'." I'll come out and say it: *the only acceptable ideology of taste is: TASTE*. Be true to the actual evidence of your senses, drink what you like, drink as many different *kinds* of those things as you can find, and forget about the goddamned grams of residual sugar.

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

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

The wines they currently call "Troocken" — those



*Trendy Troocken wines drinkers — too often concerned about image rather than "taste."*

snarling beasts with 0-9 grams of sweetness — would henceforth be called "Sehr Troocken" (very dry).

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



*wines!*

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

There's also a huge irony at work. Initially the Germans began making Troocken wines in order to regain market share they were losing to the Alsations and Italians. They invented the whole catechism of theological explanation AFTER THE FACT, as it wasn't too cool to simply say "Um, we can make dry wines too if that's what you all want to drink." And now an entire generation of wine drinkers in Germany are brainwashed to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered *once again* that other countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves 'em right.

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

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

Nor am I encouraged by the new tolerance for highly sweet wines in the German market, as again it imposes an idea upon a group of wines regardless of what they might need to attain harmony. I wonder if there's any hope at all that someday they'll return to just tasting wine with our simple wits. I fear not.

Florian Weingart had a cask of Spätlese he was hop-



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

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

Oh, AMEN!

It's also time to bury the whole putrid misconception of German wines as sweet wines. Sweet wines, as I see them, are bona fide dessert wines. Their dominant impression is sweetness. In good German wine, sweetness is barely visible in itself; it is, rather, a *catalyst* to the expression of other flavors. Cooks will know what I mean. You use a little nutmeg when you sauté mushrooms, *not* so they'll taste like nutmeg, but so they'll taste *more* mushroomy. Just so with sweetness in German

wine. The right amount of residual sugar **makes every other flavor in the wine come to life**. Stuart Pigott says it best: "We don't call wines which have an oak component 'oak wines,' so why should we call wines with a sweet component 'sweet wines'?"

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

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

### More Principles

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

After clarity come the lovelier questions. What is the actual quality of the flavor? To what extent is it beautiful? (Subjective, yes, but not impossible, and not meaningless. After all, I like truffles and I like tortilla chips, but I'm not confused about which flavor is more beautiful.) Next, is there a harmonious interplay among all the flavor components? Are all the parts in balance? Then, is the intensity of flavor *appropriate*? Not *how* intense is it, since sheer firepower doesn't impress me; I'd rather have a delicate but fine and intricate flavor than an intensely *boring* flavor. Then, is the flavor monofaceted or does it seem to evolve into sen-



tences and paragraphs? Is the finish long, and does it *also* evolve, or does it merely echo the highest note of fruit? Then, is the structure, the architecture, the carpentry—call it what you will—balanced, firm, organized, is there *nuance*, seasoning? This takes a paragraph to delineate, but less than an instant to discern.

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

Or, as Johannes Selbach told me once, “when I returned to Germany after being in the States for two years I was totally convinced that all the talk of soil producing flavor was just old wives’ tales. But when I started making wines from our grapes I was astonished to find exactly the opposite.” He believes it, not from any “romantic” cast of mind, but because it was plainly and concretely proven to be so. Me too.

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

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

*-Alexander Pope*

It’s best when you make a mistake, and the easiest mistake is thinking you’ve got it *aced*. Because now you’re not asking questions any more, you’re waiting for each wine to confirm your conclusions. I think that wine will contrive to confuse our assumptions **in order to get us to still our egos and listen**. I don’t use “ego” in its typical pejorative as a synonym for our conceits, but rather as that part of us which insists on grasping and apprehending. Wine resists being *grasped*. If you hold it too tightly, it can’t dance with you. Hold it just right, and it will glide over the floor with you as if you were a single body.

Wine resists even the compressions of professionals trying to be conscientious. I see cellar practices conscientious growers have in common, and many wines I enjoy share certain analytical features. But there are no litmus tests. I don’t need to take absolute stands on questions of winemaking. They’re not moral questions, and you have to stretch to make them ethical questions. I see no need to decide once and for all if I like reductive or oxidative wines, or this Riesling clone versus another, or wines left on the lees versus wines quickly racked.

What turns me on the most is the Joyful Noise! The clamor of methods, visions, opinions, the warp and woof of temperaments. The coexistence of all these points of view in my own mind seems to give it energy and vitality, and makes it *more* receptive to pleasure. Most of the time when people turn these into moral questions, they do it

*after* the fact. If Mosel growers developed techniques for stopping fermentation to leave sweetness in their wines because they *could* do so—their wines are naturally low in pH—it’s only natural they should defend their practice and claim to find it superior to the use of Süßreserve. But that doesn’t mean I have to believe them! Not when my own experience tells me otherwise. You learn to listen to someone explain why he does what he does, for it reveals important things about the man (or woman) and the kinds of wines (s)he makes. But that’s all, and that’s enough. It’s a waste of time trying to figure out who’s “right.”

Apart from which, these things *change*. Today there’s a general retreat away from steel, a general movement toward fermentation from natural yeasts (whose results are referred to as *Spontis*, for “spontaneous”), and even the stirrings of a challenge to whole-cluster pressing. If you’re around long enough you can watch as the pendulum swings. You can also enjoy how necessary it is. A notion takes hold, and for 10-15 years it becomes the prevailing notion and everyone tries it and it becomes the *correct* way to make wine—it signifies you are serious about quality. Then a few people start wondering “What if we did it another way?” Florian Weingart, who is remarkably thoughtful, self-aware and intellectually curious, has had ten years to establish his *regime*, and most of his innovations were defended with good logic.



But last year he started making changes, as it started to dawn on him that “My father knew very well what he was doing and many of his approaches turn out to have been better for the style and quality I seek.”

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

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

immediacy. Yet this is mostly impossible.

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

**TT:** Yeah, I appreciated being knocked on my (figurative) keister by so many of the 2003s, because the more certainties that topple away, the closer to that Edenic state one returns—yet even this is a kind of wishful dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Man, after that exchange you better *believe* I belched

loudly and turned on wrestling!

## An Essay On Tasting Blind

Kermit Lynch said it best: “Blind tastings are to wine what strip poker is to love.”

Look, the palate is an instrument played by the taster. As you learn an instrument you practice exercises and repetitions until you are facile. Then it comes naturally and you don’t have to *think* about “Ah, a C-sharp is 1st string 9th fret.” You just grab the note. Blind tasting is the equivalent of playing scales. It’s valuable and necessary at a certain stage, but don’t confuse it with making music. Sadly, far too many do.

Have you heard Keith Jarrett’s solo piano CD, *The Melody, The Night and You*? He’d been suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome for several years, curtailing his performing career and making it all but impossible for him to even play the piano on some days. The CD is a recital of standards and folk songs played very straight, with little



embellishment or technical bravura. The approach is said to have been compelled by Jarrett’s draining enervation, but the result is nearly sublime, a tender, deliberate and caressing reading of these songs, essential and pure.

Returning from the phone while the CD was playing I realized if I’d been listening casually I might have thought it was merely cocktail-lounge piano. Knowing the artist, his history, and the conditions under which the recording was made gave it *resonance* and meaning. Context gives meaning. And meaning gives *life*.

Why, then, do we play at reducing wine to a thing without context? What’s the *good* of tasting blind? Where’s the silver lining of experiencing wine in a vacuum? Yes, it can train us to focus our palates. It can hone our powers of concentration. Then we can discard it! It has served its purpose. If we keep tasting blind we run a grave risk. It is homicidal to a wine’s *context*, and wine without context is bereft of meaning, and the experience of meaning is too rare to squander.

Blind tasting will only guarantee your “objectivity” if that objectivity is so fragile it needs such a crude crutch. If you’re too immature (or inexperienced) to be objective when necessary, tasting blind won’t help you. It will, however, confuse you as to the purpose of

*drinking wine.*

I'm not even talking about recreational drinking, *fun* (remember *fun*?); the only genuinely professional approach to wine is to know as much about it as possible!



*German spies were not into blind tastings . . . at all!*

Who made it, under what condition did it grow, what's the maker's track record, where is (s)he in the "pecking order?" Then and only then can a genuinely thoughtful evaluation take place, of a wine in the fullness of its being. Blind tasting? **Done it, done with it.**

### **The 2007 Vintage**

I usually bury the lead in the vintage report, so this time I'll make with the blab-o-rama: 2007 is a fantastically consistent vintage of very high quality, standing somewhere between 2002 and 2001, and more homogenous than either. It is even more homogenous than 2005, which was supernally great where it was great but which was merely very good in certain regions. 2007 is also a wonderfully pleasing vintage; its wines are delicious and amenable at the same time they're rich, detailed and stupidly long.

The basic story of the growing season repeats cross-regionally. A very early bud-break was followed by the earliest flowering in history—more than a month ahead of schedule—causing most growers to cancel their usual late-summer vacations for fear they'd be picking before September 1st. But the eventual summer surprised them all. "It was what we used to consider a typical German summer," one of them told me. "Cool, cloudy, plenty of rain, only a few sunny days. . . ." Another grower who'd just bought a swimming pool lamented ruefully "I didn't enter it a single time." Harvest-times kept being pushed back, and back, and back, as growers waited for acids to drop. In many cases they had sugar-ripeness but were still unfinished physiologically. This was a relief to hear, in fact, as many of Europe's recent vintages have, to my taste, been compromised by the worship of physio-at-all-costs, which sometimes results in ponderous over-endowed wines that ain't no fun to drink. But Germany in 2007 reminded me why we cared about the inner ripeness in the first place.

Picking was blissfully long and deliberate, in almost entirely good autumn weather. A couple brief rainy peri-

ods caused some Pfalz growers to panic and pick too soon, for fear of enduring another onslaught of rot a la 2006, but most were resolute.

The wet summer created markedly high extracts by which the sometimes-pointed acids were buffered. Still, 2007 can show a little last kick of acidity in its finish, as some 2002s did too. It has the silvery textures of that vintage but also the spicy profundity of 2001; it's also a fruit-driven vintage, along lines of the lovely 1997—but even better. Back to those extracts though, for this is perhaps the defining story of 2007. It's said you need 100 days between the end of flowering and the start of picking to make good German Riesling. In 2007 you had at least 120-130, and some growers showed me wines with 150 days hang-time; the results were riveting.

Yet even here one encounters shades of opinion. More than a few growers told me they picked when the grapes were ripe, though the weather was fine and they could easily have waited. One grower told me that the vine sometimes takes back ripeness, extract and thus even flavor if you wait too long to pick. Something new to think about. . . .

2007 usually enters the palate fruity and then gives way to a riptide of minerality and acidity. I wrote "The wines enter as liquids and leave as solids," and this nails it. The finish of these wines is scarcely believable; you think something must be wrong in your mouth for the wines to cling so, and "finish" in these wines is the furthest thing from metaphor: it's a tactile feeling the wine is not only still there, it continues to grow and deepen.

As is often the case in vintages with "important" acidity, the mouth-texture of these wines is fantastically slippery and juicy. It sometimes seems we forget to notice the actual physical feeling of a wine in the mouth since we're so busy working to isolate and identify flavors, but these 2007s will bring you home to how your mouth can dance.

Fruit runs malic, but ripe-malic. Not Granny Smith apples, but Cox-Orange Pippins, and many wines offer a feast of pears along with a little toothsome nip of quince. I barely recall a wine I felt was deficient in fruit qua fruit, and if I focus on 2007's acids it not because they determine these wines: far from it. They inform many 2007s, but





to the extent I saw analyses I was almost bemused. Some wines have more acidity than they display, and others (Mosels especially) display more than they actually have. 2007 is also a vintage with a disconnect between acidity and pH, at least sensorily. At Merkelbach I saw a vintage uncannily like 2001, cracking line-drive wines of almost iridescent brilliance, the kind of Ur-Mosel they do at their very best, but the wines were in fact on the low side viz acids and the high side viz pH—so 2007 is at times a lesson in the difference between palate and analysis.

Eiswein was possible if you waited until just before Christmas, but many growers said “We had such a long harvest that when it was finally over we felt done with it, and we decided not to leave anything for Eiswein.” Still, you’ll see a few, and they’re typical and wonderful. There’s also no end of BA-TBA (Catoir made a BA and god-help-me seven TBAs . . .) but there’s no plethora of Auslese as was the case last year. Drinkers yearning for a return to the “typical” Kabinett will be relieved by 2007, though standards have changed and what we now taste as “typical” would have been unthinkable ten years ago. Bear this in mind when you first confront the Dollar-disaster prices for ‘07s. That “Kabinett” you’re being asked to pay so “much” for contains juice you’d have cherished in a Spätlese in the 1990s and an Auslese in the ‘80s.

2007 offered very few disappointments. It’s a reliable year. It is huge fun to taste! Even its dry wines are—mostly—huge fun to taste. You know, there’s ‘sweet’-dry and then there’s ‘sour’-dry, and most of the dry 2007s seem to have been born in balance. They’re like Gerber babies, plump and dimpled and smiling. One grower we saw near the end showed me the kinds of gnarly Trockens I’d come to loathe and I was actually relieved I hadn’t been somehow seduced-at-last by Trocken; the ‘07s were really that good.

REGION-BY-REGION is hardly necessary in this vintage. There was no storm-that-just-missed-us nor any occluded front where the wines on the north side were clean and fine but those on the south side were difficult. Interestingly, 2007 marks the first vintage since . . . what,

2000? . . . that the Mosel and Nahe haven’t been dramatically the best regions, fine though they surely are! Indeed I couldn’t say Mosel in toto is any better than Rheinhessen was in 2007, and I’d be tempted to say my humble little paysannes in RH had maybe the even-better year.

There’s also enough wine. At last. This has had a moderating effect on what would have been draconian price increases, based on the many short crops the last five years, and on us poor Dollar beggars imploring our growers to defer increasing prices year after year until the poor grower finally has to burst out. In fact most of his fixed expenses (especially for bottles) have shot up the past two years, and they’re hurting from the prices they’re giving us. Thank our new best friends in China-India-Norway-Sweden, who can pay the asking price and who are in effect subsidizing us dirt-poor Yanks.

Sybarites with tastes similar to mine will be delighted to hear of the many excellent Scheurebe and *Muscat* from 2007.

### HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

My list of *hors classe* is squirming to grow. Certain growers have emeritus status, and I eliminate them from my best-ofs because if they were there they’d steal the whole show. Dönnhoff obviously. But if Catoir has another vintage like 2007 they’ll have to climb on board also, because this is not only a head-shakingly magnificent collection, it’s a real *so-there!* to anyone who doubted they’d be able to pull it off in the Post-Schwarz era. More on this when I get into their text.

The Winery Of The Vintage is...with a big *ta-da!* . . . our friends at **Selbach-Oster**. I thought about this one, because they got the hosanna two years ago, and I’d like to spread it around. But when I looked back on everything I tasted I could draw no other conclusion. Again with Selbach it has to do with breadth. It’s not that their wines are necessarily “better” than, say, Schaefer’s, but that there are so many masterpieces and the quality is so remarkable across the board—the very *large* board.

OTHER OUTSTANDING COLLECTION . . . that is, sustained superlative performance over the entire vintage, consist of the following:

**Wagner-Stempel** (When is this world-class grower gonna get the attention he deserves?)

**Schlossgut Diel**

**Spreitzer**

**Schaefer**

**Müller-Catoir** (No sensible person can deny them their rightful position as best in the Pfalz any longer!)

GROWERS FOR WHOM 2007 IS THEIR BEST-EVER

VINTAGE:

Hexamer  
Kruger-Rumpf  
Minges

COMEBACK KIDS OF THE YEAR . . . GROWERS WHOSE 2007S ARE MARKEDLY SUPERIOR TO THE PREVAILING LEVEL OF THE LAST FEW YEARS:

Strub  
Meßmer  
Merkelbach

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese  
"Rotlay"

RUNNERS UP INCLUDE:

Von Othegraven Ockfener Bockstein Riesling  
Spätlese  
Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling  
Spätlese 3-star  
Spreitzer Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese  
Karlsmühle Kaseler Nieschen Riesling Spätlese  
Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling  
Spätlese 1-star

THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Müller-Catoir Haardter Herzog Rieslaner  
Auslese

THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Müller-Catoir Haardter Herzog Scheurebe  
Auslese

THE KABINETTS OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

Schlossgut Diel Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling  
Kabinett (for its psychedelic expressiveness)

Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett (for  
making me its *bitch*)

THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

Strub Grüner Veltliner (a sheer delight of typicity  
and vitality, And a quantum-leap ahead of any pre-  
vious vintage.)

Bernhard Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg  
Riesling Kabinett Feinherb (which also gets the  
award for the longest name . . . but this is one of  
those who-knew-they-had-it-in-them wines, a new  
level of finesse and complexity from this estate.)

Schneider Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling  
Spätlese (likely to be the best wine they have ever  
made, certainly in the modern era, and a great Nahe  
Riesling.)

Leitz Dragonstone (yes! Back to the drier style and  
more filigree delineation that made this wine when  
it was first introduced.)

THE GREATEST CORE-LIST WINES ARE:

Strub Soil To Soul  
Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken LITER  
Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett  
Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling  
Kabinett  
Minges Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Spätlese



(replaced Gleisweiler Hölle)

THE GREATEST DRY WINE IS:

Wagner-Stempel Heerkretz Grosses Gewächs

THE TWO GREATEST VALUES ARE:

Schneider Riesling Kabinett LITER  
Minges Riesling Kabinett LITER

SHORT LIST FOR ROCKHEADS:

Wagner-Stempel Sauvignon Blanc  
Wagner-Stempel Riesling "Vom Porphyr"  
Schlossgut Diel Burgberg Grosses Gewächs

Leitz Rüdesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling  
Alte Reben  
Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #12

SHORT LIST FOR FRUIT ANDCHARM HOUNDS:

Strub Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese  
Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese  
Hexamer Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen  
Riesling Spätlese

## **Earlier Vintages Revisited – 2006**

Another waif, this orphan-vintage so few of us loved, though so much of it was loveable. As 2007 is the Right vintage for its Moment, 2006 was the Wrong vintage for its. When you taste it bookended by the more-elegant '05s and the more-lyrical '07s, 2006 can seem earnest and a little obtuse. The Germans have a useful word *Jahrgangston*, i.e., the flavor-of-a-vintage, though they really mean the dubious flavor that announces a vintage by dint of its basic flaw. Think of 2000. Some of the '06s, tasted a year after bottling, show this flavor more than before. It is a baroque vintage that arrived like a foie gras course served after the main course; it looks great but you're not hungry any more, and certainly not for anything so rich. . . .

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

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

### **2005**

One doesn't taste them now, but every time I did I was struck by their excellence, their grace, moderation, balance and vinosity. In fact I asked to taste '05-'06 parallels where I'd felt the 2006 was perhaps even better—even more grandiose, explicit, determined, complex. But in many cases I was wrong: 2005 was even finer. The tandem will remind German wine geezers of the '76-vs-'75 debates we remember so well, with 2006-1976 linking muscular arms while 2005 and 1975 dance their pretty dance.

### **2004**

What to make of this vintage? At the time it was hailed as a relief after the broiling 2003s, which were generally (if fatuously) written off as clunky and four-square. Tasting the wines pre-bottling I was struck by their freshness and consistency, only noting a small tendency for grassiness in a few sub-regions. But that

grassy flavor has intensified, and has started showing up in wines with 1-2 years in bottle. If you told me Sancerre had such egregious overproduction that it hired a gang of vandals to break into German wineries at night and pour off its excess into tanks of Riesling, I'd nearly believe you. The problem is, it isn't confined to Germany. I've tasted lots of Alsace wines, several



Chablis, and even a few Champagnes, all showing this *green* flavor somewhere between a pleasing Menetou-grassiness and a yucky cruciferous vegetality.

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

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

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

## **2003**

Indeed many of the 03s have *slimmed down* with bottle-age and what impresses most about them now is their purity and even elegance. But I doubt a single German wine grower ever imagined his four recent vintages would include *three* mega-ripe monuments. Some 2003s appeared almost demure next to their more muscular sibs from 2006. We were fools to write this vintage off, but the universe has more urgent matters on its hands.

## **2002**

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

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

## **"Antiques"**

**2001** - I've just started to breach the occasional bottle and for the most part they want to be left alone, especially the Mosel wines. I wonder whether the vintage will seem even more lissome when compared to the outsized 2003-2005-2006 trio. 2001 does seem to be the last classic fine vintage, Beethoven versus Mahler. Or maybe the crowding mass of remarkable years will serve to remind us there are many forms of greatness and we get to have them all if we're not obsessed with how things *have* to be.

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

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

**1999** is as good as forgotten, bland creature that it was, yet again it's often just these vintages that return to amaze us in 20 years. Think of '86, '79, '73. And here's something for your weird-o-meter; many of the German

1999s are evolving the very same beeswax/camomile aromas we see in their distant cousins from Austria. These are wine regions separated by some 500-600 miles, not to mention the Alps, not to mention 2-3 degrees of latitude,



and yet the vintages show the same flavor. Perhaps Science should help us explain this instead of twisting itself into knots trying to "disprove" terroir..

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

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

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

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

If you really want to get humble fast, go back to your first notes of a vintage and consider what happened to it later. A lot of guys (usually *guys*, and usually wine-writers) seem to need to defend their omniscience, but for me it's an ongoing process. I've tended to underrate fruit-driven vintages, especially when they're on the heels of mineral-extract vintages, because the fruity ones seem simplistic. I'm concerned I might overrate skeletally-driven vintages because I'm so entertained by their early complexities. I am also aware my palate changes with



experience and also as my body ages. I want more fruit and symmetry these days, and single components don't wow me like before. I've learned that if I *taste* acidity then it's probably too high, maybe not for immediate drinking if you crave a certain sharpness, but for the long haul.

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

1989 developed predictably; we knew it would age quickly and it did, though its best wines make for tasty drinking now. '91 was a spiky little critter and still is. '92 was a good-natured oaf without much finesse or complexity (exceptions exist of course, e.g., Catoir) and yet it's aging quite deliberately and might yet confound us as '79 and '73 did. '93 started out tart and has stayed that way. '94 was a vintage where flesh was at a premium, and has become one of the more compelling years of the '90s. It's rather better than I believed it would be, and it

also contradicts my theory about excess acidity. My poor little theory! In fact someone should contrive a test whereby a Wine Person gets to make big declarative statements *What I Have Learned* and then the examiner produces wines that blow what he's learned right out of the damn water. At the end of the whole wretched process the poor schlep has to write a paper called *What I Learned Today* – and then you'll get some truth.

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

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

First, either do away with cork or find a way to neutralize its damage. I am *fed up* with the number of corked bottles of German wine I encounter. Yes, outright stinkers are rare, but these aren't as scary as the subtly corked wine, where something indistinct is making the wine taste mute, furry, stale.

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

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

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

So there is, perhaps, some objective evidence for the impression many of us have formed anecdotally, that German wines are more often corked than other wines. Yet if the quoted statement is true, there should be many fewer corked bottles of dry German Riesling with 13%

alc than of Mosel Kabinetts with 8%. I wonder whether this is in fact the case. I suspect . . . not.

Here's something else I'd do; remove the spurious glamour attending to "flying winemakers." I'm not sure why it's sexy for someone to ride a plane to go somewhere else to make wine. I appreciate wanderlust. But I'm happier when someone chooses a place and makes wine there, ideally the place he was born and raised. He then becomes linked to his place and his wine expresses the connection. The connection gives it significance. Otherwise wine becomes a plaything (a *thing*, period). Johannes Selbach certainly racks up as many frequent-flier miles as any human I know, yet I cannot imagine him starting a wine "project" (the word makes me wince) in New Zealand or Yunnan province. He is a Moselaner; therefore the wine he makes is Mosel wine.

Don't misunderstand; there's nothing morally wrong about making any wine any where you please. I just don't think it's inherently fascinating or desirable. It rather adds to the incoherence of the world. And whatever it is, it ain't glamorous.

I'm even starting to wonder about professional cel-



*Just say no to corks.*

larmasters. I'm such a fusspot. But look, I know everybody isn't lucky enough to have a winery all ready to inherit from Mom and Dad, and wineries of a certain size need someone to simply handle the work. But in most cases a cellar-master, even one with all the "right" ideas, cannot make 3-dimensional wine. (S)he can make very good 2-dimensional wine – I ship some of it – but the cellar-master needs to stay put long enough to feel as *if* he were at home, to evolve a familial/familiar relationship to the land; to want its story heard. Otherwise it is merely application of skill. A jobber at the job, even if it's the right job. Any good itinerant cellar-master should yearn to buy an estate and make himself at home.

I think I would decree that new vintages could only come along every eighteen months. Once a year is getting to be too often. David Schildknecht gave me

this idea, and because of that I would appoint him Minister Of Wine Writing.

One thing I'd be sure to do is to protect *true* Eiswein. This genre of sweet wine originated in Germany, and probably happened by accident. Then the growers discovered a chance to make intense sweet wine in years when BA and TBA were impossible. Then they discovered how amazing Eiswein tasted, and came to prize it for itself. Then they learned how to refine it, what to leave hanging, how (or if) to protect the fruit, when to give up on it, and what not to concentrate. This last point is crucial, which you'd appreciate if you remembered any of the '87 Eisweins; this unripe vintage gave Eisweins wherein the *unripeness* was concentrated, and I will never forget tasting a Mittelrhein Riesling Eiswein with over *twenty gum-bleeding grams of acidity* which would probably have removed dog blood from silk.

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

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

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

An idea has been promulgated whereby certain vineyards shall be classified and those sites can stand alone on a label, without reference to a village name. Think of Burgundy. Musigny. It makes sense. The problem commences with the nomenclature. These apostles of vinous wisdom have arrived at Erstes Gewächs to denote the Grand Crus, and even for a German-speaker

like me that's, like, an OWEE! (It's also an ironic pun, inasmuch as "Gewächs" sounds like "Geh' weck!" which means "Go away!") For they are pitifully aware of foreign markets, these folks; they're the same villains who want all German wines to be DRY.

Which brings me to the blood-boiling ne plus ultra of the whole matter. For a wine to carry the Erstes Gewächs banner, it must be TROCKEN. Somebody help me understand this!

I know the answer, and it is an answer of sorts, but embedded in it lies a subversive question. They'd probably say: "When the consumer buys a bottle called 'Meursault' he knows he is getting a wine that is always dry, but our German wines could be dry or semi dry or sweet, and this confuses him." Well let's not have that! I have an alternate suggestion. LET'S INSIST THAT ALL WINES LABELLED "ERSTES GEWAECHS" BE SWEET!!! And let's even do it in fine Teutonic fashion and decree the wines must have "no more than 50.5 grams and no less than 38.623698499 grams (39 if you're married filing jointly)." If we are going to decide, completely arbitrarily, how an entire community of disparate wines will taste, then let's increase the odds they'll taste GOOD, what say?

Ah but this isn't P.C., you see! In a topsy-turvy world where Trocken = Proper it follows rationally (if horrifically) that the potential quality inherent in a site has only to do with the goddamn residual sugar in a wine from that site. Too bad it's nothing less than the imposition of an ideology disguised as a "helpful" classification for the consumer.

It is also a dreadful violence to individual wines. Doesn't anyone in Germany actually taste wine any more? Never mind what might be suitable for this wine or that! They MUST be dry. Let's LOBOTOMIZE these wines. Abandon fruit, all ye who enter here. If one of you



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

well-meaning but disastrously wrongheaded people are reading this, please, forget all your abstractions, "the market," "consumer taste," "the modern drinker" and just taste wine! If you make wines that taste balanced and taste delicious you will—imagine!—find a market for them.

You will also avoid a bizarre polarization you yourself created with your dogmatic rigidity. For a grower can — and almost always does — bottle a dry

wine from his peak-site called Erstes Gewächs, and another from the same site called Pudyanker Slugberg Riesling Spätlese, and what's the "market" to make of that? "But wait . . . aren't those from the same vineyard . . . ? Why isn't the Spätlese also Erstes Gewächs?" Ah, you see; because the presence of the dreaded residual-unmentionable means that it cannot be sold under the banner of a "great growth".

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

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

All in all I'm starting to wonder about the VDP. They seem to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. They frequently fix what wasn't broken while neglecting what is. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all O.K. Good place to stop. Vineyard classification, also O.K.: I proposed one myself in a DECANTER article back in 1985. Rather blatantly self-serving (e.g. FAR too much Grand Cru land in marginal Rheingau villages which are

home to VDP members) but still, it needs doing and any start is better than none.

Good place to stop. Leave well enough alone. But, alas and inevitably, the “marketing” guys pull up in the white truck with the jackets and the Procrustian bed and the syringes and scalpels and electrodes. Let’s establish prices, they insist. Let’s decree that only Riesling can be called Grand Cru (or “Erstes Gewächs” and other such lingual abominations), and let’s further decree the precise parameters of residual sugar a priori. Time to REWIND the tape to just before the silliness started, eh guys?

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

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

Ah but you see, the only variable that matters is residual sugar, because we are obsessed with residual sugar, because we have for some perverse reason turned it into the sole aesthetic CRUX of the matter. Sugar doesn’t matter, folks, except as an agent of harmony, one among many, an especially helpful one at table, but final-

ly just one of many facets. Yet singled out for special villainy in a world gone gaga.

In full view of the good being done by the VDP, I sadly conclude they are doing even more harm. For the member growers they do provide a marketing platform, but at perilously high cost - beyond the hefty dues the grower pays. The estates I like best are the non-aligned, the intuitively sensible and flexible, the Selbachs of this world.

## **TASTING VERSUS DRINKING**

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

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

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

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

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

## What is a Palate?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## How German Wines Age

I have newbies working with me. We have grown to the point we need regional reps (either that or we need to buy an airline) and so we hired a fine young professional, Michele Parent to cover Colorado and points-west (a territory she devoutly hopes will include Hawaii). We also have with us a passionate young 'un covering NY/NJ named Jonathan Schwartz, who traveled with me and tromped around even more than I did. Jonathan's birth-year is 1981, which info I was required to vouchsafe Johannes Selbach so he'd know what vintages to bring out with dinner.

Now if you've never visited German wine growers



you have no idea how these wines truly age, i.e., when they've never been moved from the perfect cellars in which they lay from the beginning. The first time you get to experience such a wine, it is nearly unbelievable. And no matter how many times Johannes has witnessed this reaction from his guests, it gets no less fun – plus he's a sweetie of the highest order. So seeing everyone's astonishment at the condition – and the *tenderness* – of these old Rieslings caused many more of them to be unearthed. Nothing grandiose mind you; just "ordinary" wines of unremarkable years.

I myself have experienced this many times. But something struck me now, having to do with the "tenderness" I mentioned before. For with many of these mature Rieslings it isn't just how well they've preserved, and it isn't even how many facets they've integrated or what complexities they've attained. It's more. It is first the extent to which they've stayed *alive*. They are neither relics nor objects of curiosity or even astonishment: they are still with us in their original purpose, to keep our food and us company and to share their happiness. And it's also the way they've made peace with their factions of flavor. The French describe this process and its result as *fondue*, a melting together of parts into a seamless whole. The tenderness I speak of arises from there.

But it is also a quality of deliberateness. "A 25-year-old Kabinett, and yet it tastes so *young!*" is not where it ends, but where it begins. It is going nowhere fast. It has much life before it. It is in no particular hurry. *It has all the time in the world*. Such wines do not only exist in time; they appear to *embody* it. From here one can extend many ways outward. But I'll just talk about time.

We think of time as a thing there's always too little of, against whose relentless limitations we constantly bang our heads. But wine can show us another kind of time, a more meandering and forgiving time. There's a Zen saying: *The oxen are slow, but the earth is patient*. Wine can bring us to the patient earth, of whose existence we are often not aware, though we live here. The title of this section is "How German Wines Age" but it's also wise to consider *why* German wines age. They have a thing to show us.

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

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

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

So don't!

The problem is, we are tasting and sampling those wines commercially at *exactly* the most awkward moment. If you encounter such an aroma in a young Mosel Riesling, try swirling the glass for a few minutes; it will dissipate. The number of minutes it takes to dissipate is roughly the number of *years* it will take to disappear from the wine entirely if the bottle is left undisturbed. It is in NO WAY a flaw; merely an inconvenience. Or you can look upon it as a warning not to drink these wines too young!

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

The mature flavor begins as a kind of singe around the edge of the fruit. Finally that singe—as though the fruit had been flambéed—seems to *encompass* the fruit, to subsume it. The fruit is not devoured, but it has chrysalized into a brighter and richer thing. An entire panoply of secondary flavors begins to appear, and the wine becomes truly *vinous*; it is born as wine, leaving

the placenta of grapiness behind. If it is a fine wine, especially a wine with botrytis, these flavors constitute a real elixir, the effect of which is completely seductive. But even smaller wines take on a patina of poise and mysteriousness.

There are also strict chemical reactions wherein acidity softens and sugars polymerize, so that each is less pronounced as the wine ages. In the 1990-vintage zeitgeist the idea was to make “sweet” wines as dry as possible, but many of these wines now seem obdurate and lumpen, with still-prominent acids and not enough fruit; yang, but no yin. Sometimes it’s necessary to allow apparently-excessive sweetness in a baby-wine as a guarantor of great cellaring. A few of the 2007s appear to have more sweetness than they strictly need, but from the right cellar I’m actually glad to see it; it denotes a grower who’s thinking years ahead to the wine’s maturity.

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

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

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

The author Tom Stevenson’s of whose scholarship I stand in near-awe, summed up the petrol thing neatly. “The so-called petrol aroma is a well-known varietal characteristic of a classic . . . Riesling wine of some maturity. The active chemical compound has been identified as trimethyldihydronaphthalene, or TDN for short. TDN develops during the bottle aging process through the degradation of beta-carotene, an antioxidant that is itself derived from lutein, another antioxidant. The ratio of beta carotene to lutein is higher in Riesling than in any other white grape variety. Studies show that the lower the pH of a wine, the higher its potential for developing TDN. The longer it takes for the petrol aromas to emerge, the more finesse they have. Interestingly, cork absorbs 40 percent of TDN, thus screwcaps preserve more petrol aromas.”

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

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

KABINETT: peaks from 4-6 years (if it’s *true* Kabinett and not declassified Auslese) and shouldn’t fade till about age 15. Again, it’s not an abrupt demise, but rather a deliberate twilight slide. That said, I have in



mind that 1961 Kabinett I drank at Schmitt-Wagner; 42 years old and going strong.

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

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

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

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

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

My own instincts are to pay heed to the weight of the wine—Eiswein at 135° Oechsle is a different critter than one at 200° Oechsle—and drink it as you would any other hyper-concentrated dessert wine: either very young or very old.

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

## **What To Drink Now**

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

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

## The Question of Tartrates

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



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

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

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

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

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

## Label Basics

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

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

The common complaint is the German label is too verbose. Here's a nice terse response: bullshit. If this were

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

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

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). The phrase *Qualitätswein mit Prädikat* is a bit of bureaucratic puffery. Quality wine with special distinction, right! The distinction in this case is that the wine is not chaptalized. Chaptalized wines can only be labeled *Qualitätswein b.A.*; they aren't subject to predicates. Only Germans have perversely decided that chaptalized wine

is ipso facto inferior wine. The French cheerily go on consuming just about all their wines except the most southerly, not caring that sugar was added to the grape must to boost the alcohol a few degrees. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the

*Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum





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

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

## GLOSSARY

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

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays remarkable ripeness for its quality level. Most of my growers are contemptuous of the lenient standards for minimum ripeness. And you need to know if, for example, I'm offering you a Kabinett with near-Auslese ripeness because you might be looking for a light wine and you won't get it. Each grower sets up his own schemata, and if the baseline level is, say, equivalent to Spätlese, then the lightest wine could be called "Kabinett" even with Spätlese-level ripeness. Better to be

remembered for a superb Kabinett than to be forgotten for a run-of-the-mill Spätlese. German wine in general is riper than it was fifteen years ago (it's a global-warming thing), even though I have stopped using aerosol deodorants personally.

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

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

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

**ACIDITY:** I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine except Riesling has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient. In 2006 acids were higher than what's become the norm over the last 6-7 years, but not always. Lately there's been a seam in the usual corollary between acidity and pH, i.e., high acid normally means low pH. But many 06s had normal levels of acidity *and* abnormally low pH. Strub, to name but one, barely had a pH reading higher than 2.9 (!) despite having almost no musts below 95° Oechsle. I'm beginning to feel there's a lot we don't understand yet. Including what role acidity really plays in the aging process.

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

The Germans have lurched backward from their acid-obsession. Now the pack has moved too far in the opposite direction. The poor grower! The ones who try to "gauge the market" end up being whipped around, dupes to fashion. The Good Guys just go on making the best wines they can and look for people to sell them to. I would never advocate a return to the days of Trocken wines with 11 grams of acidity (you could disfigure your

own face if you let any of that stuff dribble down your chin), but it concerns me to hear so many vintners talk about adjusting acids downward to make their young dry wines palatable. It signals an inappropriate focus on acidity as such, rather than on the entire flavor of the wine. As Hans-Günter Schwarz so wisely puts it: "Acidity is the fundament of fruit."

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

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

**SÜSSRESERVE:** It was striking how many times tasting these 2007s when I wished there was some *dosage* with which to fine-tune them. Literally dozens of wines could have been improved. But this is contrary to the new liturgy, and it's starting to get under my skin.

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

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

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

So-called "Süssreserve" (literally sweet-reserve) is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—at least in theory. Actually, I have decided that I don't

like the word "Süssreserve" any more and I won't use it in this text. Since nobody objects to the idea of *Dosage* in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I'll use the nicer one.

In any case I applaud purism in most places it is found, but the anti-*dosage* crusade in Germany smacks not of science but of religion. I am quite certain that thousands of growers used *dosage* willy-nilly—still do—but that only demonstrates there's plenty of hacks making wine. I doubt very much they'd make better wine by stopping fermentation. Hacks are hacks. *Dosage* has been seized upon by a community of growers a little too eager to polish their halos. It is a convenient symbol of manipulation, but this is silly; all winemaking is manipulation, and the authentic questions are not whether to manipulate (one already does) but rather *how* to manipulate and to what end. What we call "non-manipulation" (with rather an excess of romanticism) is more properly called *minimal* manipulation. We prefer growers whose wines are guided by a wish to *preserve* natural inherent flavor rather than laddling all kinds of cellar-sauce over it.

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

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

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

**FLURBEREINIGUNG:** Literally this means the "rectification of the fields." It's actually a process whereby costs of production are diminished by rationalizing land holdings and building roads, paths, and walkways. Formerly

the growers' holdings were split into myriad tiny parcels and scattered hither and yon over the hillside. Often there was no easy access. It could take a longer time to get to one's vines than to actually work them.

In Flurbereinigung, the entire expanse of a vineyard is pulled up. After the new roads are built and the work is completed (sometimes old walls and terraces are rebuilt also), the growers get the same amount of land back, or nearly, but in fewer, larger sections. After replanting, the first commercial crop follows in three to four years. Everyone who's had vineyards through the process reports that it is much easier to work the land afterwards. It also levels the playing field, since everybody's vines are now the same age. It does create short-term shortages of wine, and it does diminish the quality of wine from a vineyard until the vines mature again, but it's a small price to pay to help ensure the future of viticulture in Germany.

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

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

**THEIR TWILIGHT-ZONE WINE LAW:** The 1971 wine law is being neutered by the new generation. Eventually it will become so irrelevant to the way wines are actually produced and labeled it will either be forced to adapt to reality or become a laughable anachronism. Many growers are taking their cue from the Austrians: all the dry wines are ostensibly sold as "QbA" because no one likes

"Spätlese Trocken" or "Auslese Trocken". Many growers are using old micro-site names as a gesture of recognition to their distinctive terroirs. No serious grower cares (nor do some of them even *know*) about the ripeness minima for the various "Prädikat" levels; they name by *taste*, and a "Kabinett" is the wine that *tastes* like one, regardless of must-weight. Indeed there's never been less concern about must-weight, or more concern about physiological ripeness.

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

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

When I first started seriously with wine, *herb* was the word growers used to indicate their dry (or dry-er) wines. "Trocken" was unknown. So "feinherb" is an attempt to rub a little spit on it and make it sound nice. The word is neither here nor there, but the idea of regulating it *sensorily* is so manifestly sensible I wonder why they don't apply it to all the dry wines instead of obsessing over lab figures. Enjoy this wee glimmer of sanity while it lasts, as I'm sure some constipated twit at E.U. Brussels HQ will wrestle it into his airless little box.

### **Plusses and The Quest For Perfection**

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

Every wine in this offering gets in because I like it a

lot. Certain ones are especially striking; firsts among equals, if you will. To these I give a plus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**JF:** *Re Deiss and ZH: I wonder if you agree with me on the following proposition: maybe, just maybe, there are other wines this inspired and heartstopping in the world. But I can’t imagine wine being “better” than this. I mean, how much can you demand of a wine? How much can you demand of Bach? Deiss and ZH are making the vinous*

*equivalents of the Mass in B Minor.*

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

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

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



# SOMMELIER ALERT!

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

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

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



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

# sommelier alert

GSO-310	2003 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**	53
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# mosel-saar-ruwer



I was staying with Selbachs in Zeltingen, which lies right below the Himmelreich vineyard, and Karen Odessa and I had a lovely multi-hour tromp among the giddy lizards astonished by the early warmth glancing off the slate walls. They were darting around everywhere. We even saw a solitary bewildered butterfly, wondering why it was so warm but there weren't any flowers. And the weather held for nearly a week. This was good news for your intrepid importer, who battles with his tendency to eat one too many schnitzels – OK, more than one – and trust me, when you've spent a whole day swirlin' and hurlin' all those young frisky high-acid whites you get a total monkey hunger by evening. So those morning walks were helpful for maintaining my trim boyish profile. Often my sweetie came with me, but one morning she was too dozy and I set off alone. It was misty and cold, fresh and moist, with the high-fog riding about 500 feet over the valley. I stomped up to a trio of wild-cherry trees blooming halfway up the Himmelreich, pushing at top speed to get warm. Kept climbing. Got up into the woods too high for vines any more and listened to the birds fluting away. Many of their calls were new to me. The Himmelreich hill leads back into a small combe which gives way to the next hill, the Schlossberg, and this in turn leads southeast to the great Sonnenuhr. I was on a high path with the Mosel vertically below me through the vines, and only the trees above. Some workers

were pruning and binding here and there, and I thought how lovely it must be to be out on such a cool morning to work with the vines in such pretty surroundings. I know very well it isn't always like this – these vineyards heat up through the summer or grapes wouldn't ripen – but I seemed to have melted through some sort of membrane and everything was suddenly, and clearly, divine. The small teams of people working, the birds noisily peeping, the silvery Mosel below, the smell of slate and woods. Isn't it odd how it happens; you only take a half-step back out of what you imagine is your self and you suddenly see the blessings inside things, and inside you, and you receive it and give it out as gladness and gratitude. It's quicksilver, this state, but it's strangely durable when you're in it. I passed a group of workers replanting in the Sonnenuhr and bade them Guten Morgen nearly sopping with happiness as if it were entirely self-evident, but of course to them, for all I know, it's just a gig and I looked like a crazy person. I'm sure the work isn't pretty

**I look for slate. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness.**

in the summer heat. I turned to head back, and caught a glimpse of Zeltingen's church and its cemetery where Hans Selbach is buried. I wanted to tell him it's still like it was, old friend, it's a beautiful foggy morning and the workers are working and the birds are birding and it's all as it should be. And you were right; it is divine and full of love, and patience, this little bit of our little world. I got

back late and felt bad for keeping my colleagues waiting. But not too bad, to tell you the truth. I burned a bunch of calcs and had a mystical reverie, and all before 10am.

I've found I need to visit Hans as soon as I can when I

**Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly.**

arrive along the Mosel. It isn't a duty, it's something I need. It provides a grounding, a reminder of affection, and of the value of connectedness. Hans' grave is high on the hill, as the cemetery is built on what would otherwise have been steep-slope vineyards. I passed through all the flower-decked gravesites—the Germans keep them cheerful and generous with color—until I got to Hans. I was alone, and could have spoken aloud to him, but I didn't have to. The air was fragrant with slate and cheery-blossom and hyacinth. At harvest time the air must be full of the voices of the pickers and the thrum of the tractors. Later the first snow will come, sifting and settling over the graves, and Hans and his neighbors lie alike among the slate, above the river.

I think if we love Mosel wine we love it tenderly or we don't love it at all. That is because of the wine itself, it's particular sparrow charm, but if you have ever been there you will not only love the wines, you will find in them a taproot where you can drink from your soul's purest waters. These wines do not merely hail from a culture; they are embedded so deeply within the culture it becomes otiose to insist there's some place one begins and the other ends.

We arrived from the Nahe, where one of my growers said that he loved Mosel wines too, as every wine



*Trekking up the Erdener Treppchen*

lover does, but that tasting them day after day would have to be less interesting than tasting the geological miasma that is Nahe wine. After all, the Mosel offers only minute variations on a single theme of slate. “Uh oh,” I thought, “I’m not gonna be able to get this out of my head.” But after the first Mosel day it was gone, and it was only on the 6th and final day it came to me again. Here I’d been tasting slate-grown wine endlessly for nearly a week, and they hadn’t remotely begun to pall. Rather the opposite. I found the flavor delightful and fascinating and was in no hurry for it to end.

Slate defines the Mosel and her wines, and slate is what I look for when I select them.

I want to taste that soil, for it’s slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness. There are other light and aromatic wines in the world from northern climates: the U.K., Luxembourg, even the Ahr, which is further north than the Mosel. But no other wine expresses this curious permutation of mineral and Riesling. Mosel wines *can* be rich, but flabbiness is simply **out of character**; softness has no place here. I want that malic, granny-apple fruitiness that manages to be so taut and exuberant, set in a binding of minerality you should detect with the first whiff. Mosel wine should never lounge around like a contented feline. It should run like a gazelle, taut and rippling and sinewy.

The valley itself is spectacular but unforgiving; the very steepness of its slopes suggests the precariousness of a vintner’s existence. The wines themselves, beneath their extroverted gaiety, have something quite rigid, unsentimental, as though of a flower-essence distilled to a point of almost unbearable clarity. It is so easy to be charmed into euphoria by these wines that I forget how intricate and inscrutable they

can be. Even the most rustic and uncomplicated vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly. However searching the wines may be, the work of producing them is sweaty and brusque. You know, until you actually *see* these vineyards, you cannot imagine—even the best pictures cannot convey—just how steep this ground is. Our forbears were stoically accustomed to a certain physical travail as a condition of being. But not us. Sometimes you will look up at little specks of people, pruning, binding, spraying, and you will wonder: “how do they keep from falling?” But even more you will wonder: “who in his right mind would *do* such work?” Who indeed! People who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Families undertake most of the work themselves, *if* they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable names are either up for sale, have already *been* sold,

### **But the Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-racking flood during the harvest of 1997.**

or are floundering. For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

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

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

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

the life if you didn't love wine and didn't plan to excel.

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his name, he places himself on the *scene*, and customers ensue. This means a guy like me just isn't going to make the kinds of "discoveries" which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he's not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he's aggressively marketing himself.

The second major change, the more important one, is economical. Until around the late '60s, there was equilibrium between costs of production and prices paid. Few vintners were cash-rich but most did well enough. Their expectations were modest. They defined "affluence" differently than we do.

Then in the '70s costs began to rise, driven by labor, driven by the disinclination of the young to break their balls on the steep-slopes. For a while the growers lived on whatever fat they'd been able to accumulate. By the late '80s - early '90s, they were scraping bone. The young man or woman emotionally committed to assuming the reins was only going to do so if he could make a decent living. These young people were far more cosmopolitan than their parents; they traveled widely, drank other wines, knew other markets, and *saw the prices vintners were getting in other parts of the world*.

All of us who love German wine share a certain guilty secret; we know they are grossly underpriced. They are the last absurd bargains of the wine world. But we cannot expect young people to carry on this beautiful culture, this noble craft, for nothing but the altruistic *glamour* of it all. Glamour don't pay the bills. Prices are going to rise. It is the cost we all must pay to ensure the survival of the people and the wines we love so much.

For everyone along the Mosel plays the same lament; **labor**. It's hard to get, and because it's hard to get it commands a high price. The slopes are forbiddingly steep—it's physically dangerous to work such land—and there's very little feasible machine work. Hand-labor on steep slopes in this satellite-TV world is not consistent with Kabinett wine costing \$10.

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for *pfennigs* (or *cents* in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his window at the perpendicular mountains I know he has to

work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we're going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

The Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking flood during the harvest of 1997. ("In the next life," Sigrid Selbach told me, "I don't think I'd buy a house along the river.") On Christmas day 1993 the highest water in two hundred years poured through villages and into cellars. As it had ruptured several underground fuel-storage tanks, the floodwaters were also slick and smelly. You can't get insurance for flooding and the economic consequences of the flood of 1993 were devastating. The new-world winemaker "lifestyle" is the heaven these Mosel vintners hope they'll go to someday.

The Mosel is also a self-contained culture. Despite the length of the river (and its tributaries) there is a certain cohesion there, more so than in other German wine regions. This isn't always good, mind you; there's more than a little Hatfield vs. McCoy chicanery along with the petty jealousies afflicting small village life throughout most of the world. One day Andreas Adam planted a quarter-hectare. When he went out the following day to continue, everything he planted the day before had been vandalized. The young man is sure of himself (as he has every right to be), and this infuriated a neighbor. These cultures are not exclusively lyrical! A well-known grower filed suit seeking redress for vineyards he said he "lost" as a result of *Flurbereinigung*, and which ended up in the hands of a nearby neighbor with whom relations had always been cordial. The courts determined the case was frivolous and baseless, but what struck me was that it was filed at all, in such a narrow valley, such a fish-bowl culture, in whose narrow perimeters it wouldn't seem prudent to roil the waters. Yet I have rarely seen such a spirit of true neighborliness as I have on the Mosel, at times, among families where there's mutual respect and trust.

At Hans Selbach's funeral I spent a few moments gazing at the faces of the hundreds of mourners, an entire panoply of Moselans, and it was like looking backward in time. Nearly every face could have been etched on a Roman coin. There is community and cohesion here, yet this isn't necessarily sentimental, and for a lone wolf like me it is a beautiful garment that fits too tight but that I long for anyway, solitary American nomad that I am.

# mosel regionals

Mosel wine is one of the easiest wines in the world to enjoy, yet when the novice has cut his teeth on the usual regional blends, the real thing may be too steely for him. Most regionals come from Müller-Thurgau grown in flat sites on the alluvial side of the river—if they come from Germany at all (hell, if they come from **grapes** at all). Most are bought on the bulk market as grapes, must, or unfinished wine, commissioned through brokers who are ordered to procure X thousand liters at X per liter. It's a market that calls another breed of procurer to mind.

I'd like to encourage people to drink genuine, honest Mosel wine. I think you agree. Therefore it seems to me if we want to trade people up from regionals, we'd better establish a true style among those regionals. That means Riesling. My regionals are 100% Riesling. Even their Süsreserve is almost always Riesling. They are not purchased on the bulk market, but cask by cask

from growers with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "Piesport customer" only wants a price. One thing I can promise you. He will never care about quality if you don't. Taste some of that cheap stuff some time, and see if you can look a customer in the eye as you take the money from his hand. Good luck.

I'm occasionally asked why I ship regionals at all. What's a nice guy like me doing trafficking in Piesporters and Zellers, anyway? Well obviously, the category exists and this gives me a choice with a high road and a low road, and I can choose the way that makes me proud. Plus it's tonnage. Oh yeah, that. But a few years ago Johannes Selbach and I began to wonder whether we could create our own wine which would fulfill all these commercial functions, provide easily memorable "brand" identity and fill containers and give us something we could call our own, which wouldn't have to be defended as we must even with our honorable Piesporters.

Thus, the development of what we're certain will prove to have been an epochal event in the history of wine commerce. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy: I give you TJ Riesling!

## The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

I heard an unbelievable story. There was some sort of

tasting put on by the German Wine Institute, for the purpose of determining a style of German Wine that would **specifically and particularly** appeal to the American market. I guess there were marketing experts present—I wish I'd been the fly on the wall for that one! A bunch of wines were tasted blind, most of them brands already on the market. But here's the punchline: when the votes were tallied, *one* wine stood out. *here* was precisely the perfect wine to appeal to us Yanks. It answered all the necessary Concepts. Maybe they thought it tasted good too. It was TJ Riesling.

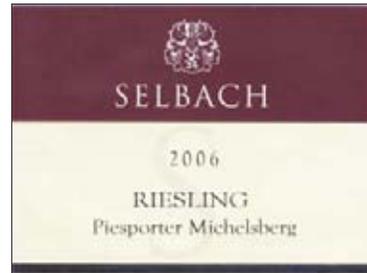
Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

We wanted to charge enough for it to distance it from the Piesporter genre, and also to give us latitude in choosing excellent base wines for the blend. We wanted a wine that tasted slatey and appley as all the best Mosels do, and we wanted a wine that would accommodate the widest possible variety of foods. That means we wanted just a discreet hint of sweetness, enough so the wine wouldn't taste acid or sharp. Finally we wanted a wine that would be sensitive to vintage, not a product that would always taste the same. We remain committed to the **profile** of TJ as a consistently slatey and crisp Mosel Riesling which should be both *agreeable* and *serious*.

TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market.

**Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:**

- GSR-107 **Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-207 **Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA (Screwcap)**
- GSR-307 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-707 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-807 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-607 **“TJ” Riesling**



# selbach-oster

## mosel • zeltingen

Johannes and Barbara's two kids are getting older twice as fast as I am, because otherwise I can't explain how they have become 17 and 15 all of a sudden. Hannah is more voluble and Sebastian is more reserved, but each of them is more thoughtful than any adolescent of my recent memory. It struck me. These two young people have become citizens in some way, not only of their particular country, but of the worlds of thought and values and conscience. There is something in this family that grows rare people, and here it occurs again. Somehow I don't imagine the kids sitting with their parents having "weighty discussions of matters of the mind,"—Johannes and Barbara are playful folks—but somehow this family incubates a kind of concern in its members. I wonder if there isn't a kind of Selbach-charter-of-values in a box in a safe-deposit vault somewhere. I imagine unscrolling it and reading something like *Life is a pleas-*

*ant business, most of the time anyway, but it is also a serious business, and one should be mindful of the need to proceed with thoughtfulness, in all things and all ways, while still having every possible fun.*

Johannes is the oldest of four boys, and he's shall we say just a little alpha. In a good way, of course, but here I was all proud of the *Pata Negra jamon* I'd bought him but he already had some, and of course it was better than mine. I enjoyed it ruefully, but did enjoy it.

He told me there were "over 100" wines from the 2007 vintage, which he had courteously reduced to something over 40, or actually 32 with several variations of some of them. That's a lot of wine by Mosel standards, where estates tend to be small, but Selbach has grown to



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

a whopping 18 hectares and in a normal-sized year like '07 it'll be quite the farandole. I knew Johannes was happy with the vintage but as usual he understated it. I myself am still glowing from his celestial collection in 2005—seriously,

strike twice. I expected a good, smart group of wines with maybe a few high spots. I approached them with a workmanlike attitude.

Often I go through the membrane into a mystic zone when tasting at Selbach. The wines consolidate into a great chord of beauty, and they do so in an especially allusive way; they crawl in your windows while you're running to get the door. But this year I never really lost my matter-of-fact-ness, even when certain wines sent me into silvery silent places. At the end of the day I looked back at some of the notes, looked at how many superb wines there had been, and knew this was the "performance" of the vintage.

Selbach's wines aren't like books of poems, where you can dip in here and there or dog-ear your favorites; they're more like novels, where you can certainly indicate passages you like especially, but where you can't just start reading any old where. Any given vintage is a whole story of which individual wines are scenes or sometimes chapters. This is also true, I think, for the progression of vintages. For as the Mosel is a weave, the

- Vineyard area: 18 hectares
- Annual production: 9,500 cases
- Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst
- Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam
- Grape varieties: 98.5% Riesling, 1.5% Weissburgunder

For as the Mosel is a weave, the



Selbachs are woven through the weave, and the wines are woven through the family which is woven in the big tapestry called Mosel. They are so connected it is hard to see them in the isolation we insist upon when we judge them merely aesthetically. And yet we must, of course; they are bottles of wine we buy and sell—and drink.

One morning I came in from my daily tromp and I must have been glowing. Johannes' wife Barbara met me at the door, saying "Well look at you!" and I said something about how beautiful it was up there in the vineyards, and Barbara said something sweet and memorable; when Johannes returns from his *many* travels he is often renewed and heartened by having such a lovely place to call home. I have a range of producers along the Mosel, and I love all their wines, but none of them embodies a sense of *home* with more gravitas and purity than Selbach. As much and as often as Johannes flies hither and yon selling wine, he has somehow managed to remain more profoundly anchored to Home than anyone I know. Not just to his particular dwelling, but to the holistic being of Zeltingen and the Mosel valley. Do his wines express this anchoring? Of course they do. It is why they themselves are so grounded. Can I explain how this occurs? Not really. I doubt if even Jo can. We *try*, and I'll spend the next X-hundred words trying to catch this butterfly with a threadless net, but these things aren't strictly linear. At best they arise from a multitude of tiny choices some of which one isn't aware of having made. Still, the truth is perhaps in the groping for truth, so I'll grope away.

These are good times for Mosel wine lovers, with more fine producers than ever. We all have our share, my colleagues and me, and I hope we all admire all the wines

"apolitically." What I'm about to say isn't a better-worse statement, but it's something I deeply believe. *There are no wines along the Mosel more honorable than those of Selbach-Oster.* They are grounded, honest, intelligent and meaningful — like the family who produce them. Where wine is concerned I trust Johannes as I trust very few other people. He's not only highly intelligent, he's also smart and judicious. He has found his path. His wines have identity and purpose.

Yet Selbach's wines reward a certain attention. In short they are made to be *drunk*, not "tasted." They never show off. Other wines, even very good wines, often do; like someone with a brand new BMW driving ostentatiously through town honking at the neighbors. Doesn't mean the car's not great. Just means the owner's got some . . . issues.

It's tempting, you know, to strut, but Johannes is instinctively immune to sleight-of-hand winemaking. He knows exactly how it's done, he sees other growers do it, and he simply will not. One year, there were a lot of Auslesen on the table. So much so that I asked Johannes if there was a 3-star in reserve, as I didn't see one.

Many people say many things to me during my month in Germany, and I dutifully try and scribble the smart things down. Johannes' answer stopped me in my tracks. "Terry, the 2-star Auslese was one block picking; that's how that wine came in from that vineyard on that day," he said. "We could *concoct* a 3-star Auslese of course; blend together some small lot of botrytis-wine with a little Eiswein and a little BA, but it would be a *contrived* wine, the kind you only create 30 liters of to send to journalists and get big scores. That's not the business we're in."

*Listen to this, people.* This is what wine means, this and only this. The vineyards didn't create a 3-star Auslese, so there isn't one. Simple. There's BA and TBA and Eisweins, but no 3-star Auslese.

It's easy to blather about *terroir* and facile to claim the vineyard makes the wine. Johannes has acted on a principle which will cost him valuable PR, but which is the only sustainable relationship a producer can truly have to wine. I am both roused to my core and seething with frustration. Frustration? Witness: a big-Cal-red first-release called . . . oh, I like the guy personally, and

it doesn't matter what it's called; let's call it HUBRIS HILL . . . so Hubris Hill goes out for \$125 per bottle. The "producer" doesn't make the wine, doesn't even *own a vine*, but he's sure willing to stake a claim on your Buck-and-a-quarter because he knows the world's gone **mad** and a whole bunch of suckers'll pay it, especially if it has oodles of *jammy hedonistic fruit erupting from the glass in sub-atomic orgasms of delirium: 90 points*.

And this, we are led to believe, is wine.

**Wine:** (n) anything anybody can contrive to make, detached from nature, detached from culture, connected to nothing but our infantile need to be entertained and our adolescent need to be fashionably *correct*, to be sold at the highest price some desperate hipster can be horse-whipped into paying.

If this is the summit of wine's aspirations then it wouldn't hurt civilization if it disappeared. But I know better, and I want you to know better, and I know that we can, most of us, return to the knowledge of wine's true claim on our hearts and bodies and souls. All of which is saturating the very filaments of air at Uferallee 23 in Zeltingen on the Mosel, where Selbach-Oster calls *der schotz*.

One secret is casks, the 1000-or-so liter barrels the Moselans call *Fuder*, in which Selbachs make about 55% of their wine. This proportion will increase when it becomes logistically possible (the barrel cellar is only so large) and my sense is Johannes would prefer all his "serious" wines be made in *Fuder*.

Another secret is lees.

When you ferment in cask and leave the wine in cask on its gross lees for a month or two after fermentation, your wines have wonderful plush texture and rich mid-palates and they *need less sweetness*. They also have what Johannes calls "soul."

I drink plenty of wine with my friend Johannes and I know his tastes are broad. He likes those reductive fruit-brilliant wines. He simply prefers not to make them. He wants his wines more *imbued*. He wants them to make friends with you, to be companionable and useful. You can't be friends with someone who's showing off all

the time. You can win trophies, but what would you rather have, a mantel full of trophies or a life full of friends?

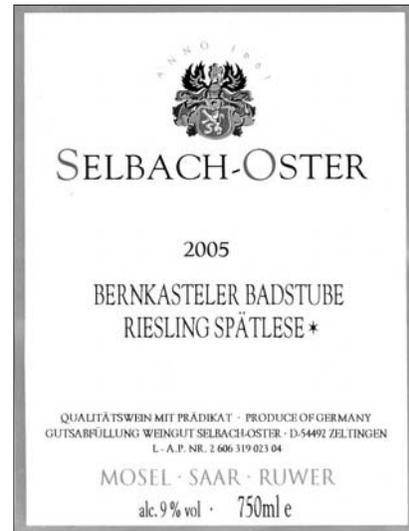
Many of you have met Johannes on his travels. Yet for me, his winery is perhaps *the* fundamental example of the difficulty of removing wine from its contexts of family and locality. From the very first, the Mosel makes an impression on you; it's so improbable and so beautiful.

Sigrid Selbach told me a story one year. "We picked our Eiswein last year on Christmas Day," she began. "The day before, when we realized the weather might permit us to gather the grapes the morning of Christmas, we were hesitant to call and ask for help with the picking. But you know, we called twelve people, and they all agreed to help us, and they were all **cheerful** to do it. We went out into the vineyard before dawn to check the temperature, then phoned them at 6:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, and they all came, and all of them were in a good mood. Afterwards they gathered here at the house for soup and Christmas cookies. And when they left they were all singing out "MERRY CHRISTMAS!" as they went home to their families. Isn't that wonderful?"

It's more than wonderful. It literally amazes me that people would *cheerfully* agree to get out of their warm beds before dawn on Christmas morning, leav-

ing their families, to go out and gather enough fruit for a few cases of wine that nobody makes any money on. Can you hear such a story and *still* doubt that angels walk among us?

Stories like the Eiswein harvest signify more than neighborliness, or even esprit de corps among fellow



vintners. It is simply taken for granted that certain traditions are ennobled by observing them with love and good cheer. When you have a chance to gather an Eiswein it is beneficence from heaven; you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

I have two Mosel producers who are neighbors in the same site; their parcels are contiguous. One producer hadn't quite finished picking when their Polish workers' work-visas expired, which meant the crew had to return to Poland. No problem, said the neighbor; *we'll pick for you. We'll pick for you.* It really is another world. People may know one another for twenty years and still address each other as *Herr-This* and *Frau-That*. But *we'll pick for you.* There is a certain baseline *kindness* here, I find myself thinking, a certain understanding of neighborliness. And it is without affect; it seems to come quite naturally. It strikes my American ears, so used to hearing platitudes and boilerplate about neighborliness, citizenship, fellow-feeling, that *this is the real thing*. Oh believe me, they have their problems and jealousies and all the ratty bullshit which can possibly exist among people, but— *we'll pick for you.*

Being a vintner along the Mosel signifies membership in a human culture much deeper than mere occupation. Nonetheless, there are many ways to be a citizen of this culture; one might be lazy, content with mediocrity; one might be merely diligent, competent and dutiful. Or one might be conscientious and nurturing. And one's wines **flourish** under such nurturing. They are *vital*, for they exhale back the love that's been breathed into them. This may seem abstruse to the "consumer" but there are many ways to consume, and many things to *be* consumed in a glass of wine. You can see the wine merely as an Object, and assess it "against" its "competitors" using some arbitrary point-system you have chosen.

Or you can drink something that tells you it was made by human beings who want to show you the beauty and meaning they have found in their lives. You choose.

Part of the Selbach's aesthetic is the eschewing of

anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internal* skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured, detailed, and defined, and the overall effect of the wines should be as *bracing* as a leap into a cold pond on a hot day. Hans Selbach once advised a colleague not to select too stringently at harvest. Better to leave a few of the underripe grapes in the bunches. They give *structure* to the wine.

Tasting the wines of *Papa* Hans Selbach's era, one is always struck by how vigorous they are, how ageless. One is also struck by their lack of affect; they never try to seduce with their prettiness. They are upright, firm in posture, correct, impeccable.

Johannes was raised with these wines and he had no desire to alter them. What he did do was to *build upon them*, to add a layer of sensuousness, to give just a little more **warmth**, a wider Julia-Roberts kind of smile. He did this with great tact and love, but I don't suppose he ever deliberately sat down and plotted it all as a STRATEGY, nor ever said "I must do this with great tact and love."

The results are some of the deepest of all Mosel wines. They refuse to be *merely* aesthetic. They strive for (and often attain) a *sine qua non* of Mosel-ness. They take you through the gift-wrapping of mere flavor and they show you something you *may not know how to see*.

Few wines — *few things* — take us to such places. You can't identify that slippery little thing *soul* in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they peal and echo. It is how quickly they leave *themselves* behind and lead you *elsewhere* away from "wine." Johannes told me that he wants "soul" in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a *value* in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.

## A Look At The Vineyards:

*I find my notes are shorter the past two years as I didn't want to repeat the basic adjectives that depict vineyard characteristics. I wish I had a dingbat I could use each time I want to say "slate and apple!" So below are general descriptions of the Selbach sites.*

**BERNKASTELER BADSTUBE** is a small Grosslage; the component single-sites are distinct from one another, but one can organize them thus: LAY stands alone. DOKTOR-GRABEN (at least the good parts of Graben!) stand together, and MATHEISBILDCHEN-BRATENHÖFCHEN stand together, and give us what we see now; heavier understructure, not quite as tensile, due to richer soil, and signature flavors of kirsch and almost Pouilly-Fumé flint; the piquant exotics of the Mosel. Typically, they are medium in body.

**ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG** is mineral to the MAX! I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Flavors are a *borealis* of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cussed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

**WEHLENER SONNENUHR** is like Zeltinger Sonnenuhr feminized, slimmed down, and refined. If Zeltinger Sonnenuhr is oaken, Wehlener Sonnenuhr is willowy. It can show a ravishing elegance. Butter-vanilla, very delicate slate and equally delicate apple, now with a slightly herbal tertiary flavor. I would say light-to-medium body, but the beauty in these wines resides in class and actual flavor, and not in size or fullness.

**GRAACHER DOMPROBST:** I doubt there's a better site on the "great ramp" (as Hugh Johnson terms it) between Bernkastel and Zeltingen. Domprobst is invariably starched and magnificent; its flavors are always standing at attention. It has a particularly emphatic slate statement, with nuances of pistachio or pecan, cassis and quince. Medium-bodied, high-bred and snappy, coltish and itchy to take off full-gallop.

**ZELTINGER SONNENUHR** is the Premier Grand Cru. Basically All Of The Above; slate, lime, apple, butter-vanilla, rich, almost chewy earthiness, great depth. Some parcels are prized by locals as the best sites in the entire Bernkastel-Zeltingen ramp—DOKTOR notwithstanding! These wines are full-bodied. Selbachs are now the primo owners in this great site, and have inaugurated an era of selective harvesting and a quality potential such as we have never before seen. Meanwhile, you'll see by the number I offer that the wines had me in a weak-kneed thrall, and - redundancy be damned—I just couldn't walk away from any of these.

### **selbach-oster at a glance:**

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection.

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

Johannes' explicitly stated wish is to make wines for people to drink and not for geeks and writers to preen over. If he says (and I agree) "The best bottle is the first one emptied," it can sound mercantile, but it isn't. The useful wine is the *friendliest* and most companionable wine, not the most "impressive" one. But Johannes earns the right to claim this value by making many of the *most* impressive wines you can drink – depending on what exactly impresses you. If you want bombast and primary-fruit perfume and excess sweetness, look somewhere else. These are meant to drink with food up to and *including* Auslese in most vintages. There is a striking conciliation between brilliant acids and a kind of leesy plushness. There's plenty of minerality, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

**DRY WINES AND KABINETTS**

- GSO-306 **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 This is serious and dry—dry—but far from dour, and there’s a lot of *stuff* here; grape-fruity and subtle yellow-fruit aromas; fullness on the palate and some physio-“sweetness;” a sort of demi-glace of lemon on the finish.  
 SOS: minus-1 (now-2 years and again 10-15 years)
- GSO-310 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken\*\*** +  
 Johannes is a fiend. He brought this wine along to dinner after the tasting and served it blind. I didn’t take a note at the table (I’m not that geeky, please) but it was by *FAR* the best Trocken Mosel wine I’d ever tasted, and seriously comparable to a Ried Klaus from Jamek. This is a **first release**, as the wine fermented 14 months (!) and we reserved every one of the 280 bottles which remained. Who knew such a thing was even possible from the Mosel? And, one must ask, why aren’t they all like this?  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-12 years)
- GSO-308 **2007 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +  
 GSO-308H **2007 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken, 12/375ml**  
 This is becoming a perennial, and in the era of climate-change this less-than-Grand-Cru site is becoming a center-stage vineyard for “lighter” wines with long enough hang-time. It strikes me this is *perfect* dry wine; it’s within the range of *Brut* so there’s a lovely hidden useful sweetness; penetrating grassy aromas with mirabelle and tarragon; palate is streamlined but lush and with a lovely nubby texture; digitally detailed and incredibly delicious and flexible.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 10-16 years)
- GSO-303 **2007 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**  
 GSO-303H **2007 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett 12/375**  
 This is all Zeltinger Himmelreich in fact, a *cuvée* with a few casks added to the zippy stainless steel base; more grapefruit and lady-apple, a fibrous apple-skin texture but waves of creamy fruit into a long greeny finish with a seductive juicy coda.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (4-18 years)
- GSO-311 **2007 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**  
 After the dearth of Kabinett last year we’re offering everything we can score from 2007; this is not redundant with the above because this one was done in *Fuder*, yet it’s as pointed as Mosel wine can be while still showing the ultimate Selbach suavity of texture with 2007’s chiseled delineation; juicy, precise and minty. Pure delight!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-19 years)
- GSO-305 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 What’s left to say about this supra-Mosel wine? Without flattering in the least it communicates—and pleases—the most; firm, juicy herbal perfection. Buy it by the case? Shit, suck it from the bucket!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-21 years)
- GSO-309- **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** ++  
 GSO-309H **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett 12/375**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. And we’re going to get this whenever Johannes makes it, because recent vintages have been *too* ripe for Kabinett in this Grand Cru site. It is everything a Mosel Kabinett could possibly give you; mostly a “*sponti*” (fermented with ambient yeasts); immense, deep, fruit-massive and soil-solid; absurd quality and breed in this *echelon*; rich, focused apple and grain on the vaporous yet infinite finish.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-25 years)

**THE SPÄTLESEN**

- GSO-304 **2007 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**  
 GSO-304H **2007 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
 Zeltinger Himmelreich and Kinheimer Rosenberg, and it's a straightforward keen line of limey Mosel fruit with a sneaky salty length; I don't remember a better vintage of this wine.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-22 years)
- GSO-312 **2007 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 This is so good it almost hurts; it's so archetypal and just frickin' *delicious*; classic flint and kirsch; an insane, exquisite omigod-where'd-you-learn-that kind of pleasure. All *Fuder*, very old vines (70 years-old), ripe and late-picked, and man you'll be strapped to the mast wriggling and squirming . . . maybe I'll let you have some, hehehehe. . .  
 SOMMELIER ALERT: SOS:2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-313 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 A creamy *Fuder*-driven masterpiece with the angular cheekbones of the site; sunlight-on-water brightness; acres of yellow flowers; spice and vanilla atop the cox orange—just wonderful.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-307 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 GSO-307H **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375**  
 CORE-LIST WINE: Because I want you to see what the Mosel-lover's Mosel wine is like. It's a leap up from the Kabinett in ripeness and creaminess with wonderful rich mirabelle and cox orange aromas; almost fluffy in its weirdly transparent thickness; ripe 3-point perspective of fruit and citrus going off into the beyond. . .  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-314 **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 This has a cool piquant wash of mirabelle, fuji apple and grapefruit and shows beautiful class and clarity; apple-skins and sweet lees; a focused thickness again, and a real chiaroscuro of citrus and slate.  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GSO-315 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese\*** +++  
 Supernatural expression of fragrance, ethereal and shimmering; a quiet and haunting beauty like those John Taverner pieces he wants played "at the threshold of audibility"—an acme of quiet purity. I can't promise your mind will be blown, but your *soul* will be stirred and fed, and if you're not sure how to find your soul, don't worry; this wine will find it.  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GSO-316 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese "Schmitt"** ++  
 GSO-316H **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese "Schmitt," 12/375**  
 Most of you know by now this is one of the old pre-1971 site-names that most wise and enlightened law made extinct. The underlying philosophy is explained in the note for the "Rotlay" later on, but suffice to say this is both a cult-wine and an *occult* wine if you believe terroir is just some kind of magic. Johannes, like many growers, is concerned pruning may have become too draconian, and so "in 2007 we pruned to two canes instead of one," which is perhaps why this wine is "merely" a Spätlese. Jo again: "We wanted a drink, not a monument," and indeed this is becoming one of the wine world's most trenchant terroir statements; toasted slate, burning leaves, carbonized mineral, granular and dried-herbs and transparent. A quiet determined force of old buried rocks and grubs, invading some sort of supernatural apple.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (12-32 years)

## **AUSLESEN, THEN THE REALLY SWEET WINES**

GSO-317 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** +  
A little muted from bottling and my one plus is likely too cautious; a cool, mineral food-friendly Auslese, with the nutty fibrous texture of the site (which seems to have been unusually successful in 2007), ripe of course and slaty and salty of course, and keen and pithy; a Selbach-Auslese prototype.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (15-37 years)

GSO-318 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese\*, 6/750ml** ++  
Another leap ahead in ripeness without leaving its leafy-woodruffly soul behind, even with the candied lime-zest and Ranier-cherry. This speaks with the purposive voice you use when you're repeating an explanation; spearmint-wintergreen tang, an apothecosis of Schlossberg.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 3 (15-35 years)

GSO-319 **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese "Rotlay," 6/750ml** +++  
GSO-319H **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese "Rotlay," 12/375ml**

I'm going to quote from a letter Johannes sent to Lorena Ascencios of Astor Wines & Spirits when she asked him what "Rotlay" signified.

*The Rotlay is the single best parcel within the [Zeltinger] Sonnenuhr. Rotlay is an old, local term for a rather unique piece of vineyard which is tucked between a massive wall of slate as the upper border and the large water surface of the river with its mirror effect as the lower border. On the sides it is open and flows into the other local parcels called "Kakert" and "Lehnschaft" though there [are] some large outcroppings of rock in the border areas, creating a unique geographic scenario, similar to a "clos" in France, with a rather unique microclimate.*

*The slope that comprises "Rotlay" faces straight south here and the soil is very stony, covered with big chunks of blue Devonian slate. (The slate is the compressed silt of the seabed of the giant ocean that once covered most of the earth some 450 million years ago alongside the single continent Pangea.) The inclination of the vineyard ranges between 45 and 60 degrees. Hand labor is a must.*

*"Rot" in German means "red" and some people interpret this as a sign for the high mineral contents of the soil which is visible where iron components, exposed to the elements, actually do rust. "Rodd," in older German orthography, also stands for "cleared" in the sense of barren, stripped of vegetation, and some people say it's the massive wall of rock and the surrounding outcroppings of rock, which are barren, resp. indicate a bald spot in the slope.*

*Either version has its justification since the vineyard is a steep, barren, rocky, hot piece of "dirt" where only deep root systems can survive the always warm, at times hot and arid microclimate. Drought is often a concern here.*

*Selbach-Oster owns the biggest piece of the Rotlay and, in 2004 we began to pick "Rotlay" as a single block, with no selections pulled from the vineyard prior to harvesting. This brings the unique, diverse mix of greenish-yellow, golden, slightly overripe copper-colored, as well as botrytised berries together, creating a truly wholesome wine which reflects the true expression of this great site's "terroir," without the influence of human selection.*

*We refrain from skimming through this vineyard but rather prefer a long hangtime to pick at optimum ripeness without pushing for over the top sugars.*

Terry here again: I'll pick up on an implication inherent in Johannes' thinking here, which is that the *en bloc* picking is in essence a search for *truth*. All the wine books tell you that Auslese is/was made by successive passes through the vineyard – indeed it's what "Auslese" means – and yet 20-30 years ago only a few growers had the wherewithal to accomplish this. Usually they waited as long as they could bear and then gathered it all. As Hans Selbach was old enough to have lived through those days, I'm sure he contemplated what might have been lost in the modern obsession with skimming the cream from the vineyard in search of higher must-weights (and the "points" such wines engender). Put concretely, you lose a holistic flavor containing both the ultra-ripe grapes plus the less-ripe ones and the grip and green they impart. And which *also* constitutes terroir. It's not much of a leap to infer this is a quest for a deeper authenticity; it's one thing to select *which* flavors you want and another thing to pick the whole magilla and see what flavors you *get*. See why I love this man?

*My wine of the vintage* in this offering, and an astonishing wine; since 2004 this has had what I call the "1975 fragrance" (perhaps the most beloved of all recent Mosel vintages) as it does now again; there's also a brashness of pure apple; but my god, the palate! Explosive, shattering intensity of what's at core a *tender* thing, zen-tender, calm in confidence of its perfect firm strength; endlessly generous but without gushing or bellowing; a mentholated high-toned apple vein fills out the finish, which seems to spiral outward into eddies and whorls of complexity.  
SOS: 3 (17-40 years)

**THE “SWEET STUFF”**

- GSO-320H **2007 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**  
 Picked shortly before Christmas, and it could be in the same league as the celestial 2002; pure, racy, salty, whizzes through the air like a needle from a blow-gun. Hard to summon much affect (let alone the necessary vocabulary) after everything that preceded this. But, um, *wow*.  
 SOS: 4 (15-40 years)
- GSO-321H **2007 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+++**  
 I had the 2001 last week, just to see. Johannes is one of the few growers I know who understands Eiswein as a quintessence of the *innate* flavor of the site, not as a dessert confection. His Eisweins are lunar and whispery even at their most intense. This is silvery and otherworldly, a Solaris out beyond the home galaxy, navigating a lonely little illumed arrow of trajectory through the eerie silence. Yet for all its ethereal borealis shimmer the wine is amazingly companionable and discreet; it wants to keep you company. Why not just let it? If you give it a “score” it will shrivel up and vanish.  
 SOS: 4 (15-45 years)
- GSO-322H **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **++**  
 It may surprise you to consider that even a writer as extravagant as I can be is stopped short by big young sweet wines. I don’t seem to find the words for their explosive opacity. The ones I like most are like this one; sleek and focused, as the very best are, taken to the outer limits of concentration without them getting hirsute and belly-heavy. Others will find all the fruits and nectars I missed.  
 SOS: 4 (30-65 years)

**FISH LABELS**

I didn’t like these labels when I first saw them, but everyone else did and you do too. Shows what a marketing hot-shot I am! These are our go-to Mosel wines in the value category, and are certainly wines of the type-no-fridge-should-be-without.

- GSZ-024 The **Dry** wine in the clear bottle comes from Zeltingen, Kinheim, Erden, Kesten and Detzem Kabinett juice gently chaptalized, and it shows satisfying weight, minerality and stylishness. The ‘07 is wonderfully creamy.
- GSZ-025 The **Kabinett** comes from 15 kilometres around Zeltingen. A lot of it is Zeltingen, Bernkastel-Kues and Kinheim fruit, some Detzem, some Brauneberg. This is bottled in the normal bottle and is quite simply delightful.



# erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

Lots of fresh wind in Kinheim. I know I've said this elsewhere, but it's one thing to take the reins of an estate in a glam-location, and quite another to do so in an out-of-the-way place like here. Stefan and Peter Jakoby are obliquely within the Selbach nexus, but that doesn't automatically mandate their claiming the hardscrabble life of the steep slopes. Wine is a singular passion.

Normally I taste Jakoby's range in the tasting room at Selbach, but in 2006 I was struck enough by their ambitiousness that I scheduled a visit to Kinheim. Far too much was made of this; it was my honor to visit, not theirs to receive me. But I was quite impressed and even roused by what I tasted. I was also gratified to sit with two generations of Jakoby in the tasting room. Erich,

whom I've known for many years now but who's a really shy guy, held back as his sons (Peter does the cellar and Stefan the "marketing") held forth, and as always I wondered at the dialogue of pride and humility such a thing entails. I have the sense it is codified somehow, as many old-world things are, but it's no less moving for all that.

Erich's wines set the precedent for overachievers from the domain, and I heard tales of a certain tension between him and *his* father over the adoption of practices deemed economically unfeasible. Erich persevered and prevailed, and created an environment where *any* effort to increase quality was encouraged. Ho hum, you might say; it's a tale oft-heard. But not in Kinheim.

Kinheim is a village stuck between Kröv on one side – much beloved of tourists for its *Nacktarsch* (bare-bottom)



Peter, Erich, and Stefan Jakoby

bottlings – and Erden on the other. In early editions of Johnson's *Wine Atlas* this standard reference says "Kinheim begins a decline," as indeed it does. There are no Grand Crus (though there are micro-parcels of near-GC quality and well-known as such by Mosel insiders) because the soils are lighter. Thus prices for Kinheimers are low. And low prices don't stimulate thoughts of increasing production costs. It's one thing to make highly visible grand Quixotic gestures like the outstanding Daniel Vollenweider estate is doing – *if* you can ask (and receive) stratospheric prices in return. It's quite another to labor in modest obscurity on behalf of an idea that isn't

- Vineyard area: 4.3 hectares
- Annual production: 4,000 cases
- Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Spätburgunder

remotely sexy, but every bit as passionate.

Long-time readers will know the connection between Selbachs and Jakobys: Erich was cellar master at Selbach for many years, until his father's failing health compelled a full-time return to the family winery. But even then he stayed on with Selbachs on an ad-hoc basis, and went on over-achieving in Kinheim.

If you go downstream from Uerzig-Erden you first come to Löslich and then to Kinheim. Immediately behind the village there's a crazy-steep hump of hill formerly known as *Eulenlay* which was considered first-class land in the famous 19th-century classification for tax-assessments. Behind it the slope undulates, sometimes steep, sometimes gentle. The soil is lighter. Yet good Kinheimers are scrupulously pure Mosel Rieslings on an everyday scale. Overachievers such as Merkelbach and Jakoby will give us incredible values.

One almost grows nostalgic. When I started out, my *modus operandi* was to unearth just these kinds of things; values from high-achievers in locales others had overlooked. A then-competitor referred derisively to "These's little growers," many of whom have since become the superstars of the modern scene. Erich Jakoby's wines were already very good – he took Selbach methods and applied them to wines which seldom receive such exalted care – but Stefan seems determined to take it even farther. And why not? Who knows what Kinheim can show when a young hottie is hellbent on *letting* it show?

Jakoby-Mathy appeared in the 2007 Gault-Millau guide for the first time, a definite indicator it has arrived on the radar. Jakobys are proud of this, as they should be, and I am happy for them. Prices, as you will see, remain humble.

**jakoby-mathy at a glance:** Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father's illness called him back home. Thus: Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, and 2007. They're always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I'm having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

**how the wines taste:**

As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive appley flavors with typical minerality. Other than a small section of the Rosenberg, directly behind the town, there isn't a Grand Cru slope here. But Erich's wines excel by sheer **vitality**; they're upbeat, vivid wines, exuberant and Spring-y.

- GJM-067 **2007 Riesling "Balance"**  
**CORE-LIST WINE** And a huge *bravo* to Jakobys for resurrecting this old Riesling style that doesn't fit into marketing boxes but merely delivers what it promises, to perfection: *Balance!* In the 2007 vintage I took the richer of two versions offered, and was again reminded how Mosel wine can be and ought more often to be, with a barely perceptible but categorically necessary sweetness; the wine is a creamy apple parfait ladled over stones; not fat but *fleshy*. The price is super and the wine should be on every table that doesn't have a steak or a pizza.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)**
- GJM-068 **2007 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 I took the richest of three options, but this is relative because they all tasted—yay!—like *Kabinett* and not like de-classed Auslese; Granny-apple and apple-skin and even a hint of grassiness; very minty and bright; the 50g.l. of sweetness is swallowed by the steely structure; a Kabinett for gulping.  
 SOS: 2 (5-15 years)
- GJM-069 **2007 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 There's a slinky sort of bouquet-garni minerality here, and it's covered by layers and clouds of cox orange peachy fruit and fervent key-lime citricity and a sense of giddily blooming wisteria on a cool Spring day. Taut and racy and classy.  
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GJM-070 **2007 Kinheimer Hubertuslay Riesling Spätlese "Goldkapsel"**  
 Wonderfully polished and refined; a remarkably elegant wine from Jakoby; a "heavier" fruit rich as suede, an almost peppery underlying acidity; pure slate emerges on the long finish; this is close to Erdener Treppchen in style, all decked out and handsome Mosel Riesling.  
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GJM-071 **2007 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese "Eulenlay"**  
 Again the old micro-parcel name, denoting a prized section. Lots of peach and caramel now; sleek for its richness, with a streamlined concentration and a wintergreen-y *zap* of intensity and penetration; you could easily imagine young '75s were like this (if you're a total silverback like me); it's the first wine on the table with a sweet finish.  
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GJM-072H **2007 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling BA "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml**  
 This of course is in fact the "lesser" of two TBAs, and it has TBA characteristics, and offers about as much of the TBA-juju as a dude can score at this price.  
 SOS: 4 (20-60 years)



# meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

## mosel • erden

I always write this text in early Spring. And today, I went to the ball game in the April cold. A couple years ago I went to my first ball game of the new season one night, alone as it happened. I had seats upstairs, and took the escalator. Riding up, there was a sudden brief glimpse of the field through a gap in the stands, all gleaming under the lights, that impossible emerald. And immediately I was a kid again, looking at the magic of a ballpark, and every time then and every time since my step has quickened and my heart beat excitedly whenever I've entered the ballpark. For it is an experience of *beauty*, you know. Soul doesn't have a fixed address, boss. It lives where it wants to. And each place it pauses to breathe is connected to all the places it has ever paused and breathed.

I am going to risk you rolling your eyes exasperatedly at me, because I'm gonna try to connect two things ostensibly so disparate as to be impossible. Still, away we go.

Each time I arrive at Justen there is always a wine, usually one of the first wines, that sweeps through every bit of experience I've brought with me, that snakes its fingers past everything I think I know and grabs me with its pure Mosel-ness. There is, after all, something singular about these wines! And I am catapulted thirty years backward in time to that first scent of Mosel, whatever it is, and it feels virginal and surprising again. It is partly an alertness — this is something original. And partly a swoon — this is something wonderful.

I'm hardly the first person to liken Mosel wines to Spring. But Spring is of course not a single season, but many.

First come the snowdrops, as early as mid-February, and then the crocuses. The first daffodils begin sprouting. The air is softer now, but below there's still a keen scent of frost. Things gurgle, the first cress arises impossibly soft and green by the water. This is the season of *Merkelbach*.



Stefan Justen and daughter Barbara

- **Vineyard area: 4.25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Prälat and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 11% Müller-Thurgau, 9% Kerner**

The first fragrant blossoms are the cherries, each of the several varieties that grow here, and in sunny spots the perfumed crabapples unfurl their petals. The days begin to feel almost warm in the ripening sunlight. On a damp day the perfume of all these flowering trees can almost intoxicate you. Violets, scilla and phlox carpet the yards. This is the season of *Christoffel*.

Then all hell breaks loose. The first honeysuckle opens, and the stately, lissome dogwoods, and the silly, gaudy azaleas, and the air is emphatically warm, and the trees open their sticky new leaves, and everything sprays upward in a whistling clamor of life.

This is the season of *Justen*.

These may not be the most mysterious or intricate Mosel wines I offer, but they are certainly the most gregarious and extroverted. And yet they have virtues deeper than simple winning personality; they are true-blue Mosels, and I often thought that you, and I, neglected them. Thus it was gratifying to see Justen get the credit he deserves with emphatically flattering reviews of his recent vintages. I hope he's been "discovered" now and will take his rightful place among important Mosel estates.

(I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE,

not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.)

Stefan Justen isn't what I'd call a voluble fellow. He is fairly shy, and very kind and loyal. His dad was the same way, but his dad's wines were similarly soft-spoken, while Stefan's are clamorously fruity. It's become a running joke between him and me, how we never seem to have the same favorites. I like the cool and slatey ones and he himself prefers the ones with more overt fruit. That said, Justen's wines in *general* are fruit-laden and extroverted—one of the reasons they "show" so well in competitive tasting formats—and even the "cool" ones are vamping sexy Mosel wines. And I must say, my own preferences are evolving in the direction of greater fruit, as I depart from the need to identify a clear set of *parts* in a wine as a cerebral exercise. I'm also noticing that wines with prominent fruit (as opposed to "fruity" wines) *age* better than the skelet-y wines I thought were more fascinating. Justen is a dramatic case in point. You may not find the N-th degree of Talmudically abstruse complexity in the young wines from here, but you will find no Mosel wines that taste lovelier with age. Sometimes, lots of age.

One year we had two wines, a lively and intricate 1979 Spätlese which was sensually all kinds of fun. The second wine, though, had us all silenced with perplexity and awe.

It wasn't a vintage whose signature I knew. I eliminated a range of unlikely choices and finally wrote a plausible guess. I thought it might be a light, atypically firm 1959. Stefan finally said "This wine is exactly fifty years old, a 1951 Auslese," and we were melted with wonder. This is what I wrote in my notebook: "This 1951 Auslese is flashing a shiny green tooth of acidity and freshness and is gleaming and mysterious and haunting. It's like a shirt that's hung in a fragrant wooden closet, not worn for years, your father's perhaps, and one day you put it on and there it all is, him, his body, the time when he was alive, the boy you were then. We

swim without cease in a strange bright ether. Light is gleaming and swaying always near us. If we breathe too deep we will die of a joy we aren't built to bear. Just a tiny gasp."

We say our goodbyes too quickly after such an event. Perhaps someone will show these words to Stefan Justen, so he will know how honored I am to share such a wine with him, and how I remember each drop, always.

Last year, as if to up the ante, Stefan brought out a '51 Spätlese. The wine was dry, forest-floor, birchy, shellfish-stock, leathery and avuncular, juicy, *long* and delicious and with a deep soulful complexity. You get a shock to the soul with a wine like this. A *good* shock, of course. But there you are, being a Wine Professional, doing bizniz, assigning item codes and securing quantities, and out comes a wine like this and suddenly you're plunged from the brittle surface on which you've been skating into the deep warm waters below. You need soul-bones made of rubber—a kind of spiritual Gumby—to manage the transition.

Stefan brings out not just a lovely old wine, but also a wine his father made before Stefan himself was born. As such it's part of the family's history and legacy, part of the vineyard's history and legacy, and ultimately part of the *earth's* history and legacy. It's almost intimidatingly meaningful. If you go where it takes you, you won't get any more work done that day! And you're already late for your next appointment . . .

But, there is always the wine itself. When all our glasses were empty, I saw another few fingers of wine down in the dark bottle. "May I . . . ?" I asked. *Certainly; help yourself.* So I did something I doubt I could have done 10 or even 5 years ago. *I just drank the wine.* It was beautiful wine. I knew damn well how spiritually meaningful it was, but I opted to merely *love* the wine and let it love me back.

2007 is a virtually perfect vintage for Justen. "We had exorbitant yields in Wehlen but the same must weights as we had in Erden, which had much lower yields," he said.

### Meulenhof at a glance:

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moderate for impeccable quality.

### how the wines taste:

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They are comparatively straightforward and "easy" to understand because the fruit is overt and in-your-face. Even a cursory glance into that fruit, though, will reveal the proverbial Coat of Many Colors: interplays of flavor and texture that can be absorbing and rewarding. And the wines both keep and age.

### GJU-110L 2007 Meulenhof Riesling, 1.0 Liter

Sometimes growers don't show me their Liter wines since they're sure I wouldn't be interested in something so plebian. But I am, and the incredible-shrinking-Dollar has made it urgent to find values. The first lot of this wine I tasted was a hugely charming splash of apple, pear and white peach juice—the wine is 80% the alluvial-soil Busslay, and shows a simpler fruit than the steep slate wines. But Stefan came back with another possible cuvee in which steep-slate wine was included, and the wine became more Mosel, slimmer and snappier; still charming but more focused now. *THIS IS A STEAL* for a wine you wanna hose yourself down with. SOS: 2 (now-8 years)

- GJU-104 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. We love this for the core list; it's a loaded-with-flavor Mosel wine that's amazingly reasonably priced, and there's almost always enough of it. This note is for the first bottling, being shipped the first half of 2008 to cover Spring orders; it shows the breadly-crackery side of Erd-Trep; it's quite salty and fleshy for a Kab; lots of wintergreen and balsam; a Justen-archetype, generous and focused and eager to please without at all pandering. A subsequent bottling will unite two lots (Numbers 112 and 9, if you must know) and make a more overtly fruity wine.  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GJU-106 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
 Cask 26 (the label might not say so) is some real fine Mo-zel wine, and even better it's *plausible* as a Kabinett (Justen was our first Mosel visit and I was eager to taste Kabinett's with, um, less than 100<sup>g</sup> Oechsle . . .); cox orange and comice pears; spicy slatey palate, pure and stylish with the Wehlen "green" (that herbal thing); completely delightful and good and full of character and joy.  
 SOS: 2 (6-21 years)
- GJU-105 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese (+)**  
 CORE-LIST WINE because it's reliable, very reasonably priced, and it's Wehlener Sonnenuhr; this is what they said to expect in '07—juicy fruit and snappy acids; long slatey echoes and racy zing, but it was just bottled and thus likely to be more explosive when it recovers its fruit—if that wonderful Kab is anything to go by.  
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GJU-107 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**  
 Cask 11, one of the "lighter" of the Späts but another pure Mosel fruit basket, heirloom apples in a cool quince broth with mint, and an ending pinch of acidity; man this whole collection could stand for "Why We Drink Mosel Wine."  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GJU-108 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese\* ++**  
 Casks 12 & 24; one brought explosive opulence and the other a swollen primordial mineral-magma; together they deliver a miraculous transparent density and a slippery ringent power; oh the Mosel gods are grinning now!  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GJU-109 **2007 Erdener Prälat Riesling Spätlese ++**  
 "This is great!" I said to Stefan. "Yes, I know!" he replied: "And I knew *you'd* like it," he added, as he knows I like the depth and structure more than the exotic fruit; this is one of the *greatest wines* Stefan has yet made; cherries and bergamot and spearmint; enormously juicy but with a riptide of firm minerality; it has the turbulent force of nobility. Wow, wow and wow again. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)



# alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

Though 2007 is a stunningly good vintage at Merkelbach, I can't begin to understand it. I doubt I ever will. The wines have a quivering energy, like race-horses in the gate just before the gunshot; they seem to ripple with tension, and their flavors strain against the palate as though they have too much life-force to be contained. Sounds like a 2001-type year, right? A vintage with lots of acidity, right? 2007 had lots of acidity, right? Yes, yes, yes, except . . . no. The wines

are unremarkable in acidity except insofar as they are remarkably moderate. Even the pH values are higher than can be explained by the taste and the impact. So it's back to school for me, because these wines cannot actually be, if what I thought I knew was true. Two of them are the best wines I can ever remember from this domain. Prices remain locked in a happy time warp. We reserved every drop we could get. Don't miss them!

Since I've been ringing the bell at this house for twenty three years now, I will confess to the arising of a certain sentimentality. It's not based on the exchange of intimacies, but only on the passage of time, and on gratitude for durable things. It has little to do with how "good" a Merkelbach vintage happens to be, but a lot to do with their basic honesty and the loveliness of the culture they embody. I won't soon forget what stole over me last year, sitting at this very table, looking at a few photos Rolf and Alfred let me have.

At first I took the "cutest" ones, because if there's one thing about Rolf and Alfred Merkelbach, it's their adorableness. Everybody says so. I've said so. And when you meet them they are always shy and smiling and giggling. So you want a picture that captures it.

The first of the pictures was of Rolf's face peering out from among yellow leaves during harvest. Everyone was giddy during the '05 harvest. Rolf's entire being is suffused in Fall light, as if he is asking "Does it get any better than this?" The second picture showed a Summer day, and the boys were posing in front of the big ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN sign in the vineyard. They're squinting a little into the sun, and Rolf sports an unusually jaunty smile. This is the one we used.

The last of the three pictures they are back at the winery, in what looks like the press house. They're stand-



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

ing a little apart, looking into the camera — it's actually a lovely composition. I don't know quite why it's making me weepy, but it is. I've known Rolf and Alfred for twenty-three years now, but "known" isn't really the word. When I'm there we taste the wine and I enthuse and they giggle, and unless a Selbach is present there's hardly any schmoozing — sometimes even then. I'm sure Merkelbachs are glad of me but I have no idea what they make of me. Nor I of them, if I'm entirely candid. I mean, of course I adore them — they're adorable, after all — but as I look at this picture I find myself inside a warm mystery. Who are they, *what are their lives?*

- **Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

We say they're the "last of a vanishing breed," which is certainly true. They do the whole thing themselves (with a little help at harvest) and they live a modest life, and they don't appear to have raised their prices for at least a decade. They give every appearance of perfect contentment, and I believe they are. I hope they are; it's part of a faith I hold. Theirs are lives reduced to a degree of simplicity and integration we wouldn't tolerate. But they are happy, picking grapes, posing in front of the big sign, smiling into the camera. When I let myself really think about them I sniff a kind of unknowable goodness, and it both stirs and rebukes me. A voice challenges me: *Look at those faces, and now tell me just how valuable all your hip, arch post-modern affects are.* But also, *feel the divinity in these simple mysterious lives.*

Time of course has *whooshed* by Rolf and Alfred, and with each passing year they become more of a kind of loveable anachronism. They're still there! But I slowly realize the reason I find them so strangely beautiful is that they're entirely mysterious. I don't know them, really, at all, and I'm not sure who does. I don't know what they say to each other over breakfast, or in the vineyards, or how they decide what to watch on TV in the evening, and I have no idea what each of them thinks as he's falling asleep at night. I don't know how they drive a car; they've never had a dog, so you can't tell what kind of dog they might like or what name they'd give it, or if it would reveal some hidden vein of affection in its masters. This mystery haunts the wines, because the wines are so euphorically pure and expressive they seem to contain an inchoate love. I'm always saying they're pure-Mosel, which they are, but there's also a categorical *identity* about them you'd be tempted to call "honesty" except that honesty implies a choice, the option of being dishonest. These Mosel wines seem ineluctable, and the friendliness and beauty with which they are *charged* comes from two quiet, solitary men I can never know, but only honor.

One night I was at the ball park. I'm a purist; I like to arrive early and watch the guys take batting practice and shag fly balls while the stands slowly fill up and the players pause to sign autographs. So there I was watching some rookie who barely had a beard take b.p. and he was

**KINHEIMER ROSENBERG:** this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It's the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg's wines often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years they can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

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

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

really **whacking** the ball, line-drive after line-drive, just sizzling bullets hitting the outfield fences, slapped to all fields with a satisfying crack! And I was reminded of something . . . but what?

And then I opened this text in the computer and there it was: *Merkelbachs!* Not a towering home-run in the bunch, but screaming line-drives that'd take your freakin' head off and bruise your hand through your glove if you were lucky enough to spear one.

After greetings are exchanged, we sit at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf or Alfred bring out the wines one by one.

It's self-evident to them that the vineyard is responsible for “at least eighty percent” of the quality of their wines, especially the “Lang Pichter” section of the Ürziger Würzgarten directly behind the winery. Mosel wine for them is like a dear old friend. “We like to hear that you can drink a little more of our wines without any health problems,” says Alfred. I asked Alfred what his favorite type of wine was, purely theoretically, without respect to his own wines. “The flavors I look for are hard for me to describe,” he replied. “A good white wine should be identifiable by its nose, *must* be, in fact. A young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity.”

Again the wines were presented first by cask number, then by name. Merkelbachs

probably refer to the old local names for their various tiny parcels when they speak among themselves, and the cask separation corresponds to those parcels. Just think of it for a second. We're dealing with a less-than-5-acre estate here, all ungrafted vines, tended and harvested and vinified *bit by bit*. And Rolf and Alfred know these vineyards the way you and I know our children, and wine isn't something they *do* or something they *WORK AT*; wine is in the very pores of their skins, in their veins and capillaries. Nobody punches a clock. There aren't any meetings to discuss marketing. No computers in sight. Just the seamless weaving of work into life. Just wine.

Sigrid Selbach asked Alfred if he ever took a vacation. Alfred answered: “Where would we go? When I'm on the slopes standing among my vines on a sunny day with a view of the Mosel behind me, I have everything I need to be happy.”

One year we walked over to Christoffel – our next appointment – I suddenly felt very sad. Sigrid Selbach and I were walking side by side, and I told her “I haven't always been as good as I wanted to be, and there are things in my life of which I am ashamed . . . *(pause)* . . . and times I feel the weight of many regrets . . . *(pause)* . . . but something with which I can console myself is that I brought appreciation and prosperity to Rolf and Alfred during these years of their lives . . . *(pause)* . . . I sometimes think of that.” Sigrid, perfect friend that she is, looked into my face and said nothing.

#### merkelbach at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of structure supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there's someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he's closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I've poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.

#### GME-148 **2007 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**

Fuder #2. A simply perfect ur-Mosel wine; naked slate and the crunchiest apple you ever broke a tooth on.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)

- GME-149 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Fuder #13; just one, so queue up for the 110 cases it contains, for this is *ridiculously* perfect Mosel wine, and quintessential Uerz-Würz, so if you're thirsty for the Kabinetts you remember and yearn to see again. . . .  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-20 years)
- GME-150 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**  
 Fuders 14-15 (blended), and this is a little juicier and "fruitier," more yielding, but still wonderfully slatey and maybe even longer and riper than #13; if you like a brisk *slap!* of flavor, then 13—a Swedish massage of flavor, with long, deep strokes, then this.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)
- GME-151 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Fuders 8-10 (blended), and if you think wine needs nine g.l. acidity and a pH of 2.9 to have grip and structure and length, join me in the dawghouse while we think it over. This is another racy vigorous nutty apple-skin perfect Mosel wine, with a sneaky length and a big solid finish.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-19 years)
- GME-152 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Fuders 11-12 (blended) to be followed by 19-21 (blended) only because the Brothers don't have the capacity to blend all four at once! It's on the core-list because there's no point in a "core-list" that wouldn't include it: such a wine is the *CORE* of everything I'm trying to do here. And here's another eerily perfect Mosel Riesling, with every vineyard nuance—kiwi, sasaffrass, mint, apple, strawberry, in the most vigorous hyper-impatient bottling in years.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-22 years)
- GME-154 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese\*** +  
 Fuders 24-26 (blended) and a change of character; it shows mirabelle now yet is still high-toned and racy, but with a long, snappy, granular-fibrous texture; a riotously fruity Riesling that lifts a steely sun-on-snow brilliance.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GME-155 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese** +  
 Please do me a favor and try to ignore that word *Auslese* on the label, because this wine's actually less expensive than two of Selbach's *Kabinetts* not to mention *drier* than many (if not most) modern-era Kabinett wines. This is Fuder #23, from a low-sited parcel near the old Roman press-house unearthed during the recent Flurbereinigung (see glossary), and it's just a brilliant, iridescent wine; quince, walnut and barley; *endless* length of slate—look, it's 97° Oechsle and 6.5g.l. *acidity* and yet it's as clear as a newly washed window and so structured you'd swear you could bounce on it. This we couldn't score all of; our British colleagues deserve, I suppose, their mingy share <wink>. So: 70 cases is all.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! (*YES! Perfect food-wine*) SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GME-156 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese** ++  
 Fuders 16-17 (blended). I mean wow I mean . . . holy hanging chad, this is almost hyperactive; lavender and sassafrass-salty complexity, the best Merkelbach wine in years and maybe ever; just seductive; this is a fitness coach who pushes you past your gasping limits, but man, that runner's high!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GME-157 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*** ++  
 Fuder #18. Improbable penetration and richness, with kirsch and mint-on-viagra, and it's like one of those incredibly long icicles you can't imagine being formed, such is its brilliance. I asked Rolf and Alfred if they'd compare it to a 2001; "Oh no, this is much better," they replied, as well it may be.  
 SOS: 2 (10-27 years)

## why fuss about “connections”?

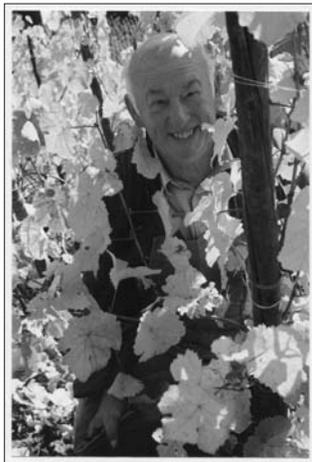
I woke up this morning thinking about Hans Selbach. He died at home, surrounded by family. His body was carried through the house, through the bottle cellar, before it was placed at last in the ground, perhaps three hundred meters from the house. It is not only his spirit which lingers genially amongst his survivors; his body itself is near at hand.

My father died abruptly. I came home one afternoon from my summer job and he was slumped over the kitchen table. He died six hours later in a hospital room while I waited at home with my small sister. He is buried in an enormous cemetery in Queens, NY; I doubt if I could even find the gravesite.

My story may not be typical, but neither is it all that unusual. We were suburban folk, and a certain existential disconnect was a defining parameter of our experience. Nor do I claim this is necessarily tragic. Disconnection has its silver linings.

But when I contemplate the connectiveness the Selbachs nurture and presume upon, it becomes clear that their wines, also, are connected, that *they* are a defining parameter in a complex of connections, and finally that this is as invisible and categorical as oxygen to Selbachs and people like them.

Those of you who know Johannes know he speaks nearly perfect English. In fact he gets along in French and for all I know he can mumble articulately in Chinese. What I didn't know, or had forgotten, is along with his native German he also speaks *Platt*, or regional dialect. I heard him speak it when we visited Merkelbachs together. It struck me what a piece of social glue this was; it was Johannes' way of reassuring Rolf and Alfred *We are brethren*, another marker of connection and identity. One might almost claim Mosel Riesling *is* what it uniquely is because of the dialect *it* speaks.



Rolf Merkelbach

I respect Priorat for its authenticity—it is manifestly the wine of a *place*, speaking the dialect of that place. I may not like it, but I'm glad it exists.

I can't summon up much of anything for the so-called

“international” style of wine, since it's either connected to things I don't care about or it's connected to nothing at all. I've had more than enough disconnect in my life. Many of us have. When I consider a Mosel family like Selbachs—like *any* of the people with whom I work—everything I see expresses an identity rooted in connection; they themselves, their wines, you cannot *disconnect* these things even if you tried.

And it salves a kind of loneliness. Though it isn't my home, it is at least *a* home, and the people are particular people, and the wines are particular wines. I spend too much of my life driving among strip-malls and their numbing detritus, and so when I descend the final hill over the Eifel and the village of Zeltingen comes into view I have a momentary thrill of *arriving*. Here is *somewhere*. I see it, I know it, I will soon embrace people who embody it—and, I also get to taste it.

I will not settle for less from any wine. Nor need you.

But it doesn't stop at wine's abstract quality, nor even at its abstract identity. Connections are curious things to follow. Douglas Hofstadter calls them “strange loops.” One morning, asleep in my bed somewhere in Germany I woke a moment to shift positions. Though the room was utterly dark, I heard a bird singing outside through the open window. It wasn't a nightingale; just an ordinary bird heralding the morning. I went to the window to see if I could glean any incipience of light. But no—pure darkness. Dawn would break soon, but now it was dark. In bed again I found myself wondering *how does the bird know morning is about to form?* As far as I can see it is still completely dark. Was he just impatient? Was he perhaps wrong? (“Oops, too soon, sorry guys, go back to sleep!”)

Just the kinds of thoughts where you can't get back to sleep. I remembered a letter I'd gotten from a friend in southern California who'd just gotten diagnosed with lymphoma and who'd started chemo. He was looking for a source for 05 Dönnhoffs and some of his other favorites. “Why, you might ask, do I give a damn about such trivia as buying wine while I am fighting for my life against the big C?” he said. “Because, to put it simply, drinking the wine of the masters like Dönnhoff is one of my great joys in life, and something to which I look forward with relish when I am able to drink again.” So there you go. Wine and the beauty it entails can connect you to life, even if you're afraid or worried, because it is such a particular kind of pleasure. There's more to say, but we can pause here.

I'm counting the days along with my friend. I can only wonder what that first glass will be like. I thought about it while lying in bed thinking about how birds know it's about to be dawn. My friend connects to wine as an agent of hope and renewal, and that connected him to me, and I'm connected to this unanswerable question about some noisy little bird on a cold dark morning in late winter in Germany, and the unanswerable question connects to the unquenchable hope and wine is the blood that beats through it all. I'm sure I got back to sleep eventually.

Here's another sign of where we have come; it was quite a relief to taste actual-Kabinetts again at Christoffel, after a bizarre-vintage where one had 106° and the other 110°—not just “Auslese” but *Goldkapsel* Auslese. These 2007s have a “mere” 92°, which seems almost airy after last year, but which in fact would still have been very-good-thank-you Auslese back in ancient times, like, ah, the '90s.

The 2007 vintage is as profound as I expected to find it, allowing for the challenge of tasting just-bottled wines. I suspect I've underrated it exactly as I've done with most of the vintages since 2002.

I can't remember the last time I tasted cask samples here. Robert Eymael doesn't like to show them. The last few vintages I've had to hedge my notes on account of bottle-sickness, and this is

a most inexact science. For each year the wines come alive (like 2002) there's another where they stay the same (like 2003). Hans-Leo's style had been growing more and more calligraphic, as if each year he wrote his flavors with a finer-tipped pen. I also sense, but cannot state as fact, that Eymael cherishes the stylistic distinction between Christoffel's wines and his own from Mönchhof, which are rather more baroque.

No matter how jaded I fear I've gotten, wines like these have the power to rouse me. They're dangerous, these silky vixens. Yet as filigree as they are, after the fifth or sixth one they begin to consolidate into an impression of remarkable depth and solidity. Their flavors may fall like little flakes, but they settle like big snow.

It's always a challenge to taste here, especially if it's the final appointment that day. There are simply *too many* great wines. Early in the sequence the palate becomes alert; it sniffs beauty in the air. Later as you ascend through realms of richness, the sensitized palate feels as if its nerve-endings are tingling. Suddenly it isn't just wine anymore. It's as though ALL OF BEAUTY is flooding into your heart. As you grope for words to convey this strange experience you find the only words are

- **Vineyard area: 2.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Treppchen, Ürziger Würzgarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

mushy, and maybe you feel a little embarrassed. But don't. There's a rigor beneath all that showering loveliness that you can trust. Beauty is real, and has nothing to do with sentiment.

“The vineyards, the grapes, play the decisive role in determining quality,” says Christoffel. “Our vinification isn't so different from the norm. We lay high emphasis on freshness and raciness. At home we drink everything from dry to sweet, from QbA to Auslese; it only has to be *good!* It should be spicy, fruity and lively, with noticeable acidity. I'd like to think our customers like to return to our wines after drinking others, and that they feel good the next morning even if they've peered a little too deeply into the glass the night before!” Christoffel identifies the section of the Ürziger Würzgarten that lies among the rocks as his best.

This is a matter of exposure, and of the very old vines he has planted here. There's no question that soil has its own role to play. “The higher the slate proportion, (therefore more porous) the finer and more elegant the wines are. Sometimes even *too* delicate. “What's ideal is a slate soil with enough fine-earth to hold water and give the wines more extract.”

Most of the vineyards are “Würzelecht,” literally root-genuine, i.e. not grafted onto North American rootstock. “I have two parcels of grafted wines,” Hans-Leo told me, “which is two too many!”

THE MATTER OF STARS: the whole star thing came



about because Mosel growers had to find a way of distinguishing the pecking orders of their various casks of Auslese. You can't describe them in terms like "Feine Auslese" or "Feinste Auslese" any more, and that makes sense; there are already too many rungs in the quality ladder. The stars — or any other glyph a grower might care to employ — are a quasi-legal expedient, and a better alternative than asking consumers to memorize A.P. numbers or capsule designs.

For many of us this presents a problem. As soon as you establish a hierarchy you inadvertently push people toward the "best," or the perceived-best. That's because we seem to see things from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Nobody wants to tell his customers "I have the second-best cask!" No, you can't hold your head up unless you have the big kahoona. It's a truly shitty way to look at wine. It has in fact nothing to do with wine, only with a commodity that *happens to be wine*. That's partly why I suggested to Hans-Leo and Robert that we include the old parcel-name for each of these Auslesen, so as to undermine the whole pecking-order aspect of the thing, and return it to the soil where it belongs. The idea wasn't met with enormous enthusiasm (and the 2007 labels were already printed and affixed to bottles) but I'm not gonna forget this.



Hans Leo Christoffel

**christoffel at a glance:**

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the "big three" among the Mosels I offer. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty.

**how the wines taste:**

Dashingly aromatic, brilliant luster of flavor, inchoate depth which begs for study. The kinds of wines you keep adding to your notes on; each sip reveals another facet, the second glass differs from the first, the very last sip is still saying fresh new things. There's a jewel-like firmness here; these aren't leesy or plush. In general, the Erdeners are thicker and more thrusting; they show better younger. The Ürzigers are refined, fastidious and sleek.

- GJC-163 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE because it's an icon of this portfolio and there's always enough of it (by our piddling standards anyway . . .) and this 2007 is unusually open and expressive, with typical site-aromas; the palate is beautifully shimmery and juicy, really a stunning Kab—or "Kab"—in all a superb Mosel wine.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GJC-164 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**  
 Huge promise here, some glimpses of a tangy fruit, but so truculent from bottling I can't write anything approaching a definitive note. <sigh>  
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GJC-165 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +(+)  
 CORE-LIST WINE, and it's on the core-list because it offers a big ol' *whomp* of Mosel flavor in an idiom of pure class; this '07 is salty and tangy, brilliant, but bottling has distorted it and sharpened its acids at the expense of its fruit, yet what peaks through is so compelling, suggesting ultimately an '07-melange of juicy fruit and a serpentine slither of firm mineral.  
 SOS: 2 (10-28 years)

- GJC-166 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Normally this is the first wine in the sequence that seems to have withstood being just-bottled, but this one was reticent; again this slinky shimmer and the steely sasaffrassy zing; sophisticated yet perhaps less arch and angular than it now appears, and weirdly dry-seeming despite 80 g.l. of RS; it's one of those smelling-salts wake-the-hell-UP wines. Or is it?  
 SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GJC-167 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese\*** +(+)  
 Ooooh . . . here's a fragrance, yet again the palate's true form is obscured, but there's more apple and wintergreen, and a greater swell of pure fruit.  
 SOS: 2 (12-33 years)
- GJC-168 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*, 6/750ml** ++  
 This always hails from the same parcel, a remote and scary set of terraces among the cliffs called "Werzgarten," and it always seems to have a *para*-slate nose, as if the slate were toasted; this wine is like one of those receivers that pick up interstellar magnetic disturbances; exceptionally precise fragrance of empire apple, spearmint and kirsch, even caraway seed; an iridescent ultraviolet vibration that hardly refers to the body at all, but to some astral self you didn't know you had, awakened into response by this buzzing, pulsing terroir. It's always been my own favorite, and it's one of the Mosel's most rarefied experiences.  
 SOS: 3 (13-33 years)
- GJC-169 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*, 6/750ml** ++  
 This is an extravagantly fine Mosel wine, yet out of its usual character, less opulently fruity than usual, less of the sultry sun-warmed strawberry and more pure cool apple; look, these are getting "plusses" by pure delineated length and focused fruit—in this case a striking volume and focus of fruit—but niggling detail of nuance is both fatuous and impossible until I taste again and the wines are again whole.  
 SOS: 3 (14-35 years)
- GJC-170 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese\*\*, 6/750ml** ++  
 This wine usually shoves its way through bottle-sickness, such is its determined density; it's one of those huge bites of food you take because it *looks* so good but once it's in your mouth you think "How the hell am I gonna chew all this . . . ?" which is to say it's more sheer force of flavor than one palate can apprehend. It is much stonier than the '06, much less baroque, with a taut granular force allied to an immense fruit. Sheesh!  
 SOS: 3 (15-40 years)
- GJC-171 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*\*, 6/750ml** +  
 "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it. What's left to say about this, after all these years? It continues to prevail in polish, class and complexity; it rings a finer and purer peal, higher overtones, calmer and shapelier—it's the one you drink slowest and think longest about.  
 SOS: 3 (15-37 years)

# heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

I keep thinking of shade images, but shade encased in warmth, like a pocket of cool air in the deep shade of a summer forest on an otherwise hot day. It was the same last year too, tasting Martin Kerpen's 2006s, and it was so welcome and so improbable I felt an immense *relief*, to drink something that wasn't **pressing** down on me as so many '06s seemed to do. And now again, this delicious coolness. I don't suppose Martin's "doing" anything radically different in the vineyards or the cellar, but there's a new fineness about these wines, and this I know I don't imagine. Everyone in Wehlen stands to some extent in the shadow of Manfred Prüm, yet I don't really see anyone trying to emulate the style. There are good wineries making splendidly steely-mineral

wines — you know who they are — and then there is Kerpen, who stands stylistically off to the side. The wines, in fact, resemble Selbach's more than any neighbors in Wehlen; verdant, shady, woody, vinous, mid-palate density, lots of soul.

Martin Kerpen has been variously described as "gentle" and "modest," but he seems to know quite well how good his wines are and to feel the appropriate pride. He is very funny and he loves to laugh. He is the most genial of hosts, and his wife Celia is a substantive and lovely woman with whom I always wish I had more time to talk. They lay a bountiful and happy table.

Some of what's happened at Kerpen reveals the prosaic truths which lie beneath much wine romance. The quality of his wines improved significantly when Martin bought his new house along the Mosel, and completed the cellar. He used to have to make the wines in weeny widdle cran-nies in several different locations; now

he's not only all under one roof but he's got ample space besides.

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? "I don't know, exactly! You have to work *clean*. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is 70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck." I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore

- **Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,100 cases**
- **Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**



he labors to make clear-tasting wine. Some have said that he makes wine in his own image — Martin is a tall, wiry sort of fellow — I said it too, but I've changed my mind. His wines are sleek (and long!) enough, but what impresses me most about them is the multi-layered *depth* beneath all that finesse. It's an almost magical mingling of super-fine clarity with a remarkable chordal richness that takes the wines from very good to great. These are wines towards which you feel both admiration *and* tenderness; they are dear, winning wines. They needn't strain to be *great* wines; their beauty is their *beauty*.



Martin Kerpen

**kerpen at a glance:**

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the “Wehlen premium” but are still below the levels of many of the richer and more famous!

**how the wines taste:**

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Leesy along Selbach lines, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not *just* pretty.

- GKE-113 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
 This is a cask-sample different from the wine being shipped to cover Spring 2008 DI orders. But not much! As always it's a winsome, slatey, cool, fluting and refined Mosel Kabinett.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-18 years)
- GKE-116 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This takes the smiling coolness of the Kabinett and adds a layer of mid-palate fruit, sweet delicious apple, and a sideways wink of slatey firmness; and again this mossy, woody deep-shade coolness that's such a compelling *yin* to the *yang* of fruit-ripeness. Call it whatever you like; interplay, dialogue, dialectic, but fine wine doesn't exist without the palate double-take as it registers different envelopes of flavors, just as great wine doesn't exist without there being a stunning call-and-response of apparently disparate elements. Power and gloss, for instance, or density and transparency. When we see it in little ways as we do here, the result is fine and lovely; in big ways, it's grand and profound. Either way, it is precious.  
 SOS: 2 (9-23 years)
- GKE-114 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\* (Artist Label)** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE**, because we wanted something approaching the stellar, to show German Riesling at its loveliest before it passed over into “Auslese” stylings—and because we love the label with the little bird in his insouciant boat. We actually asked Martin to *reduce* the botrytis proportion here so that we'd have a brighter wine more useful at table; it's a euphoria of apple now, more refined and high-toned fruit-purity, not sweeter *per se* than the “lesser” Spät but a higher-register more chiseled richness.  
 SOS: 2 (10-26 years)
- GKE-117 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** +  
 This wine is so much of what Auslese *used* to be and stopped being when everyone started baying and pawing for “scores”—a ripe, *drinkable* wine offering an extra dimension of ripeness over something still firmly grounded and structured and VINOUS, not liqueurous. It is not a confection or a slice of some pie, it emerges from the Spätlese *organically* in a more ample form, but it is still recognizably that form. I know we've all gotten rather *ho-hum* about Auslese, and I sympathize, but then there was this actual wine in my actual mouth, and all I could see was beauty I wanted more of.  
 SOS: 2 (12-28 years)
- GKE-118 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese\*** +  
 The spicy and pithy core of Domprobst is wonderful, giving a wry angular tone to the fruit; there's a resinous, almost vetiver cast to the fragrance, and the palate adds a birch-smoke bite to the Kerpen coolness; it's another food-Auslese, and entirely delicious.  
 SOS: 2 (13-28 years)
- GKE-119H **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling BA\*, 12/375ml** +  
 Well, excellent! (I'm still boycotting the massive-young-sweet-wine tasting note thing. . . .)  
 SOS: 4 (17-40 years)

# willi schaefer

## mosel • graach

There were babies present this time, or more correctly one baby, or even more correctly one very *cool* baby whom I lost my heart to even though I appear to have traumatized the poor fellow, since every time he looked at me he started to cry. Kevin Pike has the baby thing going now, since he has two of his own, and little Jonathan Schaefer was more drawn to him, and I skulked into a corner to gather the shards of my shattered aplomb.

We hit the big 3-0 this year; it was May of 1978 when I first visited Willi Schaefer. We were in what must have been our twenties or something. Willi's dad was still among us, and the two kids were still little, and now here we were with another three generations of Schaefer in the tasting room, rolling forward into a hopeful future. Life, indeed, can be this good. It always is here.

A few years ago, I have no idea what I did to deserve it (maybe they were expecting someone else and I rang the doorbell) but there was a '59 ready to be opened when I arrived.

After we finished drinking it I commiserated with Willi. "I feel for you when I drink a wine like this," I said. Willi knows I can't be trusted to ever say anything sensible, so he smiled wryly and said "Comiserate? Why so?" and I answered "Well, it has to be frustrating when you feel like drinking an old wine and every damn thing in your cellar tastes so young."

In fact I have never once had an "old"-tasting bottle from Willi, and this lovely '59 was no exception: *It is Graacher Himmelreich Auslese, the same parcel from which the best '76 Auslese came, directly next to Domprobst. As always, eerily green still, a few flecks of yellow but no gold; fresh aromas*

*of lime and slate dance with beeswax and balsam. The palate is sappy with a lovely undertone of grain, pine, tilleul at its highest form; almost unnerveingly limpid and fresh. Willi says*



Willi & Christof Schaefer

*"You taste the heaviness of the vintage," but all I taste is this comely transparent grace. The finish is searching but the wine is Spring-gentle and sparrow-voiced. BLESS this culture, who brought and still bring the world these gentle, helpful, self-effacing works of beauty.*

I'll never forget one time in the old days I took a friend here who was just getting into wine. It was a per-

- **Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

fect Spring day, and Willi's garden looked inviting. "Would you like to sit in the garden with a bottle and relax awhile?" he asked. There were other visitors and his father was entertaining an old client. "Sure," I said. I purchased a half-bottle of '75 Domprobst BA, and we sat in the shade listening to the birds, looking straight up at the impossibly steep Domprobst. The air was sweet with blossom. The wine was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started singing, some chipper little *lied* about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed. "No!" he said, "You staged this, right? It isn't actually happening, right?"

At this point Willi and I are so boisterous together I'm sure we'd absolutely freak out my teenager (Oh God dad, *ICK*) and in fact it's pretty silly I must admit. But this is truly the world's nicest guy and I'm just giddy to see him, and we laugh and laugh. But laughing isn't all we do. We've known each other 3 decades now, and one respects the dignity of such a clump of time. One year Willi announced that our occasion deserved to be commemorated with something a little special. He disappeared for a few minutes, and returned with a 1953, which he knew was my birth-year. "Twenty five years for us, and fifty for you," he said; "It seems appropriate, I think!"

It was Willi and his son Christoph, me and Corrie Malas and Mark Hutchens and Bill Mayer, and Willi's wife Esther joined us (though it was a little early in the

day to drink wine; still, it was a '53 . . .). And the wine was poured. It still tasted *primary*, still had fruit and architecture, still had some chlorophyll green flecked in among the gold. It was limpid and essentially ageless. (Like me!) The wine was in fact astonishing, yet the experience of sharing it in friendship with Schaefer was beyond description.

"Willi, let me take a glass to your mother," said Esther. "She'll enjoy drinking a wine her husband made."

Well, this day was off to a good start! Barely 10am, and I had a '53 in my glass in the company of the family who made it, and who seemed to like me.

Eventually, Willi tells me, the holdings will be enlarged and there'll be more wine for us greedy sybarites. As it is Willi *could* easily choose to grow, but he elects not to. "The estate is the right size for me to work and give the proper attention to the wines," he says. How's that for capitalism! Willi could make, say, 50% more wine and **sell it instantaneously**, thus obtaining kid-leather seat covers for his zippy new Porsche, but instead he knows in his bones what the proper size for his estate must be, if he is to preserve his relationship to his wines, to his work. Hopeless Willi, just hopeless; where's your ambition, man; where's your **can-do spirit? DON'T YOU WANT TO MAKE MORE MONEY???**

Pleased as we were to see Schaefer make Parker's *Great Wine Estates Of The World* book, I had to explain the Porsche comment to him. First I had to get over my slack-jawed incredulousness that the author (who may have been Rovani) took an obviously facetious comment and read it *literally*. The idea of Willi screaming around the Mosel in a Porsche is only marginally more plausible than Merkelbachs roaring around Ürzig in a

Lamborghini with the top down. But I do enjoy it when our omniscient writers show how very careful they are! Though I'll cheerily grant they have many priorities higher than to unscramble the meanings in my banshee prose.

When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been made. Christoph appeared in the doorway to say hi in his raffish sideburns. I recalled that the first time I drank this Domprobst was in 1980, in Willi's living room. His kids were little then. Willi left the room to take a phone call and I sat there with my glass of Auslese while the kids sat on the floor playing with a little top which hummed as it spun. The humming and the playing and the beauty of the wine and the friendliness and hospitality of my host became a single thing. I often recall that moment when I hear someone defend the idea of giving point-scores to wines.

Schaefer grows only Riesling and only on steep slopes. The best is the Domprobst, though there's no scoffing at his Himmelreich (fruitier), or his Bernkasteler Badstube (actually Matheisbildchen, and typically rich and flinty) or his little bit of Wehlener Sonnenuhr (light but true to form). Vinification isn't unusual, expect for the *very* gentlest of pressings, which leaves few bitter phenols in the wines, and gives them their strikingly pale colors. Willi knows his vineyards like he knows his children, all their quirks and foibles and capabilities. As a taster he responds to "character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweetness, fruit and acidity. Apart from that, the wine should embody its vineyard and grape variety."

#### **schaefer at a glance:**

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

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

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

- GWS-153 **2007 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**  
Fuder #2; a wonderful fragrance and crispy classical appley fruit, a darling wine with so much cut you'll drool like a fool.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (9-27 years)
- GWS-164 **2007 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett** +  
Fuder #9; even more specific; this apple has a name and birth-certificate; on the palate a dancing, shimmering brightness and yet an amazing material density that sticks to your palate like a force, evanescent yet categorical.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (9-28 years)
- GWS-154 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** +  
Fuder #16; minty fragrance; undeflected, absurd brilliance on the palate, with cut and a gingery spice; granular, ur-Mosel again; so much fruit it would probably cure scurvy.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (9-27 years)

- GWS-155 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** +  
Fuder #7; this is so salty and sassafrassy it could pass for Uerz-Würz; a ton of class and almost luridly flowery; a “palate-staining” wine with 8% alcohol; like a stony spring-water (think Volvic or Contrexeville) with a tic of blackberry in a single silvery rivulet. Sneaky-long too. What a wine!  
SOS: 1 (9-23 years)
- GWS-156 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
Another world from Graach; pure ginger and lemon, toppier and spicier than the Graachers, with more pointed acidity—but it was filtered three days before I tasted it, so . . . regardless, it’s a sexy girl, this one, and I’m sure I’m underrating it. Or her, or whatever.  
SOS: 1 (8-20 years)
- GWS-158 **2007 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese** +  
Again at once so *apparently* simple; I mean, apples, you know? Yet so nuanced, as if from a cider from 20 heirloom apples strained through slate, and so juicy you positively ache to swallow it. At least you can. Poor poor me.  
SOS: 2 (13-27 years)
- GWS-157 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** ++  
Fuder #12; now we’re into the rocks, and this is a lyric of slate now; cool, almost starched, snappy as a winter breeze, impeccable, the posture of a soldier at attention, and all green apple. Like just-polished silver.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (12-26 years)
- GWS-159 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** ++  
Fuder #5; the “1-star” quality; even for Schaefer there’s an extraordinarily complex aroma, and the palate is a sorcery of spice; this one isn’t impeccable, it is wicked and pointed and stingingly arch and extravagantly expressive. This one jolts and sizzles.  
SOS: 2 (14-32 years)
- GWS-160 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** ++  
Fuder #17; this stood with Dönnhoff in the Auslese realm; i.e., an almost savagely determined focusing and distillation of the *essential* character of the site without the confectioners-sugar of botrytis; it extends the Spät instead of slipping down the rabbit-hole of “dessert-wine;” like Spreitzer’s (just wait, you’ll see!) it refines as it concentrates until the effect is sensuous and ravishing; thank god for people who make wine for people.  
SOS: 3 (15-35 years)
- GWS-162 **2007 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** ++(+)  
Fuder #10; here we’re into the territory of the young 1971s; a stunningly beautiful aroma, and the palate has the same streamlined yet monumental length, and the *swagger* of a great wine, the command. It brooks no contradiction. Adamantly great Riesling.  
SOS: 3 (17-42 years)
- GWS-161 **2007 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** +  
Here’s the botrytis-lady, but it isn’t anywhere near a blatant botrytis, just a nap of sauce over this lovely baked-apple fruit. Domprobst #17 is virginal whereas this is a newly married lady, making all sorts of lovely discoveries about herself and her new world. . . .  
SOS: 3 (15-40 years)



You want a garagiste? Here's a garagiste! The guy makes about 900 cases of frickin unbelievable wine from Grand Cru vineyards. Although Andreas' estate is very much on-the-move right now, having grown to over two hectares on its way to 4-5. This, yes folks, is substantial for a Mosel estate, seven and a half acres. Even more heartening, Andreas wants to focus exclusively on his native village of Dhron. This young man seems to have been born knowing about things like identity and connection, and I'm touched by his dedication to his home soil, not least because Dhron is rather an underdog among great Mosel places.

It suffered hail in May, and the crop was further reduced by a little heat wave on June 15th, after

which Andreas removed all grapes either sunburned or at risk of becoming so. Thus he made a mere 50 hl/ha in an otherwise generous vintage. The wines, of course, are superb; there is no Mosel grower in this portfolio any better than this young fella.

It took me (too) many years to learn there'd never be enough time to have the kind of soul-searching conversations about wine philosophy I wanted to have with my growers. Also, that such conversations couldn't be contrived, but needed to happen spontaneously. Yet I wanted to know what made a grower tick, and so I created a little questionnaire which I leave behind for the grower to answer at his/her leisure. The results go into my catalog text, augmented by *bon mots* which actually do arise in conversation.



Andreas Adam

Andreas Adam is an *intense* young man, and meeting him for the first time it was subdued by his old-world politeness. But answering my written questions in solitude seems to have unleashed the beast. Adam is both his own man — very much so — yet also emblematic of the new wave in German wine-think. I don't agree with everything he espouses, but his bedrock passion is stirring. I think of that instant of ignition when I

tasted my first Adam wine, and it all starts to make sense.

Here's some of what he wrote:

"The hardest work of vinifying a great wine takes about nine months, from February till the beginning of November — rather like a pregnancy — during which

- **Vineyard area: 2 hectares**
- **Annual production: under 1000 cases**
- **Top sites: Dronerhofberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with clay**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

time we let what happens happen, without disturbing or perturbing nature, but rather we watch over and work in harmony with nature's larger power."

"An aside: I'm sitting here writing on our terrace under a blue sky. Nearby sits a fallow vineyard, to which a vintner is carrying chemical fertilizer. . . .

"I renounce any and all such treatments. I sustain my vineyards by intensive soil-work (I was ploughing this morning; it smells so wonderfully of fresh earth and slate) to bring the essential nutrients up from the primary rock, the natural compost of a vineyard. This completion of the bond between the elemental soil and the work of the vintner is another piece in the puzzle of terroir. "

Well-said!

"We love our Dhronhofberger, in its lovely quiet side-valley, which leaves stress behind and is out of the stream of all which is trendy in German wine-growing; today Cabernet, tomorrow Sauvignon Blanc."

Last year we took a small excursion up into the Hofberger to try and grok the ambience and look at Andreas' new parcels. Hofberger is one of those sacred spaces, I think. It isn't merely symbolic that it faces away from the river-current. One has a 180° view from it, but it isn't a grand aspect — rather a sweet, almost intimate one, of little valleys and old houses with slate rooftops. It is also very quiet, except for the many birds. A perfect place for a thoughtful introvert to work, I think. And what flavors come from this ground! Andreas says: "Even young it often shows a striking exotic fruit, subtle spice, *wild* slate aromas and a finesse of acidity."

I agree. The only reason this site isn't front-and-center among Mosel Grand Crus is the lack of a flagship-estate — until now. Hofberger is one of those Mosel sites with *complex* slate, in this case with a vein of clay and with a measure of the sandy slate-variant of the Nahe. It is both archetypal Mosel yet also extra-Mosel; it sometimes makes me think of Dönnhoff's Brücke.

Next I ask about terroir. Of course! Not for nothing have I been anointed *terroir-lama*. My question is specific: do you believe that components in your soil create flavors in your wines?

"I think in Germany we see terroir as a unity of grape, climate, soil, and the mentality of the person who works the vineyard. But the essence of that mentality is a knowledge that the geology of his terrain indeed creates the flavors in the grapes which grow there. Thus if you consider Riesling from blue-gray slate from the Goldtröpfchen, in its youth it's herbacious, with delicate lime fragrance and mineral-salty on the palate. Contrast the Dhronhofberger Tholey, with its brittle blue clay-slate mixed with quartz and *Klimmer*, whose riesling tastes almost as if it emerged from a tropical garden; maracuja, papaya, pineapple and with a slight breeze of honey and caramel. Here on the Mosel we have lovely variations of slate and exposure."

And vinification, I ask? Anything which separates you from the prevailing norm?

"Actually we do nearly nothing differently than did our forefathers in the '20s: small yields of late-harvested Riesling grapes are gently handled and pressed (we still press some in an old wooden press); after an open must-oxidation the wines fall bright at cool temperatures in stainless steel, and later ferment in old wooden Fuders. **Finito!** That's all, nothing else, just wait for the wild yeasts to begin their work. No must or mash sulfuring, no enzymes, no gelatin, no added vitamins, no bentonite — **pure nature!**

To the extent we employ technology it is only in the service of cleanliness."

I'm curious to know what kinds of wines a grower drinks at home in private, i.e. what he drinks for pleasure. Adam says, "A wide range of Grüner Veltliners, which I prefer to Grand Crus in white Burgundy; Rieslings from great sites in our region whether dry or sweet; vintage Champagnes; the occasional rose-scented Muscat from Südsteiermark or a smoky-flinty Loire Sauvignon from someone like Dageneau." Nice to know if I were ever quarantined at Adam's there'd be plenty to drink.

He has a telling comment to make about deacidification: "A great Riesling with a rather high level of acidity is no catastrophe on the palate; it just needs time. But if we ever needed to deacidify, we'd have done it before the grapes ferment, via reduced yields, intensive soil and leaf work, air-flow management, sun-exposure management, and finally a selective harvest where we only pick ripe fruit. I can get aromas from the skins in the press-house, and also reduce acids by must-oxidation, which also eliminates undesirable tannins and phenols."

Or, one might add, you can take it easy and just dump in some chemicals.

Finally, as I run through the basics of his vineyard

and cellar work, I need you to understand the extent to which this is emblematic of the new thinking in quality-minded German vintners, a thinking which has undergone a 180-degree turn in the last twenty years. These basics are:

- Exclusively organic fertilizing
- Green-harvest to reduce yields
- Hand-harvesting only
- Must-clarification by gravity (no centrifuges or filters)
- Ambient wild-yeast fermentations (There are many shades of opinion on this question.)
- Long lees-contact (4 months, followed by another 6 weeks on the fine-lees)
- No dosage (I happen to disagree with this but applaud the purism which prompts it)

He had a practicum at Heymann-Löwenstein, a celebrated estate in Winningen who was the first to break free of the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. I gather he's worked at Van Volxem too. His wines are at least as good as those of his mentors. Maybe even better. And Adam has arrived on the scene: Gault-Millau anoints him an *Aufsteiger* (literally "one who's on the way up") saying "Such fine Riesling expression, with minerality bound to clarity, elegance and depth is not so often found on the Mosel." And a private newsletter published by a Mr. Werner Elflein had this to say about Adam's '06s: "It speaks for the know-how of Andreas Adam ("My Rieslings are only allowed air and sulfur.") that even in the difficult botrytis-vintage of 2006 he used



no carbon or other fining materials."

Friend, if you've tasted these wines, you'll know why I care so much.

With the first taste of the first wine I knew it; here was someone to be reckoned with. There was simply more going on here, more weight, more expression, more seriousness, more drive. How was this estate under the radar?

As we tasted through his range (7 wines) it was unequivocally clear to me: *This is a star in the making*. I decided to list the wines before I knew their prices!

**adam at a glance:**

Tiny, still part-time grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste *deep* and leesy, and they never seem sweet and almost never seem *dry*, even when they are in fact either sweet or dry. Flavors are both thick and opalescent, and one is aware of a sense of stature: this is immediate. It's self-evident these are wines of profound terroir; it's their *raison d'être*. And for me it's a great pleasure to *finally* offer you Dhroners which embody the greatness of that land.

I have a powerful connection here, because the first wine I ever drank which fascinated me was a 1971 Dhronhofberger Kabinett. Till then I'd been drinking fruity wines which were more or less sweet or polished or balanced, but it was supermarket cheapies. The Dhroner was the first wine with a haunting flavor, something more than grapey, something that didn't pander, something that just *was*. So I always looked for Dhroners, and for awhile I found them from the Bischöflichen Weingüter, vintages from the '60s and '70s. Then quality slipped, and there weren't any other sources. Dhron itself is sleepy and the land is steep and no one seemed to come along - till now.

- GAD-022 **2007 A.J. Adam Riesling Kabinett** **++**  
 It is in fact Hofberg, and I'd really wanted this on the core-list, but there are just 80 cases available. It's one of the two great Mosel Kabs in the offering (Selbach's is the other) and you *really* don't want to miss it; 80% done in *Fuder*, and it's astonishingly good Kabinett, or "Kabinett" or whatever it actually is; but what density and precision; a dancer who only *seems* to defy gravity from your seat: up close you see he's all muscle and coiled power; a pure Mosel archetype, one of those this-is-why-we-love-it wines. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-22 years)
- GAD-023 **2007 Hofberg (Grand Cru)** **+**  
 Though Adam's not a member of the VDP (yet!) he's taken his cue from the Grosses Gewächs concept and is bottling this dry Riesling with only its site-name on the front label. 50-year-old vines, and entirely done in *Fuder*, this has sensational authority, marvelous structure; it's an MRI of terroir, full of physio-sweetness; complex herbal mineral detailing; fennel-leaf and Granny apple skin; this is what such wines should be, focused terroir, articulation, elegance and depth. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years; again 12-18 years)
- GAD-024 **2007 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 Smoky and with sweet lees; not all that far from Dönnhoff's Brücke in fact; incense and almost mesquite-y smokiness but also that cox orange apple fruit and a delicate melody of deep green—balsam and wintergreen and a rich internal floweriness, a triple-fugue of interplay that threads off beyond the horizon. Only 55 cases to be had of this masterpiece. SOS: 2 (10-27 years)
- GAD-025H **2007 Dhron Hofberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml**  
 Dense, esoteric, salty-caramelly, with great spine and focus; impressively adamant and firm; the wine will generate the *wow* response and I'm sure I'll feel foolish for withholding the plus, but I'm getting less and less able to assess embryonic dessert-wines with much detail. But you shouldn't be restrained because of my little failing. SOS: 4 (20-50 years)

# reuscher-haart

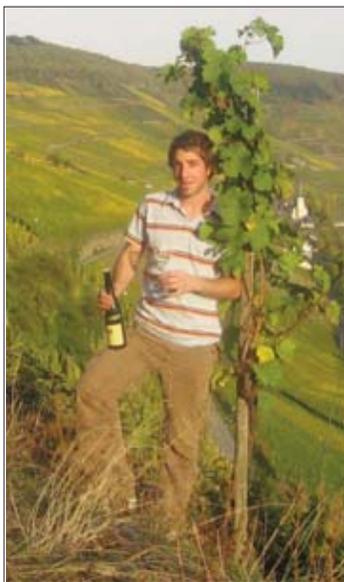
## mosel • piesport

At the end of three weeks of tasting the '07s, it turned out these were the least evolved of them all. That's striking in light of Piesport's (often-deserved) reputation for commercialism; the Moselans describe the citizens of this village as "rich kids" because everyone wants their wine and will pony up accordingly. And here's an estate giving their wines all the time they need, not caring to make wines that will flatter the palate five months after the vintage. This I think is known as integrity.

Something seems to be up at Reuscher Haart. Maybe it's the influence of Bernd and Mario Schwang, Dad Hugo's two sons (who look like members of Limp Bizkit) or maybe it's just one of those things. In any case, the past few vintages reminded me of the majestic 1990s and brilliant

1993s. Even the 2003s, about which I was dubious at first, have firmed up wonderfully with bottling, and I now feel my first impressions were misleading. Then along came the stunning 2004, and this estate is really showing me something yet they haven't abandoned their fundamental style, Mosel wine in the form of a heavy suede jacket; if anything they've renewed it in even stronger form.

These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; cupulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually



Mario Schwang

you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these wines aren't really made for our frantic world. SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more *attentive* mode of living?

Not oui-oui-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to *notice* stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

I have a stormy relationship with Piesporters. When I first encountered Reuscher-Haart's wines, I thought I had found my Piesport pie-in-the-sky. In their acid-

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr, Falkenberg, and Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Müller-Thurgau, 2% Regent**

drenched, thick, leesy style I found for the first time stunningly detailed and authoritative wines from these maddening slopes **that didn't need to be archly modern in order to succeed.**

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."

Last year the talk was all about organic. In essence, said Schwang, the estate is nearly all the way there, so why not take that small final step? What did we think? I said we applauded organic viticulture as a matter of

principle, but we could offer no commercial incentive. “I hope you’ll do it,” I said, “because it’s *worth doing*. But that doesn’t mean I’ll think less of you or your wines if you don’t.”

In fact the Mosel is among the most difficult regions to work strictly organically, yet the so-called *lutte raisonnée* of France, known as “integrated” agriculture in Germany, has taken a firm hold. In essence this stops

short of certifiably organic but encourages organic as a preference as much and as often as possible.

I had a moment during the conversation wherein I realized, Hugo Schwang isn’t the most voluble heart-on-his-sleeve producer in my portfolio, but I have probably underestimated how thoughtful and passionate he really is. Mario’s settling in seems to have turbo-charged the energy here, and this looks like an estate on the move.

### reuscher-haart at a glance:

Leesy, old-fashioned Piesporters that need time. Great resonance and depth in the best examples.

### how the wines taste:

At their best one can see why they’re held in such renown. Schwang’s wines can have impressive, almost majestic corpulence without being fat, plus a positive depth and stuffing from the lees. When that happens the Piesport fruit shows its *raison d’être*; an almost lurid court bouillon of bewitching fragrances and flavors; patchouli, passion fruit, bergamot, mango. And all in a voodoo voluptuousness that’s the wine equivalent of an erotic trance. We should have to get our PARENTS’ permission before drinking them. My parents would have refused!

GRH-054L **2007 Piesporter Treppchen Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

GRH-053L **2007 Piesporter Falkenberg Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

The question is whether we need both wines, and the even larger question is whether *they* do. Treppchen is on the “wrong” side of the river, Falkenberg is on the cooler slopes above the Goldtröpfchen, and they are different but how important is that difference? In 2007 the Treppchen was the more charming and gushy-flowery of the two, though both were quite good. It was in fact chaptalized (I’m surprised any modern German grower remembers *how*), from 87° to 92° Oechsle, i.e., the base-juice was “legally” ripe enough for Auslese. In any case, I’m recommending we/they consider consolidating these into one Reuscher-Haart Riesling Liter, and the question is being duly pondered.

SOS: 2 (now-6 years)

GRH-055 **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Fuder #7; this is about the weight (and type) of one of the great ‘90 Späts, dense and plump and plummy, with outsized salty tang; hardly a “light” Kabinett but these guys don’t *do* light wine!

SOS: 2 (8-22 years)

GRH-056 **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

Fuder #15; it seems virtually dry even with 60 g.l. RS; a glorious fragrance of slate and apple that’s more Erd-Trep than Pies-Gold—no voodoo here—and with a firm, carbonized lash of acidity (this from a pre-filtered cask samp; the acids might well be tamed later); it’s a wine with a bone-bruising handshake but if you like a firm dryish wine with eye-popping aromatics, this muscular guy is your very own Mosel stud.

SOS: 1 (9-24 years)

GRH-057 **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

**(+)**

Fuder #12; this is more ladylike, albeit a formidable lady; it has loads of the specific taste of golden Riesling grapes with a powerful balsam-wintergreen component alongside the roasted corn and cox orange apple; it’s very firm and bee-pollenly, with a long *drenched* finish.

SOS: 2 (10-27 years)

I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he did. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2 hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fer-

- **Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg, Köwericher Laurentiuslay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent**



The Hoffmanns

mentations but not all. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. The cellar's all stainless steel now.



**hoffmann-simon at a glance:**

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart.

**how the wines taste:**

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give—which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

GHS-042 **2007 Hoffman-Simon Riesling**

I made up a word, calling this wine "charmingle" in my notebook; I have no idea why or what it means, but if any wine could possibly *be* "charmingle," it's this one. A clean knock-it-back Riesling at a sensible price.

SOS: 2 (now-5 years)

GHS-041 **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

It has the structure of the '07s with the maracuja and bergamot of the site; a nice yin-yang of stone and wisteria and quetsch (purple plums); good length for an entirely attractive and characteristic Mosel wine.

SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GHS-043 **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

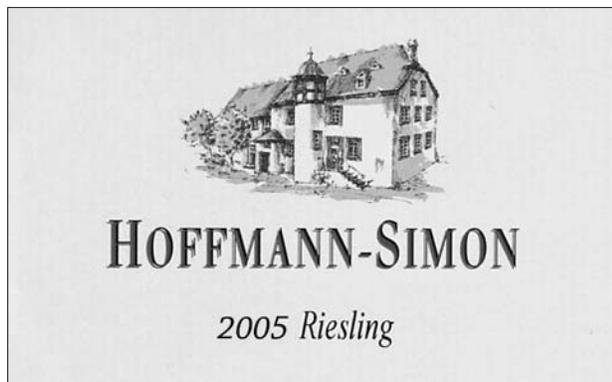
This is quite opulent, even rococo, and a definitely *sweet* Spätlese, but there's good minerality and structure below, leading into a spicy finish.

SOS: 3 (7-18 years)

GHS-044H **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

O.K., I confess I have a drooling weak-spot for these sweet wines in barrique, but this one is so easy to drink, and the (far from blatant) wood tones soften the sometimes-rough edges of a young BA; milk-chocolatey, papaya, plantain; it tastes like Jurançon would with half its usual alcohol. The price is astonishing!

SOS: 4 (15-35 years)



# weingut ansgar clüsserath

## mosel • trittenheim

Eva Clüsserath is featured (with a totally happenin' pic) in a lovely new book called RIESLING, co-written by the charming Christine Fischer, who's kinda like the German Andrea Immer except she's still a floor-working somm. Eva has a wonderful quote: "Riesling is really just fun, because it can be so heart-refreshingly uncomplicatedly complicated!"

Not too many people know how to say that, and I myself struggle with it. Wine is complicated – agricultural wine, at any rate – and if you wrestle against it, it will pin you. Yet the instant you relax, the very second you say *OK, it's complicated, it will always be complicated, and I'm going to quit trying to **master** it and just let complicated-ness be FUN*, well guess what? Wine becomes your best friend.

Size vineyard and cellar work are unremarkable in the context of conscientious Moselans. The cellar is virtually all wood fuders. "We work with little influence from technology," says Eva. She ferments with natural yeasts, filters only once, leaves the wines on the lees till March or April. No one will ever improve on these old ways.

What is significant, I think, is Eva's palate. She's more cosmopolitan than her parents were, I'm sure, and her marriage to Phillip Wittmann gives her a drinking-sweetie in another region plus a comrade with whom to explore the wine-world. They love Burgundy. But Eva herself wants "our wines to be minerally and individual, even more; unmistakable." Good for her! You can always trust a Riesling palate that *starts with mineral*. That's what Riesling is.

The estate has a wonderful future. And I love working with girl-vintners, and with the Daddies who flew in the face of all that old-world silliness and *nurtured* their daughters to carry on the estate.



Eva Clüsserath

One year I had a telling conversation with Eva. We're not selling what deserves to be sold from here, and part of the reason why is that ol' Mosel-stink problem. If you didn't read my intro to this catalog, this is the smell of H<sub>2</sub>S resulting from the lees; it vanishes with something between seconds and 2-3 minutes of swirling, and it will vanish in bottle in a couple years. It's not a "flaw;" it's a marketing nuisance. And it tends to be exaggerated in big-tasting situations, where you have 20 Kabinetts lined up on a table and suddenly one of them is

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling; 10% other**

stinky, and it's *oh-kayy*: NEXT! Even if you know such tastings almost demand that you form the most superficial impressions, you still can't help it.

I said as much to Eva, and she agreed. She's been to the tastings and she's no one's fool. But, she says, it's crucial for her to make what she feels are honest wines; she does not wish to "form" them for commercial considerations, and so she'll continue on her grounded old-fashioned way and what we sell, we sell. Curiously, the "problem" appears solve-able by using cultured yeasts to ferment, but for a certain mentality this is tantamount to diluting terroir. However awkward this may be for me, I must say I applaud anyone who's striving for *truth* in her wines, and I am proud to show you these inconvenient little stinkers! Maybe we'll put a stack of pennies next to Eva's bottles . . .

The estate is on-the-move; they've just obtained parcels in Piesporter Goldtröpfchen (from Adam, I wonder?) and Dhron Hofberger, partly for curiosity's sake and partly to have alternates from which to make wine while the Apotheke is in flurbereinigung. Yet I think Eva would have bought the vineyards regardless; it's like her. A young, curious vintner doesn't want to be associated exclusively with one site.

**clüsserath at a glance:**

Mid-sized Mosel estate making old-school slatey-leesy classics and selling them at fair prices. Under the careful eye of a smart young woman, these have nowhere to go but up.

**how the wines taste:**

A charming amalgam of Trittenheim's charmingly pliant fruit (less stiff than say Graacher Domprobst) with striking minerality.

GAC-023 **2007 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett**

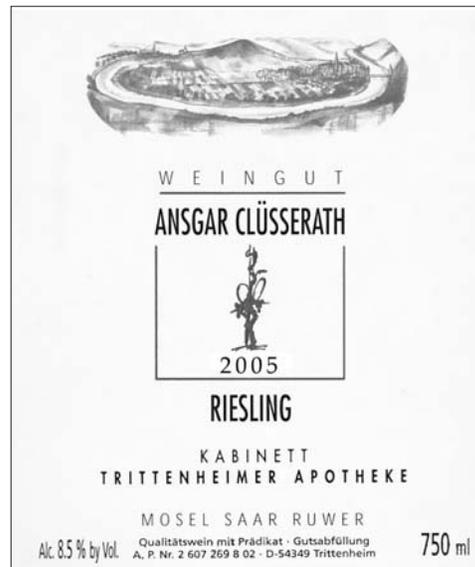
Extreme mineral, as if you're licking the slate; sweetness is on the moderate side, which makes the wine rather stark and tangy (instead of more tightly knit and seamless), but for lovers of the craggy side of Riesling, this is finely complex in its angular way. I retasted it after an 2006 Auslese and the dark, ore-like notes were more pronounced.  
SOS: 2 ( 5-16 years)

GAC-024 **2007 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese**

I preferred this to a (very good!) Pies-Gold, but the slate diction is wonderful here, and I prefer the limey fruit of this to the plummy fruit of the other, and the explicit and precise Stayman or Brandywine apple is vivid and bracing; a sleek and crisply rich Spätlese.  
SOS: 2 (8-23 years)

GAC-025H **2007 Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** +

Why aren't more Auslesen like this? It intensifies every aspect of the site, especially minerality; it loses neither precision nor focus; it *tastes like itself*, it's still brilliant and delineated, and the botrytis comes as a welcome nuance instead of the annoying lead guitarist who keeps turning up his amp. This is ultra-elegant and useful wine.  
SOS: 3 (10-30 years)



# A Primer on Terroir

Does this self-evident truth really need to be defended any more?

It seems not. I glean a willingness to agree the phenomenon known as terroir actually exists. Where opinions appear to diverge are on two related questions: 1) the definition of terroir, and 2) the significance of terroir beyond its existence as a simple fact.

First, a definition. "Terroir," as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, beginning with soil, and then beginning with soil's components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn't come first. What the soil *consists* of comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they'd wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of terroir is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I'm calling "proof?" It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors *for which no other explanation is possible*.

Even those willing to consider the truth of terroir might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said "I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of caillou and cram it in my mouth, but I can't taste that flavor in the wine." But this is not what I argue. I don't know of any place where you can literally "taste the soil" (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can taste what the soil *does*.

I've been challenged that soil's expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine's DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine's identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was sometimes drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it's safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

Nor do I wish to suggest that all of wine's fla-

vors derive from soil components. There are of course macro-factors; an obvious example is the *garigue* flavor imparted to certain wines from grapes grown near actual garrigue. Yet one hears many gropings for *other* explanations for how wines taste, and many of them are futile. There's a site called Kauber Roßstein in the Mittelrhein, which sits just above a railway tunnel. For years the smoky flavors of the wines were presumed to derive from actual smoke, as the trains blew their whistles before entering the tunnel. Then the lines were electrified – and the smoky flavor remained.

I've also heard it said the notion of terroir has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. "A great winemaker will make better wine from "ordinary" soil than a lazy winemaker makes from "great" soil." Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that terroir was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn't. For when Dönnhoff *obtained* the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggle of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that terroir is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the *first* among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I'm alert, some days I'm dozy, sometimes I'm tender and sometimes I'm gruff, but I am always. . . fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the January 2000 issue of Science News, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

"German researchers recently studied 165 wines

from six grape-growing regions. The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy (my emphasis) testing for just three elements – barium, silicon and vanadium – and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested."

A little further down the page: "From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different terroir, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to terroir."

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. "The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage," the argument goes. "They have something we don't have and can never get," it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motivation to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of terroir is afraid he doesn't have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound terroir do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Eventually science may or may not create an experimental matrix within which this hypothesis can be "proven." But I'm not certain it matters. As long as science cannot prove an *alternate* explanation, I am willing to trust empirical logic. It *might as well* be true. It appears to be demonstrated time and time again.

We are all people of varying temperaments, which dictate *how* we approach wine. I am clear about my own approach. There are sensibilities I'd call "engineering," people who are most fascinated by the how of things. These people love the *making* of wine, and tend to believe that great wine is possible from just about anywhere, provided there's a human with sufficient skill to *make* it. This is a clear, concrete sensibility, and I share some of it myself.

There are also hedonistic sensibilities, who tend to delight in their own delight, and who crave that which is *sensually* delightful. For someone like me, this isn't so much a bad place to be as a bad place to *stop*. The sensual is just one of many possible delights. Often the engineer and the sensualist overlap. And they tend to struggle against what they'd call the "mystic" for the same reasons we all strug-

gle: they fear we're a threat to the existence of the wines they cherish.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of terroir, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. "If a crappy grower can waste a great terroir," they say, "then what good is it to me?"

No good at all, if you're looking to terroir as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won't do that. Not because it doesn't like you, or because it's just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn't understand our need to avoid disappointment. This is the crux of my argument for the *so-what?* of terroir. I will ground it as simply as I can, in one single person. Let it be Willi Schaefer, though it could as easily be Hans-Leo Christoffel, Carl Loewen, any of hundreds of German (or Austrian) Riesling growers. When Schaefer goes about his work, he does so with the *certainty* that Domprobst will taste one way and Himmelreich another. He doesn't think about it abstractly, but if you asked him he'd say he *liked* it, liked that the earth expresses itself in *various* ways. He is also aware of his place in a continuum of generations who work the land that existed before and after each of them, and which always gave the same flavors in the same way. He takes his place within nature, caring for his land; he would never dream he had *dominion* over nature. Flavors of terroir come into his wine because he gets out of the way and *lets* them; why would he do otherwise? The land was there before him. When he tastes his wines he is fascinated with these flavors, and because of him we also can be fascinated. Indeed we are linked to him, to his fascination. Think about it: he is linked to his land, we are linked to him; we are, therefore, *also* linked to his land. None of this is "mystical!" Wines of terroir are wines which ground us in a nexus of meaning. Humility before nature is meaningful. Connection to our fellow folks is meaningful. Connection to places *we don't know* is meaningful, as it stimulates dreams and longing.

The "so-what" of terroir is just this; it creates a community of vintners and those who drink their wines, walking on this earth and through this life with appreciation and caring. It's the difference between *Let me show you how groovy I am or let me entertain you*, and *let me bring you here and show you this wonderful land, this wonderful place*.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don't buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn't care. It just invites. And the soil remains.

Here at These selections we like to say *We ain't no spinning cone zone!* Hey, come to our office and you'll hear us say it all the time, at the water cooler, in the company kitchen, in the parking lot. We hate spinning cones and everything they imply. Instead we like growers like Carl Loewen who say lovely true things like "A good wine is always made first in the mind." Here are some other things he says.

"In the modern world of winemakers there are hitherto unimagined possibilities to form the tastes of wines. The grape-breeders send us ever-new varieties, in my region there are people using barriques, using the most current techniques to concentrate natural musts; special cultured yeasts aim to form the characters of wines, and special enzymes to form bouquets.

Is this the brave new wine-world?

I have a different philosophy. Wine is a product of nature, the badge of its origin. And anyone who thinks this way views terroir as the defining important point."

Pretty words, even good words, but only words—until you taste.

And dear friend and reader, since the 2001 vintage Loewen is the unheralded superstar in this assortment. Our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition.



Leiwen is just upstream from Trittenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus along this stretch of the Mosel. A lot of the renown a site may or may not possess is dependent on a flagship estate. To cite a somewhat absurd example, if J.J. Prüm

- **Vineyard area: 8.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay**
- **Soil types: Devonian & light weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau**

happened to have been a resident of Pölich and not of Wehlen then the Pölicher Held would enjoy the renown of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. There are great vineyards we don't know because there hasn't been a great vintner to do them full justice.

At least till now. Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands "among the best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the *flurbereinigung* was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls." Another great site, he says, is the *Thörnicher Ritsch*. Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prowl for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer's wisdom; Ritsch was a great site. Well we didn't find its champion then, but we know him now. Finally there's the awkwardly-named Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay, from which Loewen makes a "tribute to the old proprietor of this vineyard, the cloister of St Maximin in Trier." Mercifully he calls this wine simply *Maximiner*, describing an "extreme terroir," a 65% mountain falling directly into the river, hard un-weathered blue slate, with an open west flank that catches every moment of afternoon

and evening sun. Its position right up against the river moderates nighttime temperatures and the soil retains water so that “even in a Summer like 2003 we had enough moisture for the grapes.”

Natural fertilizing, reduced yields, slow fermentations, minimal handling— they only rack the wines once, for instance, It’s an all-cask cellar. “I’m dubious about wines made in steel,” says Loewen. “The summer after the vintage they’re highly presentable, but I doubt they have the stature to age well.”

Loewen’s wines also have a quality of *companionability* which can’t be isolated or quantified but which determines how friendly you feel toward them. Some wines seem to want to take you to a world where *all there is is wine*. Others, no less absorbing or delightful, seem content to meet you in *your* world. Whenever I drink or taste Loewen’s wines I always want to curl up with a book, ideally by an open window near a singing thrush.

This is probably because Loewen’s tasting room is just inside his garden, and there’s always an *amsel* trilling away in the background. Nature does enjoy showcasing her metaphors! I often delight in the juxtaposition of the wine in my glass with the whistling and warbling outside. Here’s this little blackbird singing its little lungs out

on some nearby branch, all that energy and melody coming from such a tiny delicate body, and in the glass there’s a wine with 8% alcohol, all that energy and melody coming from such a tiny delicate body. I wonder what the metaphor would be if you were tasting, hmmm, in Australia? A cape-buffalo perhaps, bellowing outside in the dust. Or maybe it’s not a mammal at all; maybe it’s an 18-wheeler gunning its engines.

Loewen has extended his reach into an even wider range of terroirs, but this will remain a teaser until you read the next few pages. I’m so coquettish! But the news is deliciously good and I don’t want to just blurt it out.

2007 was surprising here. Carl claims to have had about 20% botrytis pretty much across the board (very rare in this vintage), which is why I was unable to repeat some of the dry wines I’d liked so much in ‘06 and ‘05. I was also aware of having a sad-palate day, alas! Who knows why these happen? I’m extremely fastidious about my diet when on a tasting tour, as I’ve learned from bitter experience what havoc one mouthful of raw alium can wreak on every wine that follows it for hours later. You’ll see in my notes how I grappled with the realization that my palate was probably distorting the wines.

#### loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! “Cool” chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

#### how the wines taste:

All that’s stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a “northern” coolness without being explicitly slaty. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: “I don’t like ‘old-wine’ flavor and I definitely don’t like this petrol taste,” he says.

#### GCL-052 **2007 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE**, because it offers an explosively generous and flavorful Mosel Kabinett experience at a fabulous price. Carl says: “Here one can find blue and gray slates but also soils where the gravel subsoil is covered with a layer of weathered slate brought down from the surrounding hills by erosion. The Kabinett is made from the slate soils at the foot of the slope.”

So, it’s slate but not steep slate, which gives these wines an extra fullness and supple texture. This 2007 is lovely, all purple, lilac and wisteria; he says there’s “lots” of botrytis, and it combines the fruit of the first three and *last* three harvest days; it’s salty and less plump than 2006 or ‘05, more vertical and sinewy, with pointed length. SOS: 2 (6-17 years)

**GCL-053 2007 Detzemer Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**

I have to hedge a little; I'm having a day I'm hypersensitive to bitterness (I retasted the perfect 2006 just to be sure), so this note is tentative; the nose is extra-fine—it's from a site called "Würzgarten," and recalls Christoffel! Hyacinth, grape-hyacinth; it has the slinky filigree structure of '07 and the juiciness dispersed into salty mineral channels; I love the suavity and lacy detail, and no one else at the table found any bitterness—it must have been me.

SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 12-17 years)

**GCL-054 2007 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese** **+**

Though picked "on the warmest day in the harvest," the wine is cheekbone, chiseled, pleasingly pointed and piquant; cox orange and mirabelle, like ginger and cardamom crusted atop a piece of Turbot in a beurre blanc with slices of lightly sautéed apples. Or, an in-and-out burger. One of those.

SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

**GCL-055 2007 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese** **++**

From the severe gray terraces of this great vineyard, a stunning and useful Auslese; an exegesis of every malic fruit; flavors written from some ancient text detailing medicinal herbs, all in a brilliant neon buzz of minty intensity; an arrestingly complicated, almost licorice-y Mosel wine that's none too sweet for "the table."

SOS: 2 (10-27 years)

**GCL-056H 2007 Leiwener Klostersgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**

Picked December 20th, and "therefore not especially high in acidity," Carl says; also from the steepest part of the site; perfect Eiswein fruit, an essence of celestial apple and mirabelle that won't rattle your teeth, or break the bank; an approachable version of *The Real Thing*.

SOS: 4 (12-30 years)



# carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

A bit of a valedictory feel to this year's visit. As you may know, Bruno Schmitt is getting on in years (though I devoutly hope to be as robust and ruddy as he when I'm in my seventies) and his son, a professional musician, has his own bliss to follow. Thus succession became an issue, and the problem has been solved in the most lovely of ways. The news, when it came, provoked ear-to-ear grins among us all: the estate is being leased to our *hero*, **Carl Loewen**, who will run the show while keeping the Schmitt-Wagner domain intact. The wines will be vinified separately, and the two vintners will work side by side as long as Schmitt is able.

Thus as we sat at the long table in Schmitt's parlor—somehow “tasting room” is the wrong way to describe it—we knew it was likely the final time. In future years we'll taste in Leiwien. I am

so happy, but what triste . . . the memories associated with this place are as stirring as any I've had with wine. The half-bottles come out when we're through with the young wines. I have almost lost count of the number of old wines this remarkable man has shared with my friends and me. But he hasn't! I think he remembers each and every one.

I think I'll share what we drank one year, not to rub your nose in it (well maybe a little) (O.K. a lot) but rather as a *tribute* to his generosity and avid spirit.

We started with a 1963 *Kabinett*, very much alive and leafy. I thought it was a '62, and was abashed. One of my traveling companions had surely never dreamed of a 40-year-old “Kabinett” with barely 8% alcohol even making it, let alone drinking like a dream. Next came an



Bruno Schmitt

elegant, fine '62 *Spätlese*, slaty and solid. A gorgeous wine followed: '69 *Spätlese*, ethereal, long, evocative and tender. The next wine was obviously younger, a '92 *Auslese*, just emerging from its adolescence; then a 1997 *Auslese*, not my type (too much botrytis); then an improbable and obscure wine; I thought maybe a 1966 but as it grew in the glass it seemed too stern and “important” for '66. “Could be a 1971 *Spätlese*,” I wrote. Bulls-eye! Then a rather old-tasting '71 *Auslese*; “We should have used more sulfur,” said Bruno. The next wine was easy; nothing tastes like this magic-Mosel vintage: '75 *Spätlese*. Corrie Malas was happy; it's her birth-year. Next up came a 1971 *BA*, 145° Oechsle, superb, but I still loved

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Blue Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

that '69 best. Then the *coup de gras*, a '71 *TBA*, about which I wrote “It's an adult but it hasn't been wounded yet; it's still perfectly confident the world is splendidly beautiful and safe. It needs fifteen more years to find its way to kindness and tenderness; right now it's all happy malt and orange.” This at 32 years old! So remember when I write “25-75 years” for a drinking envelope for such wines, this is based on many such experiences.

And all this took place over maybe 45 minutes! Nor was it in any way worshipful; quite the contrary. You get the sense this is how Bruno Schmitt likes to PARTY DOWN. I'll bet he looks forward to the chance to ram-page through a bunch of old vintages. Happy to oblige, squire. Though forgive me if I get a little *emotional*, you know. I know these wines literally live in your basement and all, but for a guy like me this is a sanctum of beauty.

I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this “drink now to four years” crap by wine writers who've never set foot in a German winery. I also love the ceremony with which the new wines are presented. Wine is significant not only as a provider of livelihood, but also as a filament connecting us to a human continuity.

It's interesting to note that the Herrenberg was classified category “A” — the *best* category — during the world's first official vineyard classification, undertaken by the Prussian land office during the early nineteenth century for the purpose of — you guessed it — *tax*

*assessment!* The original document, published by Stuart Pigott as a vineyard map, is remarkable in its fidelity to current notions of the best vineyards.

It's even more touching to consider the almost ridiculous quality of Schmitt's 2007s, as perfect a vintage as I can recall here. One wine after another, streamlined, balanced, clear and jammed with character. They're all *spontis* (fermented with their ambient yeasts) but with none of the sometimes-cheesy sponti-tone; he says he

adds vitamin B1 to invigorate the yeast in a very cold and constant fermentation. "We had 200 hours of sunshine in September-October," he says; "180 would have been enough for a good vintage."

Highlights among the old wines this year were a gorgeously malty and granular 1964 Auslese, and a melt-ingly fine 1969 Spätlese that "loves you like your mother."

#### **schmitt-wagner at a glance:**

This was a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio, but the 2001s changed that. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 111-year-old ungrafted vines—some SIX THOUSAND OF THEM. Makes among the two or three best Kabinetts along the Mosel.

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

Of course this varies a little from parcel to parcel, but as a rule the wines show remarkably expressive lime and licorice, almost sassafrass. Sounds a little like Ürziger Würzgarten, right? Both have red clay and sandstone mixed with the slate. Schmitt's is an old style, cask-aged and leesy. The wines *seem* quite open and scrutable yet they age endlessly. One unusual feature here is the rather narrow span between Kabinett and Auslese in recent vintages, but I think this has less to do with undernourished Auslese than with overnourished Kabinetts; after all, a Kabinett from 111-year old ungrafted vines is gonna have some *taste*, one might suppose!

- GSW-062 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb** +  
This is another *perfect* wine, ideally balanced, juicy yet clear, fruity yet dry, creamy yet detailed, tender yet firm; an absurdly useful food-wine—I almost don't want to accept an order from a sommelier that doesn't include this—and a riot of hyacinth and sassafrass.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years; again 15-35 years)
- GSW-060 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
Higher-toned and sleeker than the above, more overtly salty, lacier and even more precise; an articulate wine of elegant diction, girlish, a gamine of piquancy and mischief; sparminty and flinty—could almost be a Bernkasteler; in all another archetypal Mosel of the old school, the fine handsome old school; blessings on it. May it never die.  
SOS: 2 (6-22 years)
- GSW-061 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Because how can anything calling itself a "core-list" fail to include this monument of character and distinctiveness? This 2007 has darker, more herbal aromas than the Kabinett; the palate shows sensational complexity and a monumental authority, as if they knew it was the swansong vintage; a positive botrytis like a well-fitting garment; a *demi-glace* with cherry and smokiness; the botrytis gives just a slight admonition to the finish; he's not entirely explicable, this guy, but *what* an impression he makes.  
SOS: 2 (9-28 years)
- GSW-063 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese** ++  
The best young wine I've ever tasted from this estate. It's the moderate, gentle, light style of Auslese he likes to make, not the award-grabbers but the make-yourself-useful kind; this is all lime and balsam and so expressively herbal it's as though you were chewing the very leaf; a haunting tertiary note of Brandywines and pure slate that echoes and gleams. Finally, *WHAT* a price and what a practical wine for food.  
SOS: 2 (12-35 years)

# karlsmühle-geiben

ruwer • mertesdorf

It was a suddenly warm day one year when we arrived, and it would have been cruel to sit indoors. So we tasted al fresco, the way young Ruwer Riesling *should* be tasted, it so embodies the spirit of Springtime.

Bugs were buzzing and green was greening and everything alive was squirming with

energy and even Peter Geiben's news that snow was forecasted for the following week couldn't dampen our spirits. After an hour or so we all heard a sound from the sky, looked up, but didn't see anything. A moment later Peter pointed skyward and said There it is. It was two large flocks of migrating cranes, several thousand feet aloft and very small, on their way north to their summer home in Russia. The two flocks were trying to join, milling and billowing as if to form letters in the sky, crying to one another to establish a flying formation, their cries echoing through the air as if they were lonely or afraid. But they only told each other follow me, follow me. I sense a wind. . . .

Sigrid Selbach was with us, and I reminded her of the last time we'd been to Geiben and it was warm enough to taste outside. We set us a table in the quiet parking lot, and the sun was in my eyes, and when the first wine was poured I turned my head to the left and spat onto what I *thought* was the ground but which was in fact the dog's head. Poor old Sam. Lying there enjoying the sun just like us when SPLAT; some plug of viciously high-acid young Riesling lands on his innocent head. This year I spat into a little bucket. I ain't into vandalizing no dawgs.

When I first started visiting the Ruwer (well before you were born) it was a secretive little valley you hardly knew how to find; you turned off from a markedly bland village-suburb of Trier and suddenly everything was



Peter Geiben

green, pastures, vineyards, and if you were attentive you might catch a glimpse of the tiny Ruwer stream hissing and gurgling its way to the Mosel. These days the turnoff is still there but the valley is compromised; it's become quite the bedroom-community for commuters to Trier. I guess they gotta live somewhere, but they went and spoiled my bucolic fun.

You can almost forget they're close by when you sit by the little stream at Geiben's hotel-restaurant, eating a trout so fresh it's almost quivering, drinking the most exquisite Rieslings you could ever have imagined.

These wines seem to invite the sap to rise. See if you can taste them and not hear the beats of countless tiny

- Vineyard area: 14.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,400 cases
- Top sites: Kaseler Nies'chen, Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen
- Soil types: Clay and slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 2% each of Weissburgunder, Spätburgunder, Dornfelder, Müller-Thurgau and Elbling

hearts, or the squirmings of the seeds.

The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they're more expensive than Mittelmosel wines. We Yanks don't have time to distinguish between Mosel & Saar & Ruwer because we're too busy to take German wine as seriously as other wine. Put it this way: can you imagine us refusing to pay more for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune—"Hey it's all Burgundy, man." Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don't mind me: I've got rants in my pants.

Peter Geiben is a gentleman of rather brusque temperament, yet he's fiercely dedicated to every detail involved in making great wine. I both respect and like him, but my response to his wines is uncolored by any warm 'n fuzzies. Peter doesn't have a poetic temperament. He'd brush away any wine faery who happened to alight on his shoulder. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He'd rather talk about the trellising method he's developed, and he'd *far* rather talk about hunting. A friend convinced him to stop de-acidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was pleased with the results. He's done away with wood in the cellar and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the Felslay, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the Mäuerchen on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great Kaseler Nies'chen, in which Geiben now has two fine parcels.

His wines from the Lorenzhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and

the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the **Nies'chen** is fine-stoned; i.e., lots of crumbled slate and thus superior drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and **Kehrnagel** is more coarse-stoned, thus less porous, and the wines are less elegant. Peter took us for a walk through the vineyards. He also gave us various *spring-waters* to taste; the region is gifted with subterranean streams. We tasted from springs beneath the Nies'chen, Kehrnagel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different.

The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said Sigrid Selbach. They have that and more; they are the *acme of the genre*. If you love Mosel wines - and based on my sales it appears you do—

this is as fine as they can be.

A FINAL NOTE: There's a spiffy new label, which gives Peter's name pride of place over "Karlsmühle." I always prefer the name of a family to that of a place, but we want to introduce the new label with as little clerical disruption as possible!

2007 is a lovely vintage here, and you'll love it—eventually. At the moment 2006 is much more flattering, but no one wants it. This kind of thing used to baffle me, but I suppose it doesn't any more. Now it just annoys me. With very few exceptions we are buying and selling a commodity called "the new vintage" as opposed to offering customers the very best wine they can buy right now. Tell you what: anyone who calls me asking to buy Karlsmühle 2006s, I will not only sell them to you but I'll also buy you a shiny red wagon. Void where prohibited.

#### karlsmühle at a glance:

Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlsmühle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

#### how the wines taste:

Ruwer wines can be the *ne plus ultra* of refinement, with their own keenly slicing flavors of cassis and sometimes cinnamon.

#### GKM-103L 2007 Riesling, 1.0 Liter

Again with the Liter! But this is sprightly and delightly, it grips the palate tightly and rocks your bones all nightly. It fermented very long and may have undergone partial malo, but it's more than fresh enough and crammed with tangy charm.  
SOS: 2 (1-6 years)

#### GKM-105 2007 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett

+

CORE-LIST WINE, for the obvious reason that it's an exquisite example of Ruwer-Riesling. This one has some of the *sponti* carob aromas of some of Loewen's wines; the palate is—as always—refined, sleek and piquant but with the juicy delineated length of '07, and the acid-driven neurosurgical finish.  
SOS: 2 (6-20 years)

#### GKM-104 2007 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett

The point here is for someone to have this wine exclusively, since it is otherwise redundant. So ask your salesperson if you can score the ex for your area today! The wine is salty and tangy with a whole bazaar of spices; juicy, long and more robust than the Nies'chen, more of a mouthful.  
SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

#### GKM-106 2007 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese

++

I like my note last year about the *pianissimo* of the finish here. One studies such a wine as if it were a jewel; you turn it over to see the gradations of light and gleam. Wines like this are the antidote to the pall of the market, the quiet room you enter to escape the *thumpa-thumpa-thumpa* of the party, because here all that matters is how it tastes. Let me repeat that slowly: how . . . it . . . tastes. This is simply great Riesling (as it's been the past several vintages), as elegant and filigree and beautiful as petals and snowflakes; pure silken texture; incomparable fruit complexity leads inexorably to an esoteric lingering finish with overtones of wintergreen and guava; this is the wonder of '07 at its best; substance, transparency, evanescence and solidity, repose but also animation. No other type of wine comes near the qualities of wines like this.  
SOS: 2 (9-25 years)

#### GKM-102 2006 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Auslese

+

How on earth did he coax out this delicacy in wine after wine? *No one* but Diel has an equivalent in 2006. Only a suave malt note is added to the Spätlese, plus concentration of course, especially of the flower nuances. Sigrid calls it a "miracle" — indeed it is.  
SOS: 3 (15-35 years)

#### GKM-108H 2007 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml

Still young and radish-y, picked at 145-150° Oechsle at the end of November (the earliest pick-date I heard for '07 Eiswein); very pure and racy, so herbal it's almost Veltliner-like; firm but not spiky; apple-butter and *fleur de sel* finish with tertiary notes of milk chocolate. A drinkable Eiswein, happily.  
SOS: 4 (15-35 years)

# von othegraven

saar • kanzem

The estate is probably known to you, as it's been in the American market since I can remember. I am very happy to report it can now take a place of high honor in this portfolio.

Every since I was a young wine-pup I knew there was something singular about Saar wines, but could never put it into words. Let me fail to do so again here.

The Mosel itself is of course a kind of fjord, a gorge. As such it is protected from wind to a large degree, and its microclimate is moderated by the proximity of the river itself, which also irradiates the vineyards with reflected sunlight on bright days. The Saar, though, is more open

country, exposed to winds, and certainly a few degrees cooler than its big sister Mosel. Vineyards are interspersed with pasture land; the countryside is wonderfully calm and beautiful, less dramatic than the Mosel, more serene. Vineyards occupy every possible south-facing slope, but it's a more hardscrabble life for a vine here, having to do without the pampered protection of the Mosel-proper. I'm sure my Mosel growers will chuckle to hear their vines called "pampered," but I'm equally sure they'd be in no hurry to trade places with their Saar colleagues.

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's more so-called *Grauwacke* here intermixed with the slate. Almost every Mosel wine has an herbal profile and a citric profile, and it is these two things that are seemingly intensified in Saar wines. They are also rather more earthy than Mosel wines. They convey an even more palpable solidity. When they show the expected apple-y fruit they prompt you to imagine the apples were smaller and more dense, or had been picked later, when the fruit-sugars were concentrated by a light frost. Indeed one could say Saar wines taste like Mosel wines from grapes that slightly froze, not deep enough for Eiswein, but just enough for a tangy little jab of concentration. They are also *shadier* than Mosel wines, with more silvery flavors. Not bad for a guy who basically has no idea what he's talking about!

Egon Müller is, obviously, the standard-bearer for the Saar. He is, if not the very "best" grower there, indisputably the first among equals. In the same class are a few excellent growers making classically fruit-driven wines, and every German wine lover cherishes them, as do I although I do not sell them. Then our friend Mr. Niewodnicianski came on the scene at Van Volxem and really shook things up, opting to make extremely dense, concentrated old-school wines mostly chewy and dry (or dry-ish) which are consistently compelling.

Somewhere between these two poles is Von Othegraven, neither as *outré* as Volxem nor as keenly fruity as Müller et al., but instead hewing to a classical

- **Vineyard area: 11 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Altenberg, Bockstein, Kupp**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**
- **Soil types: weathered slate with quartzite, iron "Grauwacke" and loam**

line, making scrupulously honest terroir-drenched Saar wines of admirable depth and form. If you like Trimbach best of all Alsace producers you'll probably like Othegraven best of all Saar producers.

The estate is 11 hectares, with 7.5 in the great Kanzemer Altenberg which looms spectacularly above the manor. It's almost comical to open the front door and have this immense mountain of vines occupy your entire field of vision. It beats the view out my front door, in any case.

The current proprietor is the charming Dr. Heidi Kegel, who left a career as a physician when her Aunt Maria von Othegraven needed a successor back in 1995. You know, one *tries* to be gender-blind, being of an elevated sensibility and all, but I do think a woman often runs things differently than a man might, in a way I find congenial.

The wines are *spontis*, done in tank since the 2005 vintage, with very long aging on the fine lees, and only racked once *during* fermentation, and not again. Musts clarify by settling. There are three great sites: WILTINGER KUPP on highly weathered gray slate with lots of crumbled earth, making compact brilliant wines with a whole basket of heirloom apples. These are what you'd call *keen* or *penetrating* wines. OCKFENER BOCKSTEIN is famous of course, blue-ish silvery slate, a real Saar archetype. Finally the KANZEMER ALTENBERG on pure Devonian slate with rusty flecks from weathered iron oxide, making the most primordially concentrated wines, almost meaty, with such depth as to be almost inscrutable when young, as if they have so much to say

they can only stutter.

I adore wines like these. They are purely themselves, and even when they are highly pleasing it's not because they *set out* to please. They're assertive but not adamantly so. They are, though, adamantly *honest*. If you look at a tree from the top down, first you see the

thready little branches and then as the eye travels down it gets thicker and thicker until you come to the big round trunk. That's how the palate registers these wines, first the nuances and then the deep-grounded solidity. And they have the innate kindness of trees. Let's get to 'em, what say.

### **von othegraven at a glance:**

archetypes.

Venerable estate on the Saar, making intense soil-imprinted wines which are true Saar-

### **how the wines taste**

They fall between the fruit-oriented style typified by Egon Müller and the more *recherché* antique style practiced by Van Volxem; on the dry side but explosive with terroir and with ever-unfolding depth. Kupp is the keenest and most piquant; Bockstein the most extrovertedly fruity, Altenberg the most profound.

#### GOG-002 **2007 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**

30 g.l. RS, but of course basically invisible; my first note (from a pre-screening tasting we did to establish our degree of interest) said "cool, complex, stony, herbal, almost steely; excellent" and at the estate there was an explosion of berries with a tangy mineral bite, probably exaggerated by very recent (3 weeks) bottling; a gingery fibrous needly old-school Saar wine with chewy slate and phenols and a long herbal-minty finish. I can't wait to taste this when it's recovered its fruit.

SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 12-18 years)

#### GOG-001 **2007 Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE** because it's a Saar classic, and a chance at a big Grand Cru at a comfortable entry-level price. Smoky nuances from the red soil, filigree with a cool minerality, hardly sweeter-seeming than the Kupp but *fülliger* (an impossibly efficient German word you need ten English words to translate; let's say tangibly-solidly mouthcoating); rocky and ore-like, as if it were 3rd cousin to Nigl; cox orange, tarragon, and this great chomp of stone; this has gravitas, detail and density.

SOS: 1 (7-24 years)

#### GOG-003 **2007 Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Spätlese**

**++(+)**

One of the GREAT WINES OF THIS OFFERING, this one had us all abuzz. It is basically just insanely beautiful; fabulous spicy fruit, playful and slatey to within an inch of its life (but not archly mineral), almost luscious but still firm; cinnamon, cherries, fiji apples; about as great as Saar Riesling can be, and only an over-careful reticence (it was my first visit, after all) stops that 3rd "+".

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-27 years)

#### GOG-004 **2007 Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese**

**+**

AP # 8; as solid as a water-balloon, with classic Altenberg smoky-earthiness, deep and soulful; you'd never call it lithe or curvaceous, but with what, 9% alcohol, it has an amazing material density and almost an allspice tang.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (9-28 years)

#### GOG-005 **2007 Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben**

**+**

AP #7; This is more baked, and almost biscuit-y with "ripe" slate, like a Prälät but without the sunburn; hay and salt, lavishly mineral but warmly so; very spicy and long.

An aristocrat who doesn't mind getting mud on his boots.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (10-30 years)

#### GOG-006 **2007 Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Auslese**

**+**

Superb fragrance, clear, rich and complex; a granular, fibrous Auslese with jabbing acidity, stony but with stomach; how the hell do you depict a quality of corpulence that isn't remotely heavy? Wonderfully salty finish to a true old-school Auslese.

SOS: 2 (12-33 years)

## Is all taste equally valid?

Sure it is! There's a feel-good, all-American democratic answer for you. One man's opinion's as good as another's and all that. It is self-evidently the right answer to the question.

It's the *question* that's bogus.

One evening at the ballgame I had the good fortune to sit next to one of the advance scouts who attend every game, gathering intel on the players. It was a slow night, and I asked if he could "think out loud" for me, tell me what he saw. And what he saw was an entirely different ballgame from the one I saw. I sat in admiration of his trained eye.

Similarly, if I take my car to the mechanic he hears different things in the engine's hum than I do. A piano tuner hears minute tonal variances to which I am effectively deaf. A massage therapist discerns muscle tensions of which I'm not consciously aware.



All these are examples of expertise we take for granted. And yet if someone asserts expertise in *wine*, we are promptly suspicious; we sniff for snob-bism, we get defensive and put up our dukes — and I have always wondered why.

Wine writers such as my friend Jennifer Rosen feel a degree of responsibility to "demystify" wine, to make it accessible to everyman. That way, they reason, more people will drink it and the world will be improved. Other wine writers want to reassure you there are no "rules" and that you should always drink what you like; reasonable advice on the face of it. If you like drinking young Barolo with a dozen

raw oysters I won't stop you (though I'll shudder to think what's going on inside your mouth). If you like a beer with five sardines steeped in it for 20 minutes, go on and drink it that way. No one wants to keep you from the consequences of your perverse taste. No one denies your "right" to it.

Some of us, however, like to call things by their proper names. Not from snobbism, sadism or any other-ism, but because it helps to order the world of experience. It fends off the chaos.

I had a conversation on an airplane recently, with a cellist in her 20s. We talked about music, naturally, and it became clear to me her tastes were wider than my own. (I'm an ossified old geez in his early 50s.) I remarked upon her ecumenical listening habits. "Well," she said, "don't you think one should search for the virtues in everything?" Much as I wished to say yes, to do so would have been false. Instead I said: "No, I think you should seek the good in everything; that's where you are in your life. But what I need to do is identify that which annoys or wounds me, and avoid it."

Stuart Pigott once wrote: "We should . . . start making wines with balance, elegance and originality sound so astonishing that our readers feel they've just got to try them," and this of course is true. A critic must stand for something; otherwise he is merely pusillanimous. And so our first task is to find the good and praise it. But any time we take a stand FOR something, we imply the thing's shadow, i.e. the thing we love suggests, ineluctably, the thing we don't love. And we *cannot* shrink from naming both things, especially not for fear of wounding the delicate sensibilities of the philistines (who, by the way, are both robustly insensitive and also have no scruples about insulting us with labels such as "snob," "elitist" et.al.).

God knows we'd prefer to be everyone's best friend, and we feel humane and generous telling anyone with unformed (or simply atrocious) taste that his taste is as good as anyone else's. But it's a lie we tell so that we can feel noble, and furthermore it is unfair to the recipient, who, if he's being patron-

ized, is entitled at least to know it.

Pigott went on to claim that any wine anyone likes is ipso-facto “good” wine, and this is just the slippery slope we can’t help sliding down when we try to be “democratic.” It is manifestly impossible to support a definition of “good” as “wine that someone, regardless of who they are, finds to taste good.” This is irresponsible, it ducks the question. Once at a presentation I was terribly busy and opened bottles without a chance to screen them. A punter remarked that a particular wine was “fantastic; I never had anything that tasted like this, wow, how was this made . . . ?” and his enthusiasm infected me and I poured myself a taste. CORKED! What should I have done, based on Pigott’s definition of “good?” The gentleman liked a patently flawed wine. He has every “right” to like it; no one disputes this. But I felt honor-bound to (discreetly and tactfully!) correct him.

Thus I can’t endorse a definition of “good” that is as “inclusive and democratic” as some desire. I do not believe nature has any use for our democracies; she is in essence heirarchical. Some things *are* better than others, and one of *our* functions is gently to guide our readers toward appreciation of these distinctions.

If we take these democratic principles and apply them to any other thing about which aesthetic or cultural criticism is warranted, do they stand up? Shall we endorse a statement such as “All art is good art as long as someone likes it?” Does this sentiment apply equally to architecture, poetry, cuisine? Or is wine somehow “special” because too few people drink it? And should we pander to every sort of unformed or misguided taste because we’re trying to get more people to drink wine?

Let me be clear: no one has to like wine the way I like it, or the way any “expert” likes it. If wine is a casual beverage for you, then the discussion ends. Wine is complicated and therefore intimidating to people, but I’ll make you a deal: you promise not to lash out at me for what I know because *you* feel intimidated, and I’ll promise not to guilt-trip you into acquiring “expertise” over a subject you don’t care that much about. Deal?

The truest reason to write humanely is because it is good to be humane. Any professional who uses

words does well to shade them so as not to deliver gratuitous insults to people with dubious or uneducated taste. But that doesn’t mean he abrogates his entire judgmental faculties — which by the way are why we *hired* him — in search of some romance about inclusion or democracy.

There are no “invalid” moments of pleasure in wine. But, there are higher and lower pleasures. Once you have graduated from the low you can always return. It’s fun to return! If you’re somewhere in the process of honing your wine taste and you want to continue, no one helps you if he fails to delineate the distinctions between inadequate, ordinary, good, fine and great — or between “industrial” and “agricultural” wines. Maybe there is a thin line between this and Pigott’s “attach[ing] an imperative” but the way through involves nurturing one’s own kindness and honing one’s craft with words.

I feel it is indeed unkind to flatten all taste to a specious equality, made even more pernicious by encouraging the philistines to set the level.

Me, I have a powerful aversion to wines that gush and scream, they annoy me, and I tell you why, and you make up your own mind. MY imperative isn’t everyone’s, self-evidently: but I strive to send clear signals, to advocate what I think is worthy and to identify and explain what I think is unworthy, and if my tone is “superior, even dictatorial” then the fault lies with ME. I have failed to communicate my point. But, the POINT remains.



# mittelrhein wines



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

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

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

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to represent via Heinrich Weiler until the domain encountered

## At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . . .

some problems and I opted out) and Linde noted wistfully that its days appeared to be numbered. "But it's one of the great sites of the region," I protested. "Why is that?" "Well look at it," Linde replied. "It's all old terraces, too steep to work by machine. You can't get to it. Do you realize what you have to do to bring the harvest in from that vineyard?" she continued. "First you have to carry all the grapes on your back as there are no pathways for tractors or wagons. Then you have to cross a busy road, **and then you have to cross the railway line**, and *then* you have to get into a boat and row across the Rhine!" Well, I dunno; sounds like a day in the park to me. I mean, it's not like there's man-eating *fish* in the river or anything. In any case, it turned out the vineyard's sole proprietor was merely leasing the winery and had no incentive to invest in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A specie of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old cas-

tle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like Müller. But I'd wager that a generation from now, the Josts and Weingarts will have become the standard "great names."

The vineyards fall into two groups: the riverfront sites (giving the slatiest, most minerally wines) and the side-valley slopes (whose wines are tangier and spicier). Soils are Devonian slate and quartzite, so the wines bear a strong resemblance to Mosel wines, though fuller in body, more "masculine" and sometimes with more lavish fruit. Most Moselans sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.



# florian weingart

## mittelrhein • boppard-spay

It's not enough for Florian Weingart to be considered the "top" estate in his region and one of the *elite* Riesling estates in Germany. He is inherently modest and restless. His is a mind that chews things over, and I doubt he even *has* an auto-pilot function. We were talking about the reduction-aromas which often attend the early stages of wines fermented with wild yeasts. This came up not *only* because we're a bunch of pencil-necked geeks – he isn't but I probably am – but because Florian has returned to "spontis" and ambient-temperature fermentations after a decade using more modern (I dare say trendy) approaches. "After ten years I've come back to many of the things my father did," he observed.

A few weeks later, back in the States again, I had this email from him. He had continued to mull the question over – typically! How can you *not* be fond of such a guy?

"I just thought about your question concerning the volatile S-compounds in spontaneous ferments: In many spontaneous yeast societies there are types that are more capable [of] break[ing] up proteins and amino-acids that contain Sulfur than in cultured yeasts (which have been selected especially not to produce off-flavors). Those released S-bindings can react to H<sub>2</sub>S (and so on) in the reductive climate of the fermentation. I have probably just been lucky that the right [yeasts] are at work. Another reason – [which has] proved to be the most important S-source in volatile-S-compounds (US-research) – is elementary S from late crop protection treatments with Sulfur. This is *probably more important* than the differences in reductivity of the fermenting wine (barrels or stainless; small or large cell numbers) but again I don't really know. I think though that reductivity during fermentation and after has not been given the right attention for white wines [in terms of] their aroma development and their aging abilities."

Florian seems self-conscious about the accolades regularly heaped upon him, like putting on a tux and looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking "Who is this guy?" He's more of an intellectual than many growers. "There is no single True way," he says: "Rather a multitude of possibilities." I sense he's delighted to play among them!



Adolph Weingart

- **Vineyard area: 11 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Engelstein, Feuerlay & Ohlenberg, Schloss Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder**

Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It's such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

These are very happy visits. The wines are full of melody, and Florian's kids keep coming into the room, shyly at first and then like wound-up little sprites. I like tasting wine with young vintners whose kids are sitting in his lap. It stops me from getting too precious about the wines. It puts the work in context. Context is good. It helps me define a thing I need to remember: the connection of the family, the land, and the wine. Somehow I doubt I'd be tasting with Mr. Kendall or Mr. Jackson in a little living room with kids peering shyly around the corner and the shimmer-fragrance of lunch cooking.

One year both girls seized upon my Karen Odessa, who amused them for two hours with her laptop. She recorded the two girls very shyly

singing “Ten Little Indians” and every time she played it later I felt happy.

Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine example of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenerative nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheerful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines had become more scrupulous, mineral and *green*, all in the modern idiom, but Florian seemed to want something more. He looked to the past, as many smart young growers are doing. The Bopparder Hamm is one of the few due-south exposures in the Mittelrhein, and one of the few hillsides with almost no abandoned vineyards. Boppard and its neighbor Spay are an isolated warren of activity in a region that’s grown ominously sleepy. The sites are slatey of course, but there’s also a residue from the volcanic activity of the Eifel hills to the north, which imparts a certain ripe tropical note. Florian may have missed it, I don’t know. But it is singular, and maybe unique.

The “Kabinett” issue arises here, again; the vineyard is paradoxically *too* good – “We’d have to pick physiologically unripe grapes to make a Kabinett from the Hamm,” he says. Florian is sensitive to such things. He understands for example that his best dry wines come from sites with deeper soils giving physiologically riper

fruit. But like everyone, he needs a source for reliable everyday wines, and he found it 35km upstream in a side-valley near Bacharach. These are the *Schloss Fürstenberg* bottlings, which give us a chance to see this vintner’s work in a very different terroir dialect.

There’s another irony. When Weingart first leased the vineyard no one else wanted it. It was considered second-rate. When the lease came up for renewal last year, *tout le monde* wanted it, as it’s just such vineyards which give the most perfect Kabinetts. Happily for us, Florian got it. And to celebrate, we’re putting it on the **core-list**.

Florian seemed even more hesitant than usual this year. His vintage is quite good, as you’ll see, though for some reason his pHs were higher than usual. He may have felt apologetic for having encouraged the Schloss Fürstenberg Kabinett—our core-list wine—to ferment all the way dry, which means of course we can’t use it. Grrr. Like all the top German “names,” Weingart was sold out of wine by last November, and there was some urgency to both produce more dry wines (which, <sigh>, are those the Germans demand by rote) and bottle them pronto. During the three hours we spent with him, no fewer than *three* private customers turned up looking to buy wine. Was there any? Yes, some of the residually-sweet wines from ‘06 and ‘05 were still available. *No dry ones?* Sorry, those are sold out until May. *Well, buh-BYE then!*

The refusal to even contemplate these unique and beautiful wines is nothing less than contemptible.

#### weingart at a glance:

A risen star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Still-good value for in-your-face fruity-minerally steep-slope wine.

#### how the wines taste:

They’re urgent above all; these are wines that move, that push and pull on the palate. Then tropically fruity, vanilla, papaya, mango in the ripest wines. With the 1996 vintage a new minerality came; you feel it on the sides of the palate, and it sets up a call-and-response of fruit and stone that keeps you returning to the wine just when you were done attending to it. These are smiling, cheerful wines, but now perhaps with a fundamental intelligence that makes you want to spend lots of time with them.

#### GAW-091 **2007 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +

Of the five dry Späts on the table, this was the roundest and had the deepest mid-palate; *superb* aromatics, balsam and aloe; power and corpulence here and a kind of paradoxical minerality; a finesse and generosity that seldom travel together. A seriously lip-smacking dry Riesling that conveys more sweetness than it actually contains. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 12-16 years)

- GAW-092 **2007 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb** ++  
 Again this site shines. This time the extra fructose extends the aloe into quince and mirabelle and cox orange; this has swollen density but within that density is tightly packed fruit and snapping acidity and seemingly endless minerality and a minty sort of “sweetness;” virtually perfect at table, and splendid Riesling. Look, as you see I really *liked* the Trocken version—it’s a great example of its type—but if you want to see the *benefits* of residual sugar, just compare the two wines!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (1-4 years; again 15-22 years)
- GAW-090 **2007 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 This exists because we asked for it, and it involves the sacrifice of 87% of the Ohlenberg *Spätlese* to bring it into being. In that light, the price Florian is asking is such a kindness I nearly want to weep in gratitude. The wine is focused, tangy and salty, with lots of ripe citrus (tangelo, bergamot), talc, and minty minerality; a lovely and agreeable Kabinett.  
 SOS: 2 (6-18 years)
- GAW-093 **2007 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This is a *cuvée* (sounds nicer than “blend” doesn’t it!) of difference sites from the hillside; a malty and wintergreeny Spät; lots of cherry up front, but good green energy in the mid-palate; it isn’t markedly sweet but finishes so, with a tangy mélange of incense and lemon pie.  
 SOS: 2 (7-24 years)



Want to hear a story of fortitude? Peter Jost broke his leg in the vineyards just three days before the harvest one year. He was in utter denial. This simply could not be. He didn't go in for X-rays for three days, and when he did he was told "your leg is broken and you'll be laid up for about six weeks." "Um, I don't think so!" After three weeks hobbling around on crutches, including picking grapes in vineyards as steep as 60 degrees, his Doctor told him "Look, if you don't get off your feet we'll put you on your back!"

The solution? A WHEELCHAIR! "I rolled through the cellar in my wheelchair and made my wines," said Peter.

This is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it, and any way you slice it, this is one special site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the diamonds of the German wine world.

The wines can be calm and shining. *What* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They can attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slaty filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb.

The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must." says Peter. What lees do exist are stirred. "I want a partnership



Peter and Linde Jost

- **Vineyard area: 9.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Wallufer Walkenberg (Rheingau), Barcharacher Hahn**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate in Hahn; loess and loam on gravel sub-soil in Walkenberg**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 17% Spätburgunder, 3% Weissburgunder**

between primary fruit and the richness of the lees."

Nary a wine has been de-acidified for the last decade. And Peter is friendly toward the use of Süsreserve if it's produced optimally. "Each wine should have its own Süsreserve," he says. "It's labor-intensive and it falls just at the busiest time of the harvest, which means working the night shift!" But, he says, the later fermentation stops, the better for the wine. "In any case, at least for our wine which we ferment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur."

Josts reports their oldest of three daughters will take over the winery. I remember her and her sister when they were little girls, producing something like one liter of "TBA" which they bottled in 200ml bottles and offered for sale to their Uncle. For ten Marks! I'd say the estate will be in good hands, and I love any example of Frau-power in old Europe.

I will confess to a certain impatience for a great Jost vintage. I think the last bunch of years have either been too hot (and the Hahn is a heat trap in any case) or too vulnerable to unwanted rots. I once said to Peter that I yearned for a wine like the great '93 Kabinett, and he insisted its must-weight was *as* high as the new vintage's Kabinett. But all must-weights are not equal, as we know. Sometimes the wines seemed typically vibrant and expressive in cask, only to seem mute and disgruntled after bottling. ) I am not convinced the long lees-contact



# nahe wines



It is a joy to labor lovingly on behalf of what I feel to be the loveliest Riesling wines on the face of the earth.

You know, the Rhineland is really quite compact. You can get to the Nahe in a half-hour from the Rheingau, a half-hour from the Rhinehessen, an hour from the Pfalz, and an hour from the Mosel. Yet the Nahe is the forgotten acre just out of view, trilling beyond earshot in its winsome, lonely corner. Especially after the soaring scenery of the Mosel, the dreamy Nahe is almost narcotically soothing. It's still, and intimate, and stirs the soul as it calms the nerves.

Things feel astir on the Nahe these days. Mr. Dönnhoff has brought acclaim to his region, and a number of excellent growers are in the slipstream of that attention; Schönleber, Hexamer, Schäfer-Fröhlich, not to mention Mr. Diel, who is in nobody's slipstream. A case could be made that no other German wine region has the Nahe's concentration of outstanding estates in a similarly

small area. The region is also especially lovely for wine pilgrims because it remains quiet and authentic. In contrast to the Pfalz, where every weekend from Easter to harvest is cram-a-lama with gawkers and slug-it-downers. At least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VIS-

**The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be.**

ITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the *next* orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be: intricate, searchingly complex, with hypnotically shimmering overtones of flavor that can stir you to a point between perplexity and awe. Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted. If the pure *flavor* of wine interests you in and of itself, these wines will give you as much delight and absorption as wine ever can.

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich

Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam** and **clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry**, **melaphyr**, **gneiss**, **rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honeysuckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatically filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after

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having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other— we looked like a chain-

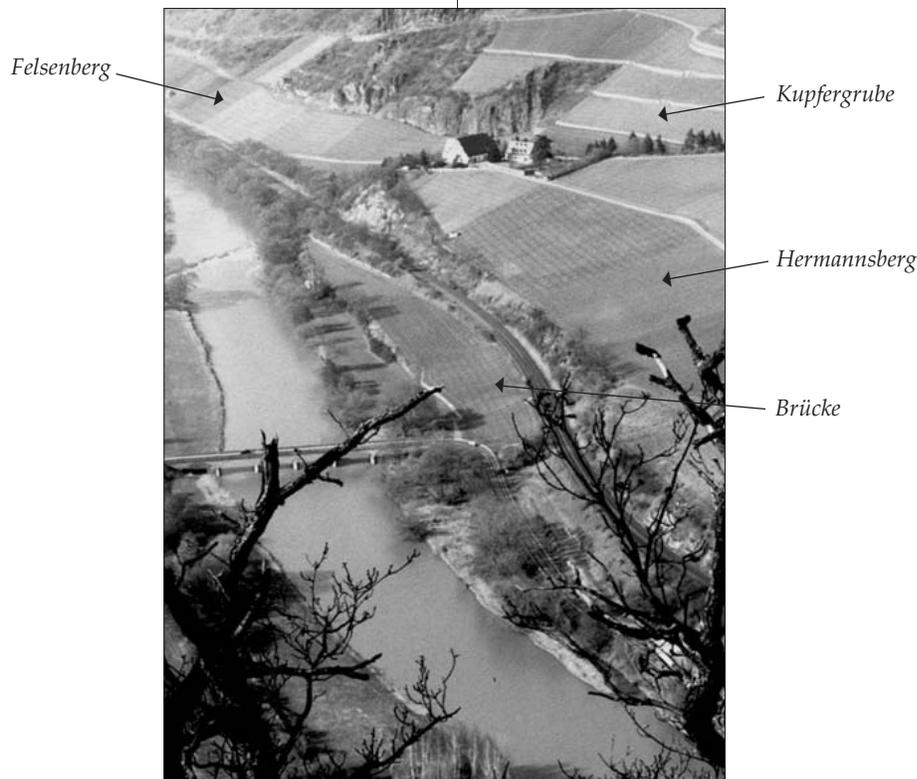
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you've just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity."

I know of nowhere else in the world of wine where grapes grow on such an intricate confluence of geological currents. No grape except Riesling could do justice to such soil.

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil

In my dream I wished I could bring you here with me, and we could sit out for a few hours in the afternoon light and look down on those miraculous vineyards and listen to the birds. Let that time gestate in our hearts, so that when we taste the wines later on we taste them *with* that heart, relaxed, dilated and ready. And then I think of those wines, arranged in sterile rows on a table somewhere, while I pace nearby and worry about how they'll "show." And for a moment it becomes impossible to be both people at once, the hot-shot wine guy and the plain-and-simple me who sits on the hill, pensive, calm and grateful.

I happen to believe that wine **means** something. And much of what wine means was visible to me then, and every time since. I also *buy* wine in part because of what it means, which is a more vital question than its simple exterior flavor. Yet if we wish to make a living buying and selling wine, we often confront a perplexing ques-



View of vineyards from the Lemberg

forming miasmic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being *shown* to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

tion: who are we to be? We all let meaning into our lives in *some* way; we thirst for meaning unawares. When you cheer like a banshee for the home team, you're feeding a need for **meaning**; on the face of it, what does it matter *who* wins the game? We *create* meaning because we *need* to have it in our lives. Wine is one of the things which happens to feed that need in me, and Nahe wine does so in a particularly suggestive, caressing way. "There are mysteries here of the most exquisite sweetness; I will show them to you," it seems to say.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

# dönnhoff

nahe • oberhausen

*"The soul does not supply solutions. It sends messages. It beckons."* -Michael Ventura

It occurs to me we are all very lucky in Helmut Dönnhoff. Me of course 'cause I represent him, but more than that. First of all we have an unusually intelligent and articulate guy. Good so far. Next we have a guy who's uncommonly *happy* in his work. Then it happens that this smart, happy guy has some of the greatest vineyards in the world. And that for years the region in which he worked was sufficiently obscure that he got to *do* his work in almost monastic purity. He was never in danger of becoming that most queasy and dreadful of creatures: a "wine celebrity." More correctly, when that danger first began to manifest, our hero was old enough to

assimilate it and not allow it to disturb the basic integrity of his relationship *to the work*.

I mean, consider how often great vineyards are in indifferent hands. Practically the entire Rheingau! Think how often passionate vintners don't have sites to do them justice. Practically the entire Rheinhessen! With Dönnhoff we have not only an ideal confluence of desire and a means of realizing it; we also have someone smart enough to recognize what he has.

When I try to describe Dönnhoff's wines I create an itch I can't reach to scratch. Someone, I think it was James Hillman said to beware of the things we have no words for. And I've never quite had language with which to detail the existential life of Helmut Dönnhoff's wines. But I think it is there, and the limitations are mine.



Helmut Dönnhoff

Put it this way: if I take other great wines, say Diel's or Catoir's, these wines are deliberately and explicitly and clearly great. They *come at you*. They are not ambiguous. Nor do they hint or imply; they come straight to the point, and the point is, they are great. I don't think this can be said of Dönnhoff. *His* wines do not so much approach you from this, that or any angle; they rather invite you to enter a larger nexus which includes them but doesn't stop with them. They beckon with a sort of spell; they are hypnagogic. If I think of Diel, I envision the tower of an immense Gothic cathedral, both mighty and filigree, rising symmetrically to a definite point, which the eye follows up into the sky. But when I think of Dönnhoff I think of the cloisters attached

to the cathedral, and of the peaceful little garden encased within it.

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg & Kupfergrube, Norheimer Dellchen,**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

to the cathedral, and of the peaceful little garden encased within it.

This has to do with texture, of course, but not only with texture. I have no idea whether Helmut Dönnhoff would endorse a thing I say here—I suspect he thinks I have a screw loose—but neither do I think there is any formula that can explain his wines. One could *try*, certainly; is it harvest selecting, method of pressing, choice of yeast, temperature of fermentation, choice of aging container, cellar temperature, all of the above, none of the above—all and none of the above? Or shall we simply admit the mystery of how a wine with such unearthly glassy smoothness can also contain so much information?

This year we tasted at Diel first and Dönnhoff the following day, and I saw Helmut's wines differently, and maybe better. Of all the greatest wines in the world, these have to be the least thrusting and assertive. Some have described them as "silky" and this is true but not true enough. Theirs is an existential calmness, a contentment, a stilling of the clamor of the mind by which beauty is able to enter you without battling against your defenses. I do love that Italian phrase *Vino di Meditazione*.

Another metaphor: Diel's wines are like a leap into a cold pool on a hot day. They are kinetic with the *splash!* and they live inside that vivid ecstatic freshness.

Helmut's wines are more like a massage, as the pleasure is coaxed from your bones and your spirit falls liquidly into the deep. The problem with all this is that one thing is explicable and the other isn't. Even in strict wine terms, most excellent growers can say *how* they got the clarities and textures you taste in the wines; what they did and didn't do. But I'm not sure if there IS a way to get at the particular texture of Dönnhoff. These wines taste as if crystal were liquefied.

To describe that information is hard enough, but to do it in the company of this genial and wickedly witty fellow is well-nigh impossible. Helmut is a master of the offhand observation that says a thing so *perfectly* you can't NOT stop what you're doing and attend to it – and write it down. Often I'm also obliged to translate for non-German speakers, which adds another distraction. But oh poor me! This must be what the Gods wish; that once a year I get to hear the most sublime, achingly beautiful music in existence but *when* it's playing there's static in the signal and a loud party happening upstairs. Still I try to get it all down.

Helmut noticed my notebook filling up, and we talked about the old days when we'd taste in the cellar and I'd use a micro-cassette to speak notes into. "The problem with dictating," he said, "is it's too fast. We undress our women slowly! The time it takes to write a note is important, because the wine changes."

"As do we," I replied.

It's easy to stake a claim for the mystic when talking about Dönnhoff's wines. They are beautiful in just such a way as to stir these kinds of thoughts, even in people whom such thoughts seldom visit. ) Last December I invited a bunch of wine-friends over to help me clear out some Auslese. They build up in my cellar too! We had a bunch of suitable foods (of which there are many more than you might suppose) and drank the wines happily. The first sip of each wine was given blind, not because I wanted people to guess, but only to let them hear the signal of flavor without the noise of identity, at least that one time. About mid-way through I opened a Dönnhoff wine, the 1990 Hermannshöhle Auslese. The room was buzzing happily by then. I poured, and disappeared into the kitchen for a moment. And a strange thing happened; the chatter and noise faded, as each person inhaled the wine for the first time. Remember, none of them knew what it was, but all of them got quiet. It isn't only me. We were drinking a slew of very impressive wines, and then came this.

I want to know what this quiet place is, and I want to know how a wine can bring you there, and I want to know who lives there and why we hardly ever get to see it, and I want to know why we should need to see it at all. Because when we are there we seem to know, immediately, that this is something we cannot actually live without.

This quality of evanescence is one of the most inter-

esting things that can happen to us. We are both out of our lives yet also more deeply immersed in them than ever. Everything seems *true* here, yet a condition for being inside this truth is being unable to articulate it. And why should *that* be?

You know, even if it's silly to suppose that something as small as a wine could open the portal into the mystery, *something* does, whatever it is and whoever you are. I suspect these doors are opening for us all the time but we are too distracted to notice. And I myself am a pretty defended guy, though I'm trying to work on my preparedness. There's something I insist must be implacably solid inside me, but which wants to be liquid, and I am afraid to be dispersed. Ah, but we are out beyond the maps now, and maybe it's time to get back to Mr. Dönnhoff and his wines.

The wines live anywhere you want them to, but they also live in the cloisters of the deepest spirit. If you go there you'll find them. If you allow them, they'll take you there. They will not teach you "wisdom" in the form of proverbs or bromides. They invite you to become absorbed. They are difficult to study because they don't hold still; they are too busy melting. They dissolve, and solidify and dissolve again, and they show you how to live inside the melting.

Here's a little story. Karen Odessa and I were nearing the end of a hiking vacation in the Alps, and we were leaving the high mountains and heading into the French Jura. We were terribly sad to leave the glaciers, and we craned our necks to catch the last glimpses of Mont Blanc as we climbed up the Col de Faucille. Then it was getting on evening, and we were in the sweet little valley of the Doubs. Tender, silvery evening light, and the little river and smoke rising from the chimneys of lighted houses and farms, and all at once two swans took off from the water, skimming the stream with their wings, and I looked at my wife and she was weeping, "It's so beautiful," she said through her tears. We had left the country of the spectacle, the unbelievably massive peaks, and had arrived somewhere littler and dearer, with reeds and swans and grassy hills.

I have never tasted a Dönnhoff wine and felt that it was out to *thrill* me or to "entertain" my senses. It simply expresses the pure honesty of itself. It hasn't a thing to prove. You almost can't believe it exists, because



there's no GPS to get you there, no recipe you can follow to create that result, it isn't like arriving, it isn't like *winning* or prevailing or mastering; it is in some strange way like breathing, daydreaming. At the end of H.G. Wells' lovely novel *The History Of Mr. Polly* the hero, who has spent his life urging and asserting, has finally learned to admit contentment into his life. We find him "not so much thinking as lost in a smooth still quiet of the mind." I think when we look back on our lives we will know those were the times we were happiest.

I have the image of a parent gazing into the crib to look at his sleeping infant. An angel has entered his body, and the entire tableau is infused with wonder. Who is this child, who seems to have been born knowing everything, who is she, what is she dreaming, where was she before she came here? And who is the man looking at a new life and at his own life entirely changed, and the oceans inside him of which he never knew?

These places of beauty and meaning come to us, not very often, and sometimes we realize some of the other beings who inhabit them, poems, streams, clouds, wines like Dönnhoff's, and the only condition of life in this place is that it be free of artifice and admittance of every question, with no demand for answers.

It makes perfect sense the maker of these wines is himself the most grounded of gentlemen. Helmut Dönnhoff likes, as he puts it, to "speak through the flowers," to use metaphor and image. He is quicker even than I am to carry wine into that realm, yet he is also the most matter-of-fact person I think I know. I suppose he's heard his share of tasters wishing to impress him with all the

stuff they "get" in his wines, but Helmut's had enough of it. It's 180 degrees different from tasting with Aubry (in Champagne), who only *wants* to add to his ongoing catalogue of associations. Helmut is rather the *shaman* who doesn't explicate but simply creates the environment for the thing to be known. What *does* amuse him, and clearly exasperates his wife Gabi, is metaphor, especially anthropomorphizing.

I mean, let's face it: wine works upon the imagination, especially great wine. This we know. So if the imagination is stimulated, what is it to do if not *IMAGINE*? That is, after all, its job. And it seems like an enormous waste if in that moment we're pitifully lost in "grabbing" the wine so we can dissect it to show how cool our palates are. It's like ignoring the rainbow while you balance your checkbook.

I tasted the wines twice one year, about two weeks apart, as I made a second visit with Kevin Pike. The latter run-through was a brisk affair—we hadn't much time—and it lubricated a somewhat delicate conversation which engaged most of my attention. I found it fascinating to scroll through these wines, which I love like none other, with only a sideways glance. In one particular moment I was groping to say something subtle in my inadequate German, concentrating entirely on finding words I didn't know, and suddenly the wine in my glass found a seam and soaked through it, and I realized I was near tears. It was shockingly beautiful. I was closed to the world, and the world opened me. And what of this? it seemed to say.

### **Some Notes On The Vineyards:**

In essence the BRÜCKE is a mineral wine; it shows a more masculine profile, it's more fibrous and nutty than many other Nahe wines, but just at the moment you think you're tasting everything in it, it comes at you with even more nuance, yet another facet of flavor. If new-world-oaky-creamslut wines are like basic addition and subtraction, these wines are like integral calculus—except that any ragamuffin palate (even mine!) can grok them.

NIEDERHÄUSER HERMANNSHÖLE is one of those vineyards that gives utterly miraculous wine. You shake your head in delighted perplexity that fermented grape juice can attain such flavors. It is a steep hillside, not very large (8.5 hectares), with ideal exposition and a soil whose complexity is mirrored in its wines. Walk fifty yards through the vineyard and you see a mish-mash of soils, as though this were a geological junction, an Arc de Triomphe of slate, porphyry, melaphyre and conglomerates—sometimes all jumbled together. The only possible drawback is drought in the drier years. Its favorable exposure makes Eiswein almost impossible.

Dönnhoff is currently producing the very best wines from HERMANNSHÖLE, and you need look no further to see one of the wine-world's great confluences of a great vineyard and a great proprietor. I don't care what a hot-shot palate you have, the complexities of these wines will tax it to its outermost limits. The fundamental aromas and flavors are a mingling of sharply sweet cherry, sometimes black cherry, and currant-cassis, but there is a hint of anise too, something spriggy, and an undertow of stoniness from the slate. Botrytis brings tropical fruit notes. I would go so far as to claim that NO SINGLE WINE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD IS AS COMPLEX AS DÖNNHOFF'S BEST FROM HERMANNSHÖLE.

I like to hike in high mountains, it is huge and stirring, but this was different, this was anything but overwhelming. This was quiet, it was the underside of a leaf, it was hoar frost on a branch, the kind eye of an old dog, a small thing standing simply in my sight as if by accident, and I was alight with it. *And what of this?* And I wondered, what of it? Yes it is beautiful, but what of it?

*It is always here.*

My wife is someone who likes to remember her dreams and consider their meaning. I find this lovely, but do not share it. It seems ordinary enough that our subconscious hums and buzzes all the time, and that we only see it when our waking consciousness gets out of the way, just as we only see stars in a dark sky. I thought of this suddenly. *It is always here.* Yes, just as the stars are always there, even when we can't see them. Just as the dreams are always there even when we don't dream them.

Think about when you make up after a quarrel. Think of the moment you realize *I love her, she is beautiful, why are we fighting?* You are suddenly inside the deeper truth, the one which abides below all your politics and power struggles, the truth that is *always* there. Sometimes a great wine will deliver all of wine—all of beauty—to you, and for a moment you are inside the slower, deeper truth, and you know that all your fussing, over adjectives and associations and quantification of your pleasure and dissecting of flavor is all a bagatelle, a waste of time. A waste of wine.

I envision Helmut reading these words and thinking "Hey, don't hold me responsible for this!" I imagine any instruction he might wish to impart would boil down to not losing the forest for the trees. Which is true enough, yet on we go.

From the top of the Lemberg you look out not merely on vineyards, hills, rivers; you don't even look out on "scenery." You look out on *landscape*, that thing which is larger than scenery or the parts of scenery. Just as the idea of "forest" is different in *essence* from the fact of trees. And when you see landscape you are quite sure it *means something*, though you can't say just what. Great wines arise from landscape as much as from vineyards. Great wines arise as much from civilization as they do from people or cultures.

Great wines also arise from people who are at home – or at *one* – with their landscape. Helmut's been hinting that new vineyards were going to enter the picture, and this year he showed me two new wines from sites in Bad

Kreuznach called Kahlenberg and Krötenpfuhl (two of the top-3 in this town), which prompted me to ask if he was at all curious about any *upstream* sites. "Not at all," came his typically unambiguous answer. I asked why not. "I want the wines I make to contain a story, and the story I can offer them is that of me at home in my landscape. I feel myself a man of the middle-Nahe, that is, the area between Oberhausen and Kreuznach. You have to be at home not only in the vineyard but also in the landscape in which it's contained. Of course, I could make a perfectly nice wine from a "foreign" vineyard, but it would only be a product; it wouldn't contain a story."

Great wine is wine which is incandescent with *reality*, larger and more eternal than its mere ostensible self, and which speaks to that thing in each of us. But don't go looking for it. Be calm and prepared, and it will find you.

Helmut Dönnhoff knows his wines are good. He doesn't strut about it but he isn't aw-shucks either. I once asked him if he agreed his goal was to make wines of crystalline texture and precise articulation. "I don't disagree," he replied. Then how do you get there? I had to know. There is, in effect, no "how," was his answer. Wine results from the confluence of a multitude of small choices, which alter as circumstances mandate. There's no recipe. There is ever-more reliance on instinct. Dönnhoff is very respectful of spontaneous instinctive recognition, and has become wary of the intellect's appetite to deconstruct. One year he spoke with David Schildknecht and said this telling thing:

*I am always asking people who have no technical expertise to assess the taste of my wines. The postman, for instance. I ask him, "Would you just please taste these three wines and tell me which you prefer." "Oh, it's really too early in the morning..." he protests, but I pull him in and sit him down anyway. And then he says something quite amazing and insightful that suddenly opens your eyes to the wine. And here is the decisive point: there are a lot of us who know too much about wine to be able to taste.*

Precisely.

Dönnhoff sees his work as craft; such art as may exist in wine comes from nature. "All the real work of the vintage happens before the pressing," he says. "What you do afterwards is repair." He approaches wine respectfully but not reverentially.

As a vintner he takes his duties completely seriously and applies himself calmly and fastidiously to his work. The result is a community of wines as transparent

and filigree as spider webs, but the wonder for Helmut lies not in the strange fact of such a thing's existence, but in the beauty of the workmanship.

My friend Robert Houde has a great way to convey this idea: "People have to get over the idea that *intensity* always means **volume**," he says. Thank you Robert! Think of some yahoo blabbing away behind you in a movie theater. Beyond all patience, you turn to this clod and whisper, "*Would you please SHUT UP?*" You haven't raised your voice above a whisper, but you have spoken with seething intensity. Wine does this too. It is always asking me to shut up.

I loved something Helmut said once: "DAS GANZE DING MUSS KLINGEN!" That is, the whole thing must harmonize; it isn't enough if this **part** or that **part** is interesting or arresting, the *whole* picture has to be balanced. Helmut is unaware of it, but he offered quite a gleaming gift of instruction with that simple little sentence. We'd all be better wine drinkers—and happier liverers of LIFE—if we could somehow remember: the whole thing must harmonize.

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast. The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn't bottle-ready after six months it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of *all* the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its *real* taste and structure," he says. "If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not

make it better, and will strip its character."

Dönnhoff's wines are different texturally, and they *feel* different existentially; they indicate a divine serenity, they seem to have emerged fully formed. Of course it's my conceit to imagine so, for I know well what year-long *schwitzzy* work goes into them. But if any companion said that a Dönnhoff wine was "well-made" I'd be taken aback. "But they're not . . . oh, well yeah sure, I guess someone makes them," I'd mumble.

I know a lot of you who regard these wines with an almost religious awe. I watched Helmut (and his wife Gabi) pouring at my New York DI tasting one June. A taster had his epiphany: "Wait a minute," he said, "Are you Dönnhoff?" Helmut assented bashfully. "Omigod! *We're not worthy. We're not worthy.*" He cried, waving his arms in the hosanna gesture. I sidled up behind Helmut and winked. "Star-power." I said. "*Verrückt*" (*Crazy!*) he replied.

It's lonely at the top, of course, and when you're perceived to be "Number 1" all you can do is fall. Wine writers looking for a story have been known to hasten that process—it's hardly news when the number 1 guy made the best wines yet again. But I can't say I see the slightest sign of this happening with Dönnhoff. No revisionism, no nitpicking for "flaws" just because someone else lauded the wines to the skies. And I think I know why. It's because we don't just admire these wines—we *love* them. Helmut is content to do the smallest, most elusive thing of all with his wines—to tell the simple truth.

2007 is wonderful here. No surprise. What is beautifully surprising is that Helmut has calibrated his prices to enable us to offer his wines at the same Dollar-price we did last year. This means that a vintner who can very easily sell every bottle he produces has actually reduced his prices to help his American importer, who is temporarily (or so we hope) incommoded by the little matter of the crash of his economy and currency.

It says something about the Riesling religion that its high priests are so **down to earth**, because great Riesling COMES DOWN TO EARTH. Earth and soil is the reason it is great. Welcome then, to many of the greatest soils in the world of wine, and the wry, genial and careful man who midwives them into being for us.

**dönnhoff at a glance:**

In this humble taster's opinion, these are the greatest Rieslings on earth. No other wine, anywhere, exceeds the clarity, polish, complexity and sheer beauty of flavor of this grower's finest wines.

**how the wines taste:**

Simply, like the most perfect Riesling that can ever be.

- GDH-214 **2007 Felsenberg Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** +
- GDH-214 **2007 Dellchen Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** +
- GDH-214 **2007 Hermannshöhle Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** ++

NOTE: these wines will be sold in MIXED CASES OF SIX, two bottles each. We want you to be able to experience them all, as their whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Felsenberg is a juicy and masculine Riesling; a smooth mild breeze blowing over a soil where rain just fell; all the fragrance of the earth and bushes and flowers exhale. An almost pensive, thoughtful dry wine.

Dellchen is an essence of its terroir, leather and prosciutto; the palate is stonier and spicier, or becomes that way as it ambles around your senses; an almost forbidding solemnity that's not austere; both enveloping and pointed.

Hermannshöhle oh there's real genius here; dark aromas swoon into a bright palate, like those times you look at a sunlit tree against a black stormy sky; it reads a text it loves deeply, it almost weeps, its voice is moderate but charged with ambiguity and a sort of compassion, a wonder; it wants to be cuttingly berried and mineral and it also wants to caress; it gets your attention not by its noise but by its *quiet*, and finally you can't fathom all the almost garish spicy arpeggios against this lullaby texture.

Ancillary points: Hermannshöhle usually comes from the lower more volcanic segment of the vineyard but this wine contains a certain contingent from the higher slate section.

Also, these wines change much more in their first year in bottle than the sweet wines do, becoming more *fondue* and creamier. The 2006 Hermannshöhle was considered the greatest dry Riesling in Germany, but the 2005 is better still; they need a few years.

SOS: 0 (all three) 1-4 years; again 12-16 years (all three)

- GDH-201 **2007 Estate Riesling** ++

Back to the *insane* quality of the 2005; porphyry and kirsch, deep and bright, exotic and minty, spicy, with perfectly calibrated sweetness. This would easily pass for Felsenberg, and offers ridiculous quality for the "entry-level" wine.

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

- GDH-202 **2007 Kreuznacher Kahlenberg Riesling Kabinett** +

Yup, a newbie: gravel over quartzite, similar to Rheinberg or even Berg Roseneck; yellow roses and cox orange; all dewy and gggly, polish and charm and playfulness; one "plus" is appropriate but ten smiley-faces would be even more; the fruit is swinging on a high trapeze yet the wine is *none* too sweet.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-18 years)

- GDH-203 **2007 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett**

A Mosel-type grown on the sandy slate called *Tholeyer*, which we see in sites like Hofberg and Apotheke. This is cooler and higher-toned, more lemon and a little more asperity in its acids, but breed shows now, and a lot of people like a certain *snap* in their Riesling.

SOS: 2 (5-19 years)

- GDH-204 **2007 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 Dönnhoff at his most frivolous and loveable, as most of you know. This one is cool and racy and *very* slatey; apples and tarragon, lilacs and hyacinth; it's the Maldon-salt of Kirschheck, or the Dawn Upshaw of the Grand Crus, a trilling songbird, pure delight. Yet! Also mineral and lnnnnng.  
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GDH-205 **2007 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Spätlese**  
 Red beets and *quetsch*, a hint of phenolic nubbinness; chewier and more corporeal. Those for whom Dönnhoff's other wines are subtle-to-a-fault will warm right up to this one.  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GDH-207 **2007 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 This is desperately delicious! You can't bear not to swallow it; lemon and asian pear, really compact fruit and a steely backbone of spice and talc; you sense a place where hoar frost goes, but right now I'm sensing the melancholy difference between what I *know* in a gestalt-flash and what I can explicate in linear sequences. Gimme a half-hour with the wine by myself and I'll make with the tasting note thing, O.K.?  
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GDH-208 **2007 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 It's true Brücke but with a wild lavender herbal note, a tautness that distinguishes it from the primordial '06—in fact it's the 2002 it most resembles, with its moderate sweetness, overt mineral and acid prominence.  
 AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (9-26 years)
- GDH-209 **2007 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** **++(+)**  
 Again the mineral is like a rockslide, the fruit is exquisite, the acidity is penetrating and the nuances are so many and hyperactive you feel as though a terroir fibrillator were shocking your palate. Almost always the most explicit and kinetic of Helmut's wines, yet when it outgrows its puppy-energy it becomes as charged with serenity as they all do.  
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)
- GDH-206 **2007 Felsentürmchen Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 From a separate parcel in the Felsenberg right below the tower, this wine was often sent to auction and so we seldom saw it. Not since the 2003 have I tasted this miraculous combination of lightness and material density of fruit and depth; this is more yielding than the whiskery rugged 2006; indeed it swoons in a kind of trance; flavor in a penumbral spectre you sense rather than see; at once both entirely scrutable—you could isolate all its nuances if you insisted—and also ethereal and fleeting. No one on earth is happier than me right now.  
 AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE  
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)
- GDH-210H **2007 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Auslese, 6/375ml** **+**  
 Salty! It's a turbocharged version of the Türmchen, like adding those four slices of bacon to the cheeseburger. All of these Auslesen, by the way, were far less evolved than the Späts.  
 SOS: 2 (9-27 years)

GDH-212H **2007 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 6/375ml** ++

Though the sweetest of these three, it seems driest; again it is a quintessence of the Spätlese; bypasses every cognitive capacity and insists you either surrender or spend six hours raining blows with your tiny fists against this implacably intricate tower of savage beauty.

SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

GDH-211H **2007 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 6/375ml** +++

Here it seems nothing is *added* to the Spätlese, only intensified, and this is so purposive you'd better either lay down or get out of the way; it fires up the fiber and mineral of Brücke with a purity of fruit you can't even guess at.

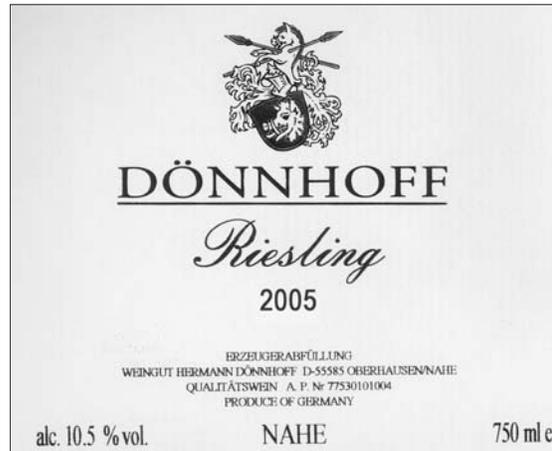
AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

GDH-213H **2007 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 6/375ml** +++

I have never tasted a better young Eiswein.

SOS: 4 (15-40 years)



## 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-cruste 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.



# jakob schneider

nahe • niederhausen

When they know we're coming they put a little wreath on the door with a sign saying *Welcome!* They always have, and I think it's sweet. But everything else is changing, and for the better. I remember first coming here, and tasting out of these really weensy little *Pokal* glasses, each of which held about a tablespoon of wine if it was filled to the brim, and you kept having to ask for re-pours and snorting like a bull just to get any *smell* from the wines. Today we taste from perfect Schott-Zwiesel "Riesling" tulips. And we can inhale like the cultured ladies and gentlemen we truly are, or imagine ourselves to be, fruitlessly in my own case. Young Jakob has fin-

ished a *stage* at Knoll in the Wachau. Coincidence? Two estates cut from a similar cloth in their respective homages to the old ways. But Schneider plans to modernize- there was no other direction in which to go - and he's a fast-talkin full-of-beans young 'un whose best wines are ahead of him.

It could seem incongruous for this (or any) portfolio to present the likes of Dönnhoff and Schneider cheek-by-jowl, one the arch-mage of polish and poetry, the other almost rustic by comparison.

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

We all know the difference between bad wine and good, good wine and fine, fine wine and great. And we prize the splendors of great wine, as we should. Yet I am wary of the tendency to reach only for great wine. Anaïs Nin warned: "Beware of the esoteric pleasures, as they will blunt your appreciation of the normal ones." And in the Pfalz there's a proverb: "There is nothing better than that which is good," and we all know the saying "The great is the enemy of the good," and it has to do with out-

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Klamm & Felsensteyer, Norheimer Dellchen & Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry, melaphyre; 52 different soil types**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Pinot varieties**

growing the insistence that only the best is good enough for moi.

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. Great growers everywhere form a kind of fraternity, an in-crowd (in Germany this would be a Brat-pack of the wurst kind) and we all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don't care what parties I'm invited to. I do care, though, about Mama-Schneider throwing her arms around me when I arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

It's nine years now since Papa Hans Schneider left us. Things are changing. Much more stainless steel in the cellar, in emulation of contemporary idioms. It is odd to think I am closer to Papa's age than to the age of this fresh-faced youth. Odder still to see the winery crawl out from under its particular rock. Personally I liked the rustic 19th-century touch of a lot of the old wines. They didn't make wines like that anymore. And now, they don't. But progress lurches on in its blithe heedless rush.

It is indeed all changed. But Papa Hans still casts a giant shadow. I met him in May 1978 when I made my



first-ever foray to the Rhineland. He'd have been in his fifties then, more vigorous but every bit as cussed and opinionated as he was to the end. When I visited just a few weeks before his death, it turned out, he only greeted me briefly before attending to a group of visitors in the next room. Every now and again we'd hear him through the wall, yammering away, worrying one of his many pet themes, and his son and I made eye-contact and exchanged knowing smiles.

This was a man made to talk. And not merely to converse, but to address, to pontificate, to perorate. He seems to have been born unable to speak except in rhetoric. What a character this was.

His property may have been the last surviving example of an estate that combined viticulture and agriculture. It seemed to have frozen in time somewhere just after the War. Other growers would speak in pure bewilderment of Schneider's antediluvian techniques: "It's like an open air museum of how wine was made fifty years ago," one grower said to me. No growers' association meeting was complete without Hans Schneider. "If I looked around and didn't see him, I'd try to leave undetected," one guy told me. "The meetings were dull without him."

The young are indeed grabbing the reins now, but there is a legacy they carry even as they change and modernize it. I wonder if we Americans can really understand such a thing. So many of our basic human contexts—senses of time, of history, of continuity, family and

community—lay in tatters. And we ourselves have shredded these things so we could get at other things we imagine we want. Can we actually see someone's wines as representatives of a family **legacy**? Can we understand how wines become *members* of the family? It is sometimes obscure even for me, and I *want* to believe it.

So I think of Schneiders, and how they render their wines, those strange songs of the earth who share the house with the family. There's our world, all a-rush and full of clamor. Schneiders have a computer in the house now, and a satellite dish on their roof, and an email address. For all I know they watch more CNN than I do. I'm not into making them adorable peasants. I am just struggling to isolate a slippery little creature, that they seem fundamentally **anchored** and that we do not. And wine is part of what anchors them, or part of what they're anchored to, or perhaps these are the same thing. And so it seems strange to dissect the wines as though they had no context in human life. It can't be done.

With the 2007 vintage the estate has attained a new level of quality. Young Jakob is out to make a statement, and these are the very best wines I've ever tasted from this house. They will impress in the general way fine wines impress; you needn't know the story. The new story is the advent of a young man who's growing wiser by the month, and who will show us things we haven't seen and wouldn't have guessed.

#### **schneider at a glance:**

"Colorful" stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted. They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great wine-y depth in the best of them.

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

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, more contemporary now. But you'd be well advised not to even try isolating any single consistent denominator from a village with 52 different soil types (!) That said, it's clear these hail from great land.

#### GJS-079L **2007 Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

You know, if you asked me "Show me a wine Terry, one single wine that encapsulates why you do what you do," I think I'd reach for this one.

You wouldn't find it without *looking*, and you wouldn't look if all you did was to follow the guides to the perceived-"best" estates. This astonishing wine is mostly Niederhäuser Rosenberg (either a top 1er Cru or a lesser Grand Cru, but certainly aristocracy) with some Kirschheck—this is equivalent to obtaining something called "Bourgogne Blanc" made from Bienvenue-Bâtard Montrachet and Meursault Perrières—and it is a lovely departure from the peachy style that prevailed through 2005; there's more of the flowery *sel-gris* minerality of the Rosenberg; incredible breed and piquant stylishness, sleek but not sinewy; 3-dimensional *spiel* of cherry-violet-wisteria-stones; big mid-palate wave of stony length catapults this absurdly beyond its class.

SOS: 2 (3-12 years)

- GJS-081 **2007 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett**  
 A true Grand Cru, contiguous with Hermannshöhle but of course (this being the Nahe) on entirely different soil, more *rotliegend*; it's also the steepest vineyard in the region; this is "real" Kabinett with 85° Oechsle (i.e., legal Spätlese) and really it's just perfect; it has all of its usual lavish nectarine and cox orange but this time a wonderfully salty terroir and pointed acidity give it a playful back-and-forth, like a parent who admonishes you but then winks and smiles just as you start feeling bad.  
 SOS: 2 (5-14 years)
- GJS-080 **2007 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**  
 This is one of the Nahe's unknown Grand Crus, a tiny vineyard on a conglomerate of slate and porphyry, it makes Rieslings that taste as though they were hewn from jewels. This started with 24 g.l. of its own RS which was fine-tuned with four grams of *dosage*—flexibility rules! The dosage, by the way, was Kirschheck (!), and the result binds flower to moon-berries to mineral in a seductive Riesling that's dry *enough* to be hugely useful and delightful. Kertz!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (1-3 years; again 10-14 years)
- GJS-082 **2007 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 A new level is reached; a really fulfilling wine from this greatest of all Riesling vineyards (of which, by the by, Schneider owns the most of as well as the oldest vines); entirely intricate and ur-typical nose, direct, clear and expressive, even euphoric; melodic, bright, complex and long and solid; the front and mid-palate are as smooth as flannel but it ends with incense and rocks. Picked October 22nd *en bloc*, and aren't you at least CURIOUS to see what this must be like, knowing Dönnhoff's bottlings?  
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GJS-083 **2007 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese** ++  
 More botrytis and *demi-glace* on the mid-palate, emphasizing the low notes, the *terroir* of the terroir; it's church-organ and stained glass and old trees and elegiac poetry and a dozen herbs that only grow in the deep shade of ancient forests and if you'd rather read about "blackberries and wintergreen" I could do that, I have done that, but right now with this gorgeously atmospheric wine in my glass, I don't seem to feel like it. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (9-27 years)
- GJS-084H **2006 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese "Junior," 6/375ml**  
 This is the big botrytis wine; Jakob said it was "pimped" with 5% BA and 1.5% TBA. (We all cracked up at "pimped.") It's an elegant botrytis-being, a craggy old guy with large hands; enormously chewy, caramelly and impressive, yet withal sleek and smooth.  
 SOS: 3 (12-29 years)



# weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

"I'd be lucky to have two or three more vintages like this one in my whole life," said Harald, about midway through the tasting when we started realizing we were in the presence of something remarkable. At such times I love what I see on a vintner's entire visage, the same thing I saw on Johannes Selbach's face toward the end of tasting his 2005s, the same thing you see on a ballplayer's face when he crosses the plate having hit the game-winning dinger. He knows he's worked hard, spent a lifetime preparing; he knows what he "did" hoping for a moment such as this one. But when it comes all he does is wonder. He's too amazed to even feel proud. He is almost embarrassed to be showered with such good fortune, as if it had nothing to do with him. *Look what happened*, he seems to say. Not "look what I did, aren't I the shit?"

It's not as if Hexamer needs a breakthrough-vintage; we all know how special these wines are. But believe me, nothing you've tasted prepares you for these. And along with the *richesse* shown below, there is also a "minus-7" Auslese (i.e., an almost-Eiswein), two BAs, a TBA and 3 Eisweins (!) which I didn't offer only because they were still fermenting. Ordinarily I wouldn't crow about such a plethora of sweeties. There've been a lot of them recently and I like you have grown a wee bit jaded. But Hexamer excels at a digital clarity and precision in all his wines, and his dessert-wines have been uniformly thrilling. It's a jade-free zone when these boys are in town.

So one night I did a class for the Smithsonian lecture series on regional distinctions among German Rieslings. You could have heard a pin drop, but nobody had one. I tried dropping a stapler, but people were just annoyed. So we started with a trio of Mosels to get that benchmark in place. Then we tasted two Nahe wines, the first of them Hexamer's '04 Spätlese.

This was revelatory even to me. Harald's wines have all the attack and snap one associates with Mosel wine, so there was no surprise at first glance, but the mid-palate was suddenly flooded with another kind of *substance*, something less direct and more allusive, more exotic. Nahe wines always taste as though they were



Harald, Petra, and Fido Hexamer

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weathered sandstone with high percentages of quartzite, conglomerates and porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 62% Riesling, 12% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 11% Spätburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 12% others**

finned with bath-salts and jewels. Hexamer's wines are a vivid demonstration of the Nahe's uniqueness, precisely *because* they're so steely and pristine.

He's bought a parcel in the Grand Cru (and painfully named) Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen from a Kreuznach estate selling off vineyards. The site is virtually unknown except to Nahe-fiends; it's small (6 hectares altogether) and the soil is sandy-stony loam over sandstone and conglomerates based on rhyolite. Most important, it's the first time we've seen what Hexamer can do aside from the particular context of his Meddersheimers. This is keenly enticing, for when I consider the many tired old growers making dull wines from great sites in, say, Niederhausen, I yearn to see what a guy like Hexamer could do. Now, we begin to glean it.

I came here after a tip from Dönnhoff. Samples were procured, and tasted over the winter, with great pleasure. (The man made some of the most *interesting* wines from the rarely-enthralling 1999 vintage.) We squeezed in a visit to Meddersheim, which believe me requires a detour. Harald and Petra Hexamer are all the things one wants a young vintner-family to be. But first let me back up a little.

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-somethings are opting to carry on their family's wineries. This isn't entirely bad. The ones who *do* self-select;

they're the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner with good warm feelings.



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

But whatever my theoretical musings, Harald Hexamer is about as dear as they come. I have a little questionnaire I hand out to all my growers (the answers from which

are often quoted herein) and when Hexamer sent his back he wrote "For some of these questions I could have written a book in response."

He aims to become identified with a genuinely superb vineyard which has an unfortunate name for non-Germans . . . **Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg**. (It is fine with me if you want simply to call it "the Grafenberg spot".)

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a complicated melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately delighted: a true *terroir* wine. In fact we took a PICTURE of a big ol' rock from the Rhein-grafenberg Harald keeps in his tasting room. It looks like something the Mars rover might have found. If you're reading the on-line version of this text the color shot should be nearby.

These wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as "density"), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent lightness. These are rare and wonderful wines, sybarites; I'm not looking to add estates to this portfolio

in my advancing decrepitude unless they offer irresistible deliciousness.

Hexamer is emblematic of the best of cutting edge thinking among quality-minded vintners. He's a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellarmaster. "I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is decisive." He often harvests riper grapes from another site (Marbach) but the wines of Rheingrafenberg are "more filigree and better-structured." He handles as little as possible. Doesn't deacidify, doesn't use dosage. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit — below 10 degrees — back to the winery.") Yields are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine"). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their glee.

All quite modern, yet Hexamer's not what I'd call a modernist. Rather, he seeks the most neutral cellar-environment so as to preserve the complexities he pulls in from the mountain. He's also a fun guy to drink wine with, and shows ceaseless curiosity and omnivorous glee in all the world's wines.

Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart". Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way. In fact I only ever ask to see analyses to confirm an impression or to have a starting point for dosage blends. My favorite growers hardly look at all. Dönnhoff told me last summer he never looks at analyses once the grapes are in the press. "I'll check during harvest for Oechsle and acidity, but once the press is running how can it possibly help me to know the figures? I can't *do* anything about them; all they do is cause me to worry needlessly." For better or worse — in his case, better — he trusts his palate. And he's influencing a young generation who are blessed with his encouragement to trust their wits and senses.

**hexamer at a glance:**

Sensational new discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven wines of terroir.

**how the wines taste:**

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

**GHX-046 2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken +**

As a rule Hexamer's wines have been too pointed to work in the dry idiom, and this one was the first hint that something was different about his '07s, for this immediately shows the authority of important wine from important soil; smoky, foresty aromas; wonderfully juicy and stony; amazingly focused and long. It's like a mini Clos Ste-Hûne; firm yet affectionate. (There's a still-fermenting 1-star dry Spät that threatens to be *even* better. . . .)

SOS: 1 (1-3 years; again 10-14 years)

- GHX-044 **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling “Quartzit”**  
 CORE-LIST WINE, because it’s an amazing value and because it makes a wonderful terroir statement; it’s a single-parcel bottling from a side-valley in the Rheingrafenberg that sits on quartzite instead of the usual conglomerates. This is almost always Spätlese quality, and if you’ve liked this wine before (as sales say you have) then yer gonna love the living hell out of this. All the mirabelle and candied lemon of 2007 and with a fine powdery minerality.  
 SOS: 2 (3-15 years)
- GHX-045 **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 “I have to be crazy to make Kabinett out of this juice,” says Harald, correctly. And here’s an crispy acid statement—9.8 g.l., with a dry extract of 28.2 (!!)—it sucks away the sweetness and works sleek and racy and keen and juicy; a grinning whippet of energy.  
 SOS: 2 (4-18 years)
- GHX-047 **2007 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Well YAY for volcanic soil; as in 2005—which this resembles—charm and complexity abound, and the finish is carried on waves of fruit and terroir; it’s like an especially tender rendition of Dönnhoff’s Felsenberg, with a plum and blackberry nuance along with the usual 5-spice and lavender.  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GHX-048 **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*** ++  
 An omigod moment here. Another 2005-1975 type (which is to say as great as great can be), with “cool” fruit and malty botrytis, a piquant edge like a Kupfergrube; quince paste and moonglow pears; a seductive lady, this!  
 SOS: 3 (9-27 years)
- GHX-049 **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*\*** ++  
 Stunning wine! From the upper part of *Eisendell*, from young vines, among the last grapes picked, at 108° Oechsle with only 3% botrytis; splendidly malic with an apple-skin fibrousness almost Mosel-like; a panoply of fruits into a ravishing finish that swirls in eddies and dreams; like the most fragrant apple-cellar that ever was.  
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GHX-050 **2007 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Auslese** ++  
 The quality of fruit of 2005 with the acid bones of 2004; spice cake and roses and freesia; apple again; an acid-driven spice; not exceptionally long but fabulously complex fruit in a yielding swoon of ripeness.  
 SOS: 3 (12-32 years)
- GHX-051H **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +  
 As perfect a young BA as I’ve ever tasted; pristine, cool, focused, virginal, shapely, outlined and etched; it’s an inner concentration of the core of the Auslese, not just an external superficial revving of the ripeness-engine.  
 SOS: 4 (18-38 years)
- GHX-052H **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++  
 Again all you can say is stunning. Rye, caraway and a quintessence of the fruits and stones of the site; it is *everything* that great Eiswein can be.  
 SOS: 4 (10-35 years)

# kruger-rumpf

## nahe • münster sarmsheim

Something's sure up at this winery. Maybe it's because his children are growing up and helping out (kids have a way of giving their dads a kick in the pants, don't they . . .), and maybe it's just simple ambitiousness, but there's no doubt Stefan Rumpf has taken a significant step forward in each of the last three vintages. I'm just guessing here, but I intuit a subtle kind of competition between Stefan and son Johannes. Dad has an audience now, and he wants to show off a little, to earn the boy's respect. I saw them spur each other on while we were tasting, and felt the frisky new energy.

It's also worth pointing out the wines are improving in matters of texture, of polish and gloss and a finer mouth-feel. Fruit was always there, but the *tones* have improved. In fact everything is improved yet the prices have stayed the same. Hmmm. . . .

It used to be quite the decathlon tasting the young vintage here, but Stefan showed me his '07s in nearly-finished form, and the vintage was far less bracing and phenolic than any of its predecessors. We were done remarkably fast (my rough notes from the cask-samples used to look like an engineer's diagram for a cyclotron) and we used much less dosage.

I do think a small tribute is in order for his geniality. Many producers, especially young studs in their twenties, can be quite the divas. "I make the wines I like and he takes them or leaves them" is a typical sentiment. And it's reasonable enough on its face; it only locks a door whereby collegial interaction might benefit grower and buyer alike. But hey, I understand, having been an insufferable twit in my twenties, and I didn't have to deal with boffo reviews before I was old enough to handle them gracefully. All of which is to say that Stefan Rumpf's collegiality is becoming rare, which makes its underlying gesture of respect and friendliness even more precious. I am also delighted to see their willingness to still use *dosage* as a means of fine-tuning, which is part of a larger willingness to eschew dogma and surf all possible options according to the needs of the wine. I'd like to hire a plane and fly a banner over the Mainzer Weinbörse—**DOSAGE IS NOT EVIL, BUT DOGMA IS.**

A good dosage from top-site Riesling, used to fine-tune just before bottling, nearly always works better—which is to say *tastes* better—than throwing in a BA or other sweet wine, which often muddies the waters. This is out of tune with the *Zeitgeist* but



Stephan & Georg Rumpf

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer, Pittersberg & Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch, Binger Scharlachberg (Rheinhessen)**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, quartzite, loess**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe; the rest mostly Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder & Spätburgunder**

the *zeitgeist* is full of shit. Buncha smug young twits with their holier-than-thou posturing and their purity tests. . . .

Back to more congenial subjects; Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is making RHEINHESSEN WINES. "We had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries. 5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite well with an overcropped Riesling—give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

As a vintner, Stefan is as practical as they come. Ask him how he does things and he often answers, "It depends." Two fairly consistent practices are early racking and early bottling, but for the rest he lets the wine do the talking. "You can't improve wine in the cellar, only make it worse," he says. "At least ninety percent of the quality of a wine comes from the raw material you harvest." He sees himself as a craftsman, a worker, whose goal is to make clean, varietally typical wine that expresses its origins in the soil.

2007 maintains the markedly high level set in 2006, and possibly exceeds it. There's no question this estate is on the move, and if one considers only the top Rieslings and Scheurebe it has few betters in the Nahe.

### A PROFILE OF THE SITES:

**Dautenpflänzer** is one the leading Grand Crus of the lower Nahe, with a typical mélange of soil types within its borders. Rumpf claims some of it is slatey and some of it is “sandy loam,” which agrees more with the standard references. It is in any case singular and immediately significant, giving a sometimes damnably complex set of aromas and flavors including coconut, violet, soursop, leaf-smoke – it is a very long list even if you’re sober. In any case it belongs with the vamping exotics of the Nahe.

**Pittersberg** is the other of the top Crus, and this site is more classic and less mischievous than its neighbor. Stefan refers only to “slate” and very often the wine smells just like Mosel wine – in fact just like Graacher Himmelreich. “In parts dusty loam over slate,” according to the textbook. Pittersberg is related to the Rüdeshheimer Berg Schlossberg, which is just over the Rhine less than two miles north, though without the Taunus-quartzite of the Rheingau site. Diel’s great Pittermännchen is also on slate; I’m sure the similar names are not coincidence. Pittersberg gives firm, nutty Rieslings.

**Rheinberg** is the steepest of the three, on weathered quartzite and dusty loam – “similar to Rüdeshheimer Berg Roseneck,” according to Stefan. It’s flavors are indeed virtually identical, though the Nahe wine has a grace and curvaciousness the more stoic Rheingauer lacks. Sweet apples and yellow fruits are paramount here, though the minerally terroir notes give a firm foundation. These are wines of true charm, not merely winning ways. I’d categorize it as a 1er Cru.

**Scharlachberg** is a Grand Cru, but in fact a Rheinhessen Grand Cru, as it sits across the (mighty!) Nahe from Münster-Sarmsheim; it’s a serious prow of hillside acting as a kind of warm-up to the Rüdeshheimer Berg just to its north over the Rhine – though on a radically different soil; a mélange of rotliedend and various volcanic derivatives (e.g., porphyry). The wines are, or can be, superb, seeming to mingle the succulence of Hipping or Pettenthal with the exotics of Felsenberg or Dautenpflänzer.

#### kruger-rumpf at a glance:

Up-and-comer the past few years, making more glamorous wines than ever before. Deft, appley and minerally wines from the greatest sites of the lower Nahe. Priced quite reasonably for blue-chip quality.

#### how the wines taste:

They’re as sturdy as before but there’s more flesh on the bones. There’s more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you’ll see the truth behind the cliché.

GKF-126

#### 2007 Rosé

This comes from old, low-yielding Portugieser vines, and gives a dewy, yielding fruit somewhere between strawberry and granny-smith apple; it’s a slight and gauzy thing, not strikingly long or serious but strikingly girlish and charming. If Diel’s Rosé is *too* earnest for you, and Darting’s *too* picnic-y, this is the perfect compromise. The ‘07 shows a little more violet and even more grip and length.

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

GKF-124

#### 2007 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

Lot # K7. It remains to be seen whether this wine can be sold under the above name. While I was in Germany the Nahe VDP voted to *remove* Prädikat designations from the dry Rieslings. This follows the Austrian model and is sensible at first glance, but something tells me it will be awkward as it ramifies. Regardless of *what* they call this, the wine’s good; it was the class of five lots of dry (or dry-ish) Pittersberg; dense, almost creamy; quince and apple, recalling the Rheingau’s Hallgartener Jungfer; long and classy, with a really dense end-palate swell; loaded with fruit and a riptide of mineral. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 12-17 years)

GKF-125

#### 2007 Dautenpflänzer Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

A high common denominator of mineral and big, exotic fruit; has a lot of *schmelz* (another perfect German tasting term describing a quality of melting and gloss) and the cashmere texture of Dönnhoff’s wines; tropical fruit and pink peppercorns and brandy-wine apple, and great salty length.

It’s also very curious that you won’t really get to taste it. The VDP says the Grosses Gewächs are not to be sold until September following the vintage, and also that they cannot be shown beforehand except to visitors to the winery. By the time we make our 2nd offering in January, they are in many instances sold out. Sehr trendy in Germany, you see. So an ostensibly “wise and enlightened” policy has the effect of denying you access to samples at the *only* time you can taste them. Hats off to the fine theoreticians at the VDP for making our lives so much easier!

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 12-16 years)

- GKF-128 **2007 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE, because this is—no, this IS German Riesling; it's always a good value, and no other wine on earth can do what it does. 2007 is the best vintage yet, with the incredible fruit-solidity of the vintage, utter quartzite "yellow" flavors and a whole second wave of this salty elixir that completes the seduction—you *can't* resist it, and if you can, I'll bet you're the kind of person jokes have to be explained to.  
 SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GKF-127 **2007 Münsterer Kapellenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 Another perfect wine for someone to have as an exclusive, so do stake a claim if you're interested; it's another '07 that seems like a fruit-bomb until this thundering rockslide of grip and mineral whumps onto the mid-palate; it's like an apple cellar hewn from a salt mine.  
 SOS: 2 (4-17 years)
- GKF-129 **2007 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE, because when do we get the chance to offer a Riesling from a Grand Cru site with every possible breed and stature at a price like *this*? It's almost always from the same old-vines (39 years) parcel called "Mitte und Rosa;" this year's is exceptionally appley, with an elegant, refined and pointed aroma, more direct and less allusive and smoky than usual; the palate is similarly direct and positive, with a genially determined length and density, with a finish like inhaling wisteria.  
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GKF-130 **2007 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 No one is making anything close to the quality of this bottling from this used-to-be-famous Grand Cru. Whole-cluster pressed, fermentation started with ambient yeasts, all stainless; this is utterly brilliant and shows Stefan's son Georg's hand in its streamlined modern styling; in fact this is *Diel*-like in its gleam and sophistication; spiel, charm and deftness; pointedly long, flowery and precise finish. A thread-the-needle wine.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GKF-131 **2007 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 Believe me I was not eager to cram a third Spätlese into the mix, but one taste and all thoughts of tidiness were banished. It's *another* brilliant wine; a penetrating explicit stoniness and a white-iris flowery funkiness, minty and wintergreeny; filigree hoarfrost detail of mineral-herbal laciness; wonderful stuff. Perhaps another exclusive for someone?  
 SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GKF-132 **2007 Scheurebe Spätlese** +  
 As always from the Grand Cru Dautenpflänzer but as always the VDP refuses to allow those names to be used except for Riesling. O.K., whatever. But in the Pfalz now they've allowed Grand Cru names for Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, and that's a travesty as long as they're dissing the infinitely finer and nobler Scheu. This one has violet and cassis aromas—it's the finer face of Scheu, less elderflower than usual, and less animal; the palate is ultra-refined grapefruit, it's a regal aristocratic Scheu on its best behavior, with a Riesling-like minerality at the end, the very delicate, gradual end. Not gaudy, but serious.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (now-13 years)

### **A TRIO OF MATURE RIESLINGS IN SMALL QUANTITIES**

- GKF-133 **1998 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** (15 cases only), vintage-typical, a little grassy and not-quite-ripe mirabelle; Kabinett-light after all these big 2007s; sweet-crystalline and meadowy like a cave-aged Gruyere; hardly sweet, with penetrating acidity.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1
- GKF-134 **1998 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese** (40 cases only), basi cally, this is perfect dry Riesling! Virginal, tastes like a yearling; apple-skin nutty and jumpy. 9 grams of acid, 39.6 grams of sugar! Such were the times.

# schlossgut diel

## nahe • burg layen

I have never seen Armin so radiant and jocund. He walked through the rooms humming and gave every appearance of a man hardly able to contain his mirth. I mean, even though I was there, with my foul vibe and all. I think it has to do with Caroline, who has returned to the winery after her many Wanderjahren abroad. I am enormously proud of Caroline, as if I had any right to be “proud” of her. She’s a very rare and special person; intelligent, disarmingly charming and friendly, the kind of person who could have done anything, anywhere, and lived a life of “glamour.” She chose instead to continue the winery. That takes some heart, baby! Caroline is my hero, and no wonder Armin is humming.

I don’t deal in a priori, and I’m a lousy tactician. I never sat down and said “I will make a specialty of catching the rising stars before anyone knows them,” yet in many cases this is what I’ve done. Dönnhoff, Hexamer, Rumpf, Weingart, Catoir, Meßmer, Leitz, Spreitzer, Christoffel, Schaefer, Adam, Karlsruhle; all were relatively “obscure” when I began importing their wines, and all are Big Names now. This is satisfying because I share-at least a tiny part-in the achievement.

Thus my representing Schlossgut Diel constitutes a departure, and will ramify in unpredictable ways. For it’s rare for a superstar-estate to enter this portfolio with its reputation already established.

The first thing to tell you is: the wines are stellar. That’s not a word I casually throw around. Schlossgut Diel belongs in the class of the elite. The wines will wow you.



Armin Diel

must be.” The ethics of the situation are quite sophisticated to American sensibilities, yet behind it all are the

Armin occupies an unprecedented position in the wine world. He is proprietor of his estate on the Nahe, and he is perhaps the most influential wine writer in Germany. Imagine if Bob Parker owned one of the 1st-Growth Bordeaux: just like that. Needless to say neither Armin nor his colleagues writing for the same books or magazines review the wines of Schlossgut Diel, which is why the name doesn’t appear on the various lists of estate “classifications.” But of course there’s a meta-message: “The man is such an expert, imagine how good his own wines

- **Vineyard Area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top Sites: Dorsheimer Goldloch, Pittermännchen and Burgberg**
- **Soil Types: loam and gravel over rocky subsoil, quartzite and slate**
- **Grape Varieties: 65% Riesling, 20% Grauburgunder, 10% Spätburgunder, 5% Weissburgunder**

wines themselves.

The Rieslings hail most importantly from a trio of contiguous Grand Crus: Goldloch on thin loam and gravel over a rocky subsoil, Burgberg on quartzite, and Pittermännchen on Hunsrück slate. “The age of the vines are similar in the three sites, the microclimates are similar in the three sites, only a few meters separate them from one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir,” say Armin and his cellar-master Christoph Friedrich. These two have an admirably close working relationship.

Indeed it’s a pleasure to see the penetration and flexibility of their mutual intelligence. Of course we rapped about the usual wine stuff, but at one point Armin interrupted to say “We do this and we do that, but most important is that all indications are in question every year, there is no monolithic recipe to ‘make’ wines year by year. Each vintage asks different questions than the previous one. I’m really thrilled to have a sensible guy like Christoph who can play in both major and minor keys.” Quite so. In effect there is very little in the “hard” viti-and-viniculture data that stands out from the norm among top estates; what does stand out is a certain deftness of intuition, the thing whereby a pasty-chef alters the puff-pasty prep depending on the humidity. It isn’t even a matter of responding to conditions: that’s an I-thou thing. It’s more that one lives at ease within condi-

tions, moving naturally as they mandate.

There's a great German word "Betriebsblind" which is one of those neologisms you need an entire phrase to translate into English. In essence it denotes the tunnel-vision that results from being too close to your own wines. Armin describes it as "sadly the rule" in the wine profession. Yet he of all people can escape it, he tastes so

many wines constantly, and I sense the air is bright and clear with perspective at his estate. The wines are both beautiful and *smart*. You might notice I never use the phrase "well-made;" it's eyewash, it means nothing, but in a larger sense Armin and Christoph's wines are well-guided by their perspective and intuition. It's true across the board, even among the wines I did not select.

#### **schlossgut diel at a glance:**

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

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

The temptation is to compare them to Dönnhoff, he-to-whom-all-riesling-producers-aspire and all that, but I think Diel's wines are too different to tolerate direct comparison. Armin's and Christoph's wines are more studiously brilliant, more explicit; they're no less pure, but it's another kind of purity. I'm tempted to wonder whether Diel's are the Nahe wines Hans-Günter Schwarz might have made had he not made Pfalz wines.

I'll soon be publishing a piece in WORLD OF FINE WINE on the subject of evanescence and the unsayable, and it deals in part with a comparison of Diel's and Dönnhoff's wines, not to determine which is "better" but rather to try and explicate their disparate existential lives. In short, Diel's wines "add up" and Dönnhoff's do not. In the four vintages I have tasted in their entirety at Diel, I've never seen a wine askew. Please don't misunderstand; I am not saying the wines are too perfect to have soul. They have plenty of soul. But it's a kind of soul that has its shirt tucked-in, and the shoes match the purse. They are visible and depictable. With Dönnhoff there is always something para-sensual that resists compressing into language. Not everyone loves this quality, just as many people prefer baroque and classical-period music to that of the impressionists, with their greater tonal ambiguity. I'm fascinated by the differences between these two types of wine, and relieved I don't have to choose only one.

### **ESTATE DRY WINES**

- GSD-062 **2007 Diel de Diel** +  
Indeed this is an exceptionally smart and pleasing wine, back to the cool aromas of the 2005 after the toastier '06; thus even more to my own liking, though this was bottled earlier and was in better shape to taste; this is a lesson in craft and a delicious dry white wine; 60% Pinot Gris with the balance Pinot Blanc, Riesling and Chardonnay; tasty, useful, long; an everyman's wine that doesn't pander with spurious charm.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)
- GSD-063 **2007 Rosé de Diel**  
All Pinot Noir, mostly whole-cluster pressed and a blend of stainless, seasoned-barrel and used barrique; a tremendously stylish, smoky Rosé; Pernand violets, blackberries, flowery length; silkier than the '06, and markedly long. Serious stuff, by far the best Rosé I offer (except for those that fizz. . . .)  
SOS: 1 (now-6 years)
- GSD-064 **Pinot Noir "Cuvée Caroline," 6/750ml**  
There are plenty of ambitious Pinot Noirs in Germany, but I wonder if there's a more grown-up elegant one than this. Beaune-like green pepper notes below the gushing fruit of young stylish Pinot; oak shows in this infant, but this is wildly vital and lively and a little roasty; not only ambitious but *smart*; it's chasing class and suavity and a high combination of density and elegance and perfume and grace.

**DRY RIESLINGS:**

- GSD-065 **2007 Dorsheim Riesling**  
 It has an almost blatant wintergreen nose, with sweet fennel and tarragon; a lean, incisive palate; a terroir statement with somewhat aloof fruit *per se* but serpentine length of mint, bark and shady forest herbs.  
 SOS: minus-1 (now-2 years; again 8-13 years)
- GSD-066 **2007 Schlossberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** +  
 Next door to Pittermännchen, gravel over slate, an ostensibly “smaller” Grand Cru but in fact this is well-nigh perfect dry Riesling and a great example of how *LAVISH* ripe flavor can be delivered by pure mineral; quicksilver brilliance and the purity of high-mountain water splashing over stones and rock salt. Hi-def dry Riesling!  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 14-20 years)
- GSD-067 **2006 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** ++  
 GSD-067 **2007 Pittermännchen Riesling Grosses Gewächss, 2/750ml** +  
 GSD-067 **2007 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml**
- These three wines will be sold in a *mixed case of 6, 2 bottles each*. Burgberg is the quickest out of the gate; like the Schlossberg had it been mixed with Berg Rottland, a kind of primordial ur-Riesling; so much extract the palate reads it as *sweet*; a rope-ladder of mineral unfurls to the horizon; it’s stern but forgiving, immense but not ungainly, and so anciently mineral it’s like licking the walls of an iron mine. Pittermännchen was somewhat scolding to start but became weirdly beautiful as it warmed and got air; it showed a strange “sweetness” as if a little gentian were growing right out of the slate, and there’s a slicing salty flower-grappa; a wizardly, esoteric Riesling, at least in the infantile state of early March. Indeed Goldloch was simply too unevolved to note, but since it’s usually the most voluminously fruity of the three, it seemed a benign risk to include it. These *are*, after all, some of Germany’s most important dry Rieslings.  
 SOS: 0 (all three) and (now-3 years; again 12-20 years for all three)

**WINES WHICH ARE NOT DRY!**

- GSD-068 **2007 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Kabinett** ++  
 An astonishing wine! Apples and herbs and sweet grasses and flint; this has it all, wry and grinning and fleshy and fibrous and vaporous and long; a *panna cotta* of violets and stones; a salty acid-driven finish; Riesling as rendered by a crazed and loony Muscat. Serious joy!  
 SOS: 2 (6-24 years)
- GSD-069 **2007 Goldloch Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Orange and tangelo, overripe peach and bergamot; juicy and firm, solid yet voluptuous, vaporous and long, plump yet muscular (how many ways can I say it?); a rocco opulent wine yet also seriously devout in its terroir, even as it blushes and giggles.  
 SOS: 2 (8-27 years)
- GSD-070 **2007 Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This is more fervidly acidic and baked-apple (which concentrates the acids also, you know), but the shimmer and needly penetration are wonderful; the wine’s creamy and lashing, like so many ‘07s, this harmonious contrast of opposites, delivered on a wave of heirloom apples.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

- GSD-071 **2007 Scheurebe Spätlese** **++**  
 What a pity one of Germany's truly great Scheus is only available in homeopathic quantities! Better than none at all, I guess, and this is one *grrrrrowwlll-hisssssssssss!* Scheu kitty; sage and cassis, ramps and slightly burned leek or spring-onion; the palate is an incantation of wisteria and lilacs; the inner perfume *occupies* your palate and probably soaks into the hypothalamus; writing and rippling and digging its nails into your back, this Scheu draws blood.  
 SOS: 2 (now-15 years)
- GSD-073 **2007 Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese** **++**  
 Maintains its sleekness and raciness even as it seeps its slatey honey; a euphony of perfect apple; an isolated cold island, icy polar waters crash against the cliffs, windy lonely plateaus where sheep huddle against the wind; a single tree stands alone in a sunny spot, you draw near and there are apples, a type that only grows there, and you don't even have to pick them, they fall into your hands, and with the first taste you start to hope your friends won't find you, so you can be alone for days and days with these lonely miraculous apples. . . .  
 SOS: 3 (12-30 years)
- GSD-072 **2007 Goldloch Riesling Auslese** **++**  
 Again the sheer beauty of the wine overcame my wish to avoid redundancy and restrain the offerings of Auslesen . . . but what can you do? This is the big brother of that woody haunting 2006 Spät; it's all *patisserie* and frilly, cherubic and cooing and yet with quite the jab of finishing acidity. What are we to make of a world that gives us a thing like this and yet also makes us indifferent to it?  
 SOS: 3 (12-32 years)

**A QUARTET OF MATURE RIESLINGS IN SMALL QUANTITIES:**

- GSD-074 **1998 Riesling (QbA)** is sprightly and perfect; apple-butter, smoke and quince. 20 CASES ONLY
- GSD-075 **1998 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese (+)** is a perfect slate Riesling just entering its adulthood; ripe, slim, piquant, talc-y, shapely and racy. 20 CASES ONLY
- GSD-077 **1998 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese (++)** this is so wonderfully angular and wry, sweet stones against perfect botrytis, one of those why-we-love-Riesling Rieslings. 10 CASES ONLY
- GSD-076 **1998 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Auslese (+)** is a little drier; smoky and juicy with the prosciutto savor-sweetness; seductive and yummy. 10 CASES ONLY



# rheinhessen wines



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

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

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



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

And it isn't only happening along the Rheinfront by Nierstein. One year at Gysler I noticed a poster for a tasting featuring growers in a group called Message In A Bottle. Any group to which Alex Gysler belonged was ipso facto intriguing, and I asked Alex whether any of his colleagues might be interesting to me. You'll see the results of his answer a few pages hence. Perhaps these guys were inspired by the acclaim attaching to Wittmann and Keller, who are making stellar wines from vineyards *no one* heard of ten years ago.

Sure the Rheinhessen remains home to a great deal of dross (Liebfraumilch has to come from somewhere, I

guess) but there's no equivalent buzz in the *Rheingau*, where mediocre wine from great land remains the status quo. Indeed the Rheinhessen seems to invert that melancholy formula, making excellent wine from (ostensibly) nondescript land. You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

You need a really unassailable idealism to worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flat-tish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may be possible that *great* wines just could be written into some of this land, if you're unwilling to assume they aren't, and willing to stake it all on your idealism. And, I'd have to add, willing to sell your wine for something less than it's worth. It helps that much of the vineyard work can be done by machine, but it helps even more that these young people no longer feel alone; they are part of an informal fraternity working for a common good.

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

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

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

But then I think of what I already have. None of the potential newbies have been as good as Strub, and none of their wines offered better value. And this truth is even more dramatic in the 2007 vintage, which was excellent throughout Rheinhessen and which is Walter Strub's best vintage since 2001. *And* it shows the real value of great land, because we sometimes need remind

ing why Nierstein acquired the reputation it did. Want to see? Step right up.

Strub's were the 2nd group of wines I tasted, and also the last. I wanted to see them four weeks' apart, first to see how they'd developed but mostly to see them with a palate honed by 28 days of tasting. If anything they were better. Walter did almost no whole-cluster pressing because everything was so clean, and this may have given the wines their palpably solid bodies. I was so happy I actually won two games of "Asshole" against the seething trifecta of Margit, Johannes and Juliane Strub. If you don't know this card game, really, don't ever learn it. If you insist then learn it from me because there's every chance you'll *beat* me. The adolescent mind was designed to search-and-destroy with this fiendish game. Don't ask me how I managed to actually win.



Eiswein, which is one of those shake-your-soul German wines, and loved the juxtaposition of drinking this while playing cards with my friends. Due attention was paid

Walter wisely looked on while the rest of us took turns being humiliated. I opened a bottle of Selbach's 2001 Badstube

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

to the wine, but all life didn't have to stop so that we could *worship* it. We appreciated and loved it, talked about it, and threw down the cards. Don't you suppose that many "great" wines are inwardly screaming *Get me down off this pedestal so I can play too?*

Even if I'd lost every game I'd have been happy. My friends were in good health. The wines kicked ass. And best of all, the 2007 SOIL TO SOUL bottling is everything it promised to be, and I can't wait to get it into your glass. More to come. . . .

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

The samples were lined up when I arrived. Most of the wines were bone-dry or nearly so, and the question arose how sweet they should ultimately be. The Trocken

fetish was only incipient in those days. Well yours truly had no earthly idea how sweet the wines should be; I'd never looked at an analysis and had no *idea* how many grams-per-liter of sweetness equaled what impression of sweetness on the palate. Walter gave me an '81 to taste and told me how sweet it was, and I tried using that wine as a benchmark.

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

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

I've learned a few things over the years. More sugar doesn't always taste sweeter. Often it's the opposite. What tastes perfect in the lab needs more sweetness at bottling, because bottling constricts fruit and body and emphasizes acidity, and because sugars begin to polymerize immediately. If a wine's a bit too sweet, time will see to it. If it's too dry, ain't nuthin' you can do.

Here's why I'm going on about this in a text about Walter Strub. Because of the many layers of trust he showed me, out of the goodness of his heart. He invited me behind the scenes, allowing me to see his wines au naturel, and to taste as I'd never tasted before. And to my astonishment, he took my ideas seriously. But that's Walter: no secrets, no artifice, full of the spirit of sharing. Many of the hippies of the sixties turned into the very people they despised, but Walter, who was never a hip-

pie, embodies all the virtues they espoused. Giving, trusting, sharing, no games, nothing to hide, sometimes even a little naïve, but actually, remarkably, *Good*. It is good, the collegial trust he shows me; it has helped me grow professionally and personally. It is good he invites me in to the wines, doesn't do the take-it-or-leave-it thing



Walter Strub

(no disrespect intended to those who do; each is entitled to his own approach) and fosters a mood of easy comradeship. In short, he treats me as a friend. And I am touched and gratified. Finally it doesn't matter how much wine you sold, which pack you belonged to, or whether yours was the fashionable position on the issues of the day. What matters are the faiths you kept, and how you treated other people. By those measures, Walter is leading a good life.

So imagine my surprise when I descended into Walter's cellar and found he'd outfitted all his tanks with chilling units. He has joined the new wave of German growers who'd rather stop fermentation than use *dosage*. Obviously that's entirely OK by me, though I do miss the blending work and do not agree with the anti-*dosage* crusaders. But Walter told me “It's always been my dream to be able to do this; it makes the wines more pure.” A few years ago a guy named Paul Weber made what he said would be an innocuous TV-film about me and my doings, but which he was asked to sexy-up a bit, so he turned it into an ideological war between the pro and anti dosage camps, and Walter was (as was I) on the unfashionable side of the issue. (Idiots! It shouldn't even be an issue.) Walter says he wasn't spurred on by the film, but I know it annoyed him; correctly so.

In any case 2005 was his first vintage using the technology, and whether coincidental or not, his entire cellar

wouldn't ferment to completion: he didn't have a dry wine! This is inconvenient for him, though meaningless to me, though there's an irony in that '05's softness might have favored drier renderings. But, we'll never know.

Walter was working in a wine shop in Munich for an impossibly haughty Bavarian snob, and I was browsing in the store one day in May 1978, and the snob was Holding Forth and said something so magnificently dreadful that I caught Walter's eye, and between us there flashed a bolt of recognition.

I approached him and we talked about wine. The rest is history.

There are things in one's life to which one appeals when solace is needed. When you're in the thickets and you look to life and ask "Hey, remind me what makes me happy", not the things you have to think about, but the ones that spontaneously console you. I can't think about Walter and Margit Strub and not feel better — even if I was feeling fine to begin with!

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

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

But none of this is quite as systematic as I make it sound. In effect, our hero blunders through with good

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

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

Well, one more. This has *nothing* to do with why you should buy the wines, and for all I know you're thinking "Why do I need to know all this?" and of course there's no reason. The only reason is that I need to say it. Thinking back, I don't think I have ever *enjoyed* myself as much as I do with Strubs. If it sounds as though all we do is sit and sigh dreamily at one another then I've given a false impression; most of what we do is howl with laughter. Notwithstanding occasional lapses into seriousness (for Walter is a born philosopher) I often leave an evening with Strubs barely able to breathe, I've been laughing so hard.

**strub at a glance:**

Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar—with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to “read” and understand.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. We were oversold on Dönnhoff one year, so I half-jokingly suggested we slap some Dönnhoff labels on STRUB wine; the stylistic resemblance is plausibly close. Walter’s recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they’re ripe and lush. They’re very often reductive and spritzy, complex and long.

GST-138 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Trocken**

No you’re not reading the wrong catalogue. Walter visited Austria some years ago (stimulated by meeting many of my producers when they all toured around the States together) and brought back GV clippings from Willi Bründlmayer. He claims there was a time Grüner Veltliner was traditional in Rheinhessen, after which it was supplanted by Silvaner. He’s planted it in a warm parcel on limestone clay, and ‘07’s is the fifth crop.

O.K., now it’s starting to make sense, and you drink this wine as much more than a plausible curio. In fact it is *actively delicious* and a huge leap ahead of any previous vintage; juiciness and snap and true varietality; almost stern in the Urgestein direction, ore-like and almost a Chablis broth and hay note, with scintillating vitality. You can NOT stop at one glass!

SOS: 0 (now-6 years)

GST-139 **2007 Riesling SOIL TO SOUL, Riesling by Strub**

+

CORE-LIST WINE. Good though it was, the 2006 vintage was something of a soft-opening for this wine, given the various challenges of that vintage. The wine is *very good*, mind you, but this 2007 is several levels better, and realizes the ambition with which it was conceived. It is entirely Spätlese juice, unchaptalized.

The basic idea was to supplant the old Liter bottling with a “branded” Riesling that didn’t have some damned animal on the label. It should ideally be estate-grown fruit (as it is in 2007), and we want it fragrant, vigorous and on the dry side. Drier than Dragonstone, not as dry as Lingenfelder’s old “Bird Label.”

We tasted every tank and identified what ought to go where; which Brückchen had to become the Kabinett, which Paterberg the Spätlese, and when we were done we agreed the four tanks remaining (two Brückchen, an Orbel and the old-vines Paterberg from which the 3-star has been made) should make up the Soil To Soul. But in what proportions? Just as a guide we blended them in totality according to the actual amount of each wine available, after which we figured we could tweak. But the gods smiled, and amazingly, we didn’t have to. The wine was perfect.

So, it contains the old-vines Paterberg, two lots of Brückchen and one lot of red-soil Orbel from the Grand Cru slope. The aroma is as complex as we could have dreamed; key-lime, Parma ham, wintergreen, ginger candy; the palate is taut, grippy, *exciting*—it’s the best branded Riesling I’ve ever offered; even the finish is suave and complex—you want to eat your own mouth just to keep it going.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (3-14 years)

- GST-141 **2007 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Nutty, plummy aromas, woody-forestry balsam and wintergreen; the palate is seamlessly knit, earthy-spicy and long; perfectly and juicily balanced; liquid *Iberico!*  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (2-15 years)
- GST-140 **2007 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE, self-evidently. In 2007 this becomes a great terroir wine, all chalk and ginger—10 year-old Blanc de Blancs smells like this at times—a several-dimensional impact, juicy zingy concentrated and focused *without* a big acid-statement; corn and sweated spring-onions and lump crab meat and beurre blanc with lemon zest.  
 SOS: 2 (4-18 years)
- GST-142 **2007 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 Lovely fragrance and a lush palate; voluminous and with its typical aromas of milk chocolate and prosciutto; a little youthful sternness at the end should ameliorate with bottle-time.  
 SOS: 0 (1-3 years; again 12-16 years)
- GST-143 **2007 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Wow, a monster. A happy monster because he is *full* of chocolate; look, it's prototypical Oelberg, both extravagant and solid; crazy-long but *deep*, not only loud, and profound, not only assertive. This is *Grand Cru* defined, and Walter's single best wine since his great 2001s.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-23 years)

### THE PATERBERG SERIES

I think we need to highlight this unlikely vineyard because no one suspects how good it is, and Walter always seems to pull something remarkable from it. In fact, over the years I think he's actually more synchronous with Paterberg than with his Grand Crus from the red slope. Yet no one else has even hinted at the beauty which lies inside this land. It's like a shy dog who only obeys one master. Paterberg is a large site, covering the entire limestone plateau south of Nierstein on the way to Oppenheim. I'm sure other growers don't see it as predestined for Riesling; the site is wuthering and windswept, and botrytis is extremely rare. I don't even know that I'd call it a Grand Cru, though I'd argue its best sections are 1er Cru and the whole thing is a fascinating lieu dit. Walter has several parcels, the best (and oldest) of which gives us the "starred" wines. This is lower down and more sheltered. The signature-flavors run to lemon-grass and the minty herbs; mint itself, tarragon, Japanese green teas (Sencha and Gyokoru), spicy apples (Empires) and lime-zest; wintergreen too—you get the picture. Peachy it's not. But there's a kind of density of spice, as if set alight on the palate. These are iridescently scintillating wines, ultra-violet and **fabulous** at the table. Here goes. . . .

- GST-137 **2007 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE, because he makes enough of it and he's so identified with this site I wanted to honor that identity, and because *very few* German Rieslings do this high-wire act; in 2007 this is actually riper than the old-vines; spicy, lemon-grassy, minty and delicious; lavish and loveable; blade-sharp cut of clarity again *without* pointed acidity. W-O-W.  
 SOS: 2 (4-18 years)

# take me to your liter

This is a schizy segment of my portfolio. Some of you report great success with this size. Others report it's impossible to sell. These, in my opinion, are the arguments in favor of the Liter:



- **It doesn't sit around in the fridge as long as a magnum, thereby diminishing the chance of spoilage.**
- **It's the perfect size bottle for three or four people on a casual occasion. It contains eight glasses of wine.**
- **It's the perfect size for the cook who wants or needs a cup or so to cook with. There's the equivalent of a full bottle left over for drinking with the meal!**
- **It nearly always contains a dry, light wine that's low in alcohol and very high on pure refreshment value. It's nearly always estate-bottled.**

It seems to me the only way to sell this size is to floor-stack it. If it stands on the shelf alongside 750s, it won't stand *out* enough as a larger package. If it's floor-stacked, you can always put a sign behind it screaming **FULL LITER!** Equivalent to just 56¢ per a 750!!!!

But some of you have tried all these bright ideas and you tell me the wines still don't sell. I have one final bright idea. FORGET THEY'RE LITERS. Don't even tell anybody it's a bigger bottle. It's just a bottle of wine for twelve bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 33% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the *Super Deal* aisle at your local supermarket. Shampoo, 33% more **free**. Man we love that word *free*. Free wine!

I think I offer the very best jug-wine quality you can find anywhere on the market today. I know of no other merchant offering such a variety of cheap, estate-bottled wine in large bottles. I say this in all modesty, or at least in as much modesty as I can muster! They'll do the job at least as well as—I think better than—anything else in the category. Give them a try if you haven't yet. Here they are, the PICK OF THE LITERS:

- GDR-057L **2007 Darting Durkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GGE-024L **2007 Geil Bechtheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-171L **2007 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-070L **2007 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GJS-079L **2007 Schneider Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GJU-110L **2007 Muelenhof Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GKM-103L **2007 Karlmühle Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-139L **2007 Messmer Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GRH-053L **2007 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Falkenberg Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GRH-054L **2007 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Treppchen Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GSP-147L **2007 Spreitzer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-105L **2007 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-106L **2007 Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GWG-132L **2007 Wagner-Stempel Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

# wagner-stempel

## rheinhessen • siefersheim

Daniel and his crew started picking September 15th and didn't finish until November 14th, which means he picked some Rieslings with 150 days of hang-time. His lightest must was 94° Oechsle—including the Litter wine (!)—and I am telling you no one in the Rheinhessen is better than Wagner-Stempel, because no one could be: wine does not improve on this.

Organic certification is just a couple years away. The wines are expensive but far from overpriced: This is an elite-level property who should fetch top-Dollar. But Daniel's wines are misaligned with the US market at the moment. First of course the crapwad Dollar. Then his dividing his assortment into either dry or sweet wines, without the in-between "Kabinett" style that gives y'all an entrée. Then also the silence of the press, so you only have my banshee word for

it. But I sat at my dining room table a month or so ago drinking the 2006 Riesling "Vom Porphyry" and knew with absolute certainty that the wine belonged with the ELITE dry Rieslings of the world. Yet it remains below the radar. How long? And who will be the first to make the discovery?

I owe the discovery to Alex Gysler, and his "Message In A Bottle" poster, and his answer to my question "Is there anyone in this group of particular interest to me?" A few months later I sat at home tasting through a half-dozen samples, and with the first sip of the first wine (the 2002 "Riesling from Porphyry") I had the *AH-HA!* moment.

The estate is 12.5 hectares, in the westernmost district of Rheinhessen, near Bernhard. Soils vary, but there's a significant vein of porphyry like the great soils of the Nahe (which is just a hop skip & jump over the hill), and there are times I think the world's greatest rieslings grow on volcanic soil in general and porphyry in



Daniel Wagner

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Siefersheimer Höllberg and Heerkretz**
- **Soil types: Volcanic material (porphyry and melaphyre)**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Riesling, 25% Burgunder, 15% Silvaner, 10% Spätburgunder**

particular. And young Mr. Wagner has baskets of various soils in his tasting room, and has all his riesling-comprising 50% of his vineyards-is planted on porphyry.

There were times I thought I was drinking the very best of Crusius' wines.

Wagner's first vintage was 1993. He arrived at the apex of the dry-wave and has only recently started making any rieslings with sweetness — I hope to provide encouragement in this direction!

The land is steeper here than in much of the Rheinhessen, and Wagner does 95% of his harvest by hand. Most musts are clarified by gravity, though some are fermented as-is. His basic-quality wines are made in stainless steel, but like many young vintners he's leaning toward more old oak for the top rieslings. Similarly he ferments with cultured yeasts for the basic wines and with natural yeasts for the best rieslings. Most wines sit on the gross lees till February. All of this reveals a characteristic degree of thoughtfulness and flexibility for a young quality-minded vintner.

He's a self-described acid-freak, but also prizes minerality and "tannin in a subtle form," indicating this vintner prizes structure above all things. He has the luxury to do so, because the wines from his beloved Heerkretz (the steepest and highest-elevated site in

Rheinhessen) and Höllberg show astonishing natural *fruit* in a stirring melange of Nahe complexity with Rheinhessen muscle.

He's clearly the rising star — I would say the *risen* star — of his region, and he has a lot coming at him not least of which is a bonny new baby! His wines, while obviously great, are not easily great; they remind me of Jamek in a sense — they reward your full attention, they ask to be studied, and they reveal themselves deliberately. Indeed they often seem to carry more complexity than they can physically hold.

Sometimes I am extremely emotional, so much so I cannot summon language of sufficient power to convey it, and I regret the times I squandered such language on undeserving occasions. All I can manage at these times is an inarticulate yammer, not because there's too little to

say, but rather too much. Daniel Wagner's wines (you knew I'd tie this together didn't you?) can remind me of the wines Hans-Günter Schwarz made at Müller-Catoir, seeming to almost *stammer* with complexity. You wonder how a mere wine can contain so much *information*. I urge you to approach these wines with the quality of attention you reserve for the elite: They deserve it.

Just one thing to add. This being the modern era, there are no undiscovered superstars, and Daniel's wines are *in demand*, which means we get only ONE crack at them. They are not offered on the Spring DI, nor will they be unless we see a big-volume vintage. Please don't delay. This is one of the half-dozen greatest estates in this offering, and these 2007s, as a group, are second only to Dönnhoff.

#### wagner-stempel at a glance:

Dynamic young vintner making weighty, sensational Nahe-like porphyry-wines, already among the very best in Rheinhessen, and certain to be THE next superstar-estate in the region.

#### how the wines taste:

Generous, complex and polished, serene graceful strength and exotic haunting flavors.

#### GWG-032L **2007 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

There's an acid-kick here at the back of a juicy and generous Riesling. The acid doesn't read sharp, but there's a Calvinist dryness for folks who say no one makes Alsace Riesling like Trimbach anymore. Do note this has often moderated by the time you taste; I'm there in very early March and some of the wines are still raw. But in fidelity to the impression of the moment. . . .

SOS: minus-1 (now-4 years)

#### GWG-029 **2007 Silvaner Trocken**

If this isn't the world's best basic Silvaner then someone please send me a better one. It's *warmer* and more toasty than '04-'05-'06, but as generous and as lentilly as a loess-grown GrüVe. Apropos, there's a "reserve" quality Silvaner that could easily pass for Nigl's Piri bottlings.

SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GWG-030 **2007 Scheurebe Trocken** +

Pungent! As stony as Pouilly-Fumé and as curranty as marl-grown Sancerre—35-year-old vines on porphyry by the way—93° Oechsle; full of licorice and wintergreen; it's like a Traiser Bastei as Hans-Günter Schwarz would have made it. Wonderful chewy, juicy wine; addictively drinkable. And be honest somms; if this were some antique heirloom Italian grape variety from a hitherto-unknown region you'd be all over it—this wine is *as frisky and full of Story as anything you can find!*

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

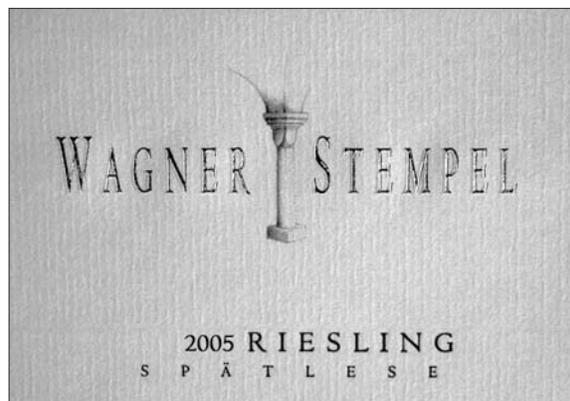
#### GWG-031 **2007 Sauvignon Blanc Trocken** +

Gee, I don't miss Styria anymore. . . .

High-90° Oechsle, with 8.5 g.l. acidity, and dude, this is absolutely marvelous, surreal SauvBlanc; refined aromas (in part from ambient-yeast fermentation); subtle stoniness; *insanely* spicy, volcanic and varietal character (red pepper and currant-leaf), a kind of fine wildness here.

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

- GWG-033 2007 Riesling Trocken “Vom Porphyry” ++**  
 An almost blatant porphyry aroma, as if it'd been bottled specifically for wine instructors' terroir classes; the palate is just *deranged*, amazingly light on its feet for 13.4% alc; it sizzles and shimmers with iridescent superreality; mineral and mint yet all coming on the heels of this emphatic fragrant blast. Palates extra-sensitive to acidity should hold this a few years. The rest of you/us: yummmmmmmmmmm!  
 SOS: 0 (1-4 years; again 12-18 years)
- GWG-034 2007 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml ++**  
**GWG-035 2007 Heerkretz Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml ++(+)**  
 The Höllberg is the deeper, the Heerkretz the more brilliant; the perfect analogy would be Höllberg-as-Loibenberg, Heerkretz-as-Steinertal (assuming you know Alzinger . . .); **Höllberg** is a kingly, regal wine, of depth and then more depth, inscrutable depth; masculine and richly plummy, solid and eternal, authoritative but not haughty; full of secret-sweetness; if this is the brave new world of dry German Rieslings—bring it on. **Heerkretz** was picked well into November; all stone and ginger and grapefruit and plantain chips; you almost can't conceive the material brilliance of this wine, a concentrated ginger-pudding with meyer-lemon zest, and I'm sure that 3rd plus will be warranted once this baby's in bottle.
- GWG-036 2007 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Spätlese ++**  
 Picked 10-14 November, and made from the healthy grapes pulled away from the BA-TBA picked alongside. Still, 110° Oechsle from *clean* fruit is nothing to sneeze at, and this is one ravishing wine; otherworldly mirabelle aromas, with pure cox orange; the palate is *drenched* with malt and talc and white chocolate and almost a Dellchen-like sweet smokiness; the young RS (110 g.l.) is conspicuous now but will integrate in time.  
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GWG-037 2007 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese +**  
 Both lighter and juicier than the Höllberg—this beauty sports a whopping 7.3% alc., thank you very much—yet also with 110° Oechsle; higher-tones apple and banana aromas; the palate is more enveloping and creamy, more citric and less swollen and primordial; piquant pitted-fruit core below this quince-liqueur richness.  
 SOS: 3 (12-30 years)
- GWG-038H 2007 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml +**  
 Somehow this doesn't seem *sweeter* than the Späts, but instead even finer, more careful and further from the ground; it's a blowing pollen of blossom, concentrated and refined.  
 SOS: 3 (15-35 years)



# POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. "Why isn't it enough," I asked, "to simply have groups, fair-good-very good-excellent-superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?" "Good question," answered Pierre. "So what you're proposing is a 5-point scale." Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that's all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that's where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score's the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this *Weltanschauung*, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It's all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn't matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many "points" to "give" it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don't, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the *writer* may have to use points but the *reader* doesn't? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that "scoring" wines is the *sine qua non* of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What's the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here's a quote I like:

*"The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe."* (John Berger, from "The White Bird")

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn't even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be *available* for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many *points* we're going to "give" or "award" the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: "We *awarded* Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale." That's nice. How many points did the wine give *you*, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat's ass how many "points" you gave a wine? That wine was a *gift* to you. And all you can do is "evaluate" it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentlemen with whom I debated this topic wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that he grew *into* using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's soliliquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin's confession (95), Levin's day with the threshers (97), Gerald's walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn't used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I'm constantly thinking "how many points is this scene worth?" I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drippage gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

"Was it good for you, baby . . . ?" *Oh, 89 maybe 90."*

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their *extent* on an absolute scale? What's 100-point joy all about? "I cannot possibly feel happier than this!" Really? *How do you know?*

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine's "stature," but I deliberately leave it loose because I don't want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of *ignition*: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to *deepen* our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he'll peer through Bob's valise, pull out the folder marked "The 100-point Scale" and say; *"I'll just hold on to this; you won't be needing it here."*

# weingut oekonomierat joh. geil i. erben rheinessen • bechtheim

(hereafter referred to as, simply, "Weingut Geil")

We seem to have gotten into the habit of coming here first. It works logistically and stylistically; Geil's wines are ideal wines with which to begin, they are so clean and candid. And Johannes himself is unpretentious and very easy to talk to, which I'm sure came as a relief to my new colleagues, who may have imagined all Germans would be either philosophy professors or Bruno the fashion guy. It wasn't long before they were off and running on Star Trek ephemera ("I'm still big in the battlestar galactica business," said Johannes.)

I was so delighted to have started with this estate two years ago, and y'all are buying lots of wine. Geil so perfectly exemplifies the new wave in Rheinessen. Here's some of the reasons why.

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

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

"No year is like another, and winemaking-by-recipe doesn't bring the best results. Naturally modern techniques such as cool fermentations are generally advisable. The question of whether less is more should be asked!"

"We have done away with deacidification; at least we haven't even confronted the question for many years now. We'd prefer to regulate Riesling's acidity with later harvesting at higher ripeness."

"When I think of my favorite among our wines I spontaneously reach for the 2002s; they have a wonderful fruit aroma and acidity."

"For me aroma is the most important factor; it's the first impression, and should be clear, varietally typical and express its origin."

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we some-



Johannes Geil-Bierschenk

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

- **Vineyard area: 27 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bechtheimer Geyersberg, Bechtheimer Rosengarten**
- **Soil types: heavy chalky loam, carbonate-rich loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 35% other**

ural, but we do keep a little Süßreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO<sub>2</sub>"

This is such a wonderful discovery I only wish I'd made it myself. In fact I have Gault-Millau to credit, thanks to their heralding Geil as their DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR 2004. That alone didn't hook me (though previous year's discoveries include Mathern, Biffar and Spreitzer); what hooked me was seeing Rieslaner planted. This variety is a litmus test for the craziness-quotient of a vintner. It creates, or can create supernal wines, but it is a sonofabitch to grow, and if you grow it then you are chasing something well worth capturing, and rarely captured.

Rheinessen's where the action is, as I said, and I asked for samples from two estates, of which these were dramatically superior. I paid a visit at the very end of my trip, and all was confirmed. Tasting samples at remove is only partially useful: you have to go there, see the folks, pet the dog, taste a range of vintages and taste *together* with the family.

There are three generations in the house, the youngest of whom is Johannes' new baby. We seemed to have met before we met, if you see what I mean. And when they gave me a dry Riesling from the difficult 2000 vintage to taste I thought "These folks have moxie" and when the wine was outstanding I thought "Man am I

lucky I got here before anyone else did. . . .”

Bechtheim lies just where the hills begin, on the west flank of the Rhein plain. The key sites for Riesling are **Geyersberg**—the best one—made up of chalky loess and tertiary marl. The **Rosengarten** is above the village, on gravelly sand and clay, and the **Hasensprung** rolls off to the west on similar soil. It’s a somewhat large estate—28 hectares, about 30% Riesling—and I infer that young Johannes came home from Geisenheim full of the restless idealistic spirit of these times: lower yields, tenderer cel-

lar work. And the results are dramatic, and the prices still humane.

2007 was of course excellent here. “We started a pre-harvest at the beginning of September, and didn’t finish until the end of October,” said Johannes. “It was the longest harvest ever at this winery. Bechtheim in general is early, much earlier than Gysler or Wagner-Stempel. In effect we have two 2007 vintages, as we had two days of warm rain in mid October, and botrytis came after.”

**geil at a glance:**

Honorable traditional Rheinhessen estate energized with the arrival of a young lion. Outstanding modern white wines (Riesling, Scheurebe, Rieslaner) at wonderfully reasonable prices. An emblem of the quixotic new generation in Rheinhessen.

**how the wines taste:**

Firm, delineated, clear, complex, healthy and radiant. I would teach a seminar with them, saying “This is the quality you can now expect from a solid young grower in Germany making wines in unexceptional conditions from good but not great land.”

GGE-024L **2007 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

Not chaptalized; a pretty, softly stony, sorrel and mirabelle-y Riesling; almost a Styrian sappiness and a deliciously juicy texture; quite good length for a “simple” wine-by-the-glass or fridge-white.

I can’t say this too many times: it is usually considered acceptable to offer *merely* acceptable wine at this price and for this purpose. When you find something this good it is every bit as impressive and probably even more meaningful than finding high quality among the glamour-wines. A vintner who offers this quality to the customer who’d have settled for FAR less is a person of *INTEGRITY*. This, we celebrate!

SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

GGE-023 **2007 Bechtheimer Heilig kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE, because yay! We needed a Scheu on the core-list, which was lonely for some kitty-action; this one, don’t worry, is on the moderate side of Scheu; it’s a plummy, violet-and-lavender type (like Darting’s Spielberg), less tropical; sleeker than the ‘06; a refined and almost polite Scheu, with a Nahe-like finesse of tone and modulation, yet still varietally expressive.**

SOS: 2 (now-6 years)

GGE-022 **2007 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**

What aroma: ur-apple and mirabelle; *this* is why 2007 will make such friends; despite 93° Oechsle it dances and grins with freshness—due to robust yields, in fact, and *en bloc* picking—a charming knock-it-back German Riesling in the “classic” manner of the riper years of the ‘70s-‘90s.

SOS: 2 (3-12 years)

GGE-027 **2007 Muskateller Trocken**

Hey, an actual QbA . . . was wondering what those used to taste like. This embodies perfectly the idea of pure and simple deliciousness; honest, happy, more!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

- GGE-025 **2007 Bechtheimer Geysersberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 Just-bottled (late February) and not showing all its cards; aromas of *bouquet garni* and yellow fruit; a fleshy wine with good phenolic grip; ripely nubby and stony with an almost GrüVe flowering-field character; lots of juicy shimmer.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-14 years)
- GGE-026 **2007 Bechtheimer Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese Feinherb** +  
 Very late harvest, “cold fruit into a cold cellar,” as Johannes put it; a virtually perfect “dry” Riesling; more redcurrant and even roasted red beets, then lemon zest of all things; wonderfully juicy, minty length and a seductive finish that sings to you to take the next sip.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 11-17 years)
- GGE-028 **2007 Bechtheimer Geysersberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 Compared to the Kabinett, more mirabelle, less apple; not riper-seeming and yet entirely different, more allusive and elegant; more meyer-lemon and freesia, and an *arch* sweetness with a piquant edge.  
 SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GGE-029H **2007 Bechtheimer Geysersberg Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** +  
 Sensational wine! All the complexity of the variety; you’ll find 30 associations, and I find guava and lemon zest and tarragon, and the jet-blast roar of intensity of Rieslaner; immensely juicy and hard to spit—and a really *sick* value!  
 SOS: 2 (4-18 years)
- GGE-030H **2007 Bechtheimer Geysersberg Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml** +  
 This gains of course in power and force, but less perceptibly in flesh or sweetness as such; there’s greater thrust of aroma, and more lavish candied lemon and malt on the palate; a spicy-as-hell finish, and another amazing value.  
 SOS: 3 (10-25 years)



# gernot gysler

## rheinhessen • weinheim

“Before I started working organic, I’d felt I’d gone as far as I could in winemaking,” said Alex Gysler. “But since I started organic I see the wines have more depth and more soul. How can you talk about terroir if you can’t let the vineyard be? If you’re forcing it all the time?” Excellent questions, and not because there’s only one possible answer, but rather because they give food for thought. Gysler will soon be Demeter-certified but possibly not in time to label his

2007 vintage accordingly. In any case, he’s managed the conversion without visiting catastrophe upon his estate; it’s easier here than on the Mosel. All of this was motivated by his wife’s first pregnancy, beautifully enough. I know the feeling; you want to make the world perfect. 2007 is an entirely *riper*-seeming vintage than any to date here. I suspect it has more to do with the year and less with the vineyard regimen, but whatever it is, these boys have weight.

Even last year Alex’s wines were more than merely correct. Theirs was a quality of unusual vitality and self-confidence. I used to give guitar lessons back in the hoary days of my misspent youth, and you always knew the exact moment when the player stopped fighting the instrument and started to *play*. Two new things enter the picture: serenity and expression. He knew he’d grab the notes, he’s figured out the HOW. Now it’s time to work on the WHAT. I got that sense from Gysler’s ’06s – they had more of *him* in them. They were more animate, more *crucially* alive.

Gysler is how you can see the enormous changes in German wine in just the past ten years.

Alex assumed control of the estate abruptly due to



Alex Gysler & family

the untimely death of his father Gernot. Father was a man of his times, an honorable and honest vintner who came of age in the post-war years, and was seduced by both technology and by all the new crossings which promised Auslese every year. “My father liked soft wines,” said Alex, “And they were good of their type, but I want to change things.”

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg**
- **Soil types: Reddish weathered soils with stone, loam and clay**
- **Grape Varieties: 30% Riesling, 30% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder, 10% Silvaner, 10% Huxelrebe, 8% Scheurebe**

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing now up to 70%. He’s shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, entirely done away with dosage, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel. He’s pulling out the new crossings and replanting with classic varieties (no mean feat with 12 hectares to manage).

Yet even as Alex turns the cellar completely around, in even deeper ways he is his father’s son. You see it in his kindness and care and lack of artifice.

And needless to say, he’s been discovered. None of the young can afford to work in obscurity; their only hope is to get on the Map *fast*. So they send their samples to all the necessary reviewers and they make all the necessary scenes.

Alex has settled in, and his wonderful dog still gazes dolefully at all the fun from which he feels excluded. What’s happening here is good. Recognition from the German wine press is also good. Soon it will be time to take the next steps. Because it isn’t reducible, after all, to formula, or if it is, you risk making formulaic-tasting wines. Germans have a great word with no English equivalent: “Fingerspitzengefühl.” A long ‘un, yes, but translated it is “the feeling on the finger tips” and it is the difference between correct wines, even “exciting” wines . . . and great wines.

It’s best when you don’t *know* what the vintner did. I have traveled with tasters who seize upon a single aspect of winemaking and try to determine whether-X-or-Y with each wine they taste. Cultured yeast or wild yeast? Tanks or casks? And when they’re wrong they feel great conster-

nation, while I smile inside. Because that fumbling is how they learn; it's how I learned and still learn. I doubt if anyone tasting, say, Dönnhoff's wine could tell you whether they're aged in casks or tanks. Take Justen and Christoffel: casks or tanks, and which is which? The more you look for cause-effect syllogisms by which wine is "explained" the more frustrated you'll become. Wine is explained in the feeling of the fingertips. And it takes the time it takes, for the taster and for the vintner.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which

takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."

#### gysler at a glance:

Big changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being!

#### how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now.

### A FABULOUS TRIO OF LITERS

GGY-070L **2007 Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE**, because, I mean, come on; is there a *better* value in the world for white wine? Especially estate-bottled, small-batch white wine? This one's a little drier and more sinewy than last year—it's the ripest and latest-picked (93° Oechsle), and do you realize what that means? *The best fruit goes into the CHEAPEST wine!* And he does that for you and me. I mean, we ought to buy the man a pinball machine at least. There's a lot of thick vinous substance here and a truly detailed and refined aroma, so much so that you can't really talk about "simple pleasure"; this is an absurdly stylish and ludicrously underpriced wine, and if you don't buy it I can't promise I'll respect you in the morning.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)**

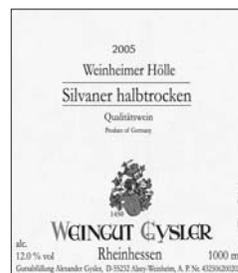
GGY-073L **2007 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**  
 Some purchased fruit in here, but carefully vetted and controlled; it's minty-herbal and juicy; a bit "drier" than the 2006 but with lovely density and saltiness; rosemary and grassiness and an end-palate mineral into a long minty finish.  
**SOS: 0 (now-5 years)**

GGY-071L **2007 Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
 Another ridiculously expressive Scheu in a cassis and sage direction; really incense-y and smoky aromas and a seethingly carnal note delivered via the fructose; this is also our first bio-dynamic Scheu, and it tastes like the soil had had an *orgy* right before it was picked.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)**

### OTHER REMARKABLE WINES:

GGY-072 **2007 Scheurebe Trocken**  
 From the red-soiled Hölle, and one of the last wines picked though with "only" 85° Oechsle; this is about as frisky as NZ Sauvignon Blanc without the overstatement and bubble-gum that sometimes show there; we have some pretty *manic* iris and violet action here, with a sheet-metal minty finish.  
**SOS: 0 (now- 6 years)**

- GGY-074 **2007 Weinheimer Riesling Halbtrocken** +  
 This is more pointed and perhaps less extroverted than that giddy exuberant 2006, but will again be an exemplary dry Riesling, less peachy-appley and more wintergreeny-spearminty, but the filigree etching of nuance is lovely, and I can't believe any Riesling at or near this price delivers the class and stylishness of this; every restaurant in the country should have it, at least until we sell the 200 available cases. . . .  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-9 years)
- GGY-069 **2007 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**  
**CORE-LIST WINE, because it's a forthright blast of fruit and vitality that costs less than three gallons of gas, and because you'll like it! If you've always liked it you'll say "This might be the best one yet." It's a stayman-apple and black cherry pie in a glass. 18/20 on the yum-fun-o-meter.**  
 SOS: 2 (3-12 years)
- GGY-067 **2006 Weinheimer Mandelberg Riesling**  
 This again would be the "Grosses Gewächs" if there were one. Do you think chaptalization renders a wine automatically "inferior?" Think again. These are Alex's oldest vines, from his best parcel, and he opted to chaptalize a segment of it; It's like a *demi-glace* of the Kabinett; there's simply more *material* here, and great curranty smoky length.  
 SOS: 2 (7-18 years)
- GGY-075 **2007 Weinheimer Kapellenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 It still had some fermentation aromas when I was there (March 1st) but there seems to be more of that sweet smoky aroma from a good *charcuterie*, and more mid-palate to buffer the RS; also some botrytis in its smoky form. The rest will have to wait.  
 SOS: 2 (5-15 years)
- GGY-076 **2007 Weinheimer Mandelberg Riesling Auslese**  
 An *en-bloc* picking with 70% botrytis, and as always the last wine picked, from a 39-year-old vineyard; a weighty mineral Auslese in the old school; the fine botrytis recalls a great '75; the wine rolls out a red carpet on your palate.  
 SOS: 3 (7-20 years)
- GGY-068H **2005 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe TBA, 12/375ml** +  
 This is only slightly riper but quite a bit more elegant and shapely than the Mandelberg I offered last year. It has higher acidity and *more fruit*. This isn't just "good for a Huxel," it is excellent TBA period. It also isn't – thank god – a figgy monster with 280° Oechsle where you get the "score" but you *can't drink it*. This is a wine to SWALLOW.  
 SOS: 4 (15-35 years)



# christian-wilhelm bernhard

## rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

I'd grown so accustomed to thinking of Hartmut Bernhard as a young pup I was taken aback to see a little gray starting around his temples. There's a photo-essay on the wall in the tasting room showing the 1980 harvest, and Hartmut looks all of eleven years old. Maybe that's why. My fault, though, for these wines and this winery are striding forward each year, and no-longer-"young"—Hartmut Bernhard is entering his prime.

2002 marked the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

The Bernhards are out of the way, just over the hill from Bad Kreuznach and the Nahe Valley. It's one of those curious little corners of Germany. The soils are not unlike Nahe soils; igneous weathered rock, even porphyry in some places. Others are typically Rheinhessen clay; a hybrid of styles emerges. Some wines show Nahe-like skeins of curranty delineation and do best in damper years. Others are typical Rheinhessen but with a more compact profile, as though their proximity to the Nahe caused them to speak with a Nahe-accent. They're also lighter and more buoyant than many Rheinhessen wines.

Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

I do wish, though, that I could persuade Hartmut to give me his Riesling from the porphyry vineyards with residual sugar; they need it, I want it, but I can't get it.



- **Vineyard area: 10.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Hackenheimer Kirchberg, Frei-Laubersheimer Fels**
- **Soil types: Porphyry, weathered volcanic soils, clay and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 25% Riesling, 21% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 6% Grauburgunder, 5% Auxerrois, 3% Scheurebe, 3% Gewürztraminer, 22% other varieties**

Why? His private customers expect it Trocken!

Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had only Riesling dosage. I'm sure this contributes to their ever-increasing polish.

Bernhards make a bigger deal out of my visits than my meager talents warrant. I'm sure they know I like their wines, but I hope they know I *respect* them too. Hoping they're reading these words; gentlemen (and lady), it remains a pleasure to grow in the knowledge of our respective crafts together over the years we've known one another. And it is a joy to know you all. There. It's just the sort of thing I can't say out loud without dying of embarrassment. Now go away, I'm blushing as it is.

As it happens they *did* read that little passage, and were duly touched, which embarrassed me even more. I don't know whether 2007 is so remarkable here because it's just a superb vintage, or because Hartmut's settling in even more. The house is both actually and aesthetically his now. Things feel complete.

**bernhard at a glance:**

Though I went at first looking for Auxxerois, this has turned out to be a Riesling and Scheurebe agency, offering excellent value especially for Scheu.

**how the wines taste:**

It depends on the soil. Rieslings from the volcanic porphyry soils taste like Nahe wines under a sun lamp, complex and intricate. The wines from the clayey Kirchberg site are real gob-stuffers; they're not elegant (though far from clumsy) but rather concentrated and chewy. Each year Hartmut inches closer to his pinnacle.

GCB-074 **2007 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Trocken**

This is in fact a big Spätlese from 30-year-old vines, showing the old-vines creaminess and fine porphyry notes; stylish and juicy with physio-“sweetness;” don't drink it too cold; superfine elegant shimmer and complexity.

SOS: 1 (now-2 years; again 6-12 years)

GCB-069 **2006 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**

All bergamot and cassis, with nice mid-palate focus and a ton of wry charm; lavender and incense and marvelous spiciness; ginger and meyer-lemon.

SOS: 2 (now- 5years)

GCB-075 **2007 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Feinherb** +

Perhaps the greatest Riesling I have tasted here; flinty, allspice, quince, violets, wet hay, Chinese 5-spice; juicy and keenly spicy and superbly balanced, with perfect RS; the sizzling sexy finish grows almost pepperminty; one of the outstanding wines of the vintage.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)

GCB-076 **2007 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**

The best vintage yet of this mouthfilling meaty Riesling from the clay slope; this is not *only* dense and meaty but also detailed and many-layered; toasted violets and lavender, with minty length; there's a polish here that's new, another level of quality.

SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

GCB-073 **2007 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**

Another polished wine that's almost sleek given it's nearly gelatinous texture; again a new detail and articulation, a liveliness and dialect. I had to ask, and he said it was the vintage. We'll see!

SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

GCB-077 **2007 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer Spätlese**

A blend of a sweet cask with a dry one, averaging out to 30 g.l. RS; very much the faded-rose and lychee style of Gewürz, but pure and true and without earthiness; incense-y and smoky, and comparable to good Alsace examples.

SOS: 1 (now-6 years)

# special offering on half-bottles

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Yay, they're back! It was painful not to be able to offer them last year, because I agree with you that it's important to have regular *everyday* wines available in halves, not just special-occasion and/or dessert wines.

So here they are, but do understand, none are available in huge quantities, because if you guys *don't* buy them then the growers are stuck with them, and we err on the side of caution when we ask them how many to bottle for us. As ye demand, so shall we supply, but only if you really truly buy.



GSO-303H **2007 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

GSO-304H **2007 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

GSO-307H **2007 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

GSO-309H **2007 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

GSO-316H **2007 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese "Schmitt", 12/375ml**

# rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s *Wine Atlas*. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Prinz von Hessen is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite

a way to go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclau (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a

**Though things are discernibly better now, there’s still distressingly little buzz about the region.**

wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough. A certain prevailing hauteur

may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, *ahem* “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard, greed must surely die hardest.

Though things are discernibly better now, there’s still





*Early Spring at the Rudesheim Schlossberg*

distressingly little *buzz* about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is still no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted *concept* of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a “true” Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent *sense* of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of *fun* here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rudesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau’s real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Nahe and the Mosel, but the truth is there’s no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly *different* from one another’s as Rauenthal’s are from Winkel’s, as Erbach’s are from Hallgarten’s—all of them. Taste *any* of these as they should be, and you’ll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The “classic” wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is *not*: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it’s not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as

to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for “experts” who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like *polished*, *impeccable*, *aristocratic* sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them *big scores*? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he’s less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the *cheapest guy in town!*—that a wine content to

### **The classic wine of the Rheingau is firm, contained, dignified.**

merely make a “statement” seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I’m quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

We’re looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy.

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren’t merely honorable, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn’t punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. *These* growers, at least, deserve your support.

Do I even need to write a profile on Leitz for you any more? He's here all the time; y'all know him as well as I do! Ah, but you didn't know him back in 1990 when I first paid a visit to a baby-faced young man with all of 5 hectares to his name. Who could imagine what would ensue in the last 15 years?

I think Johannes Leitz should grow a beard or something, so he can start looking his age. I first met him as a "big baby" of about 25 and now he's a man of 42. A big baby of 42!

He's also up to a whopping 26 hectares, in large part in order to supply us with enough "Dragonstone," but also because success accrues to success and good growers often find access

to good land. Johannes has secured parcels in two fascinating sites hovering just above Rüdesheim as well as the Erbslöh estate in Geisenheim, with its scarcely known Grand Crus. If he obtains any more important land, he oughta split the estate in two and put one of those passionate young Rheinhessen guys in charge of part of it, just to shake things up.

I must say I like best of all to see him there, at home, lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-wine-guy can obscure some of what gets you there — any clod can climb on a plane — and what got Johannes Leitz there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

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

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz I found a sober young man still not out of his twenties, running a 5.8 hectare estate. His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough



Johannes Leitz

- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland and Berg Kaisersteinfels**
- **Soil types: Weathered gray and red slates, sandy loam and loess, chalk and quartzite**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to invest, soon, a lot. Johannes was determined to make great wine.

He's a man with a passion for **aroma**. "I almost prefer inhaling to actual tasting," he says. "I can't really love a wine regardless of how it tastes if it doesn't excite me on the nose. I want my own wines to seem more fragrant than the norm, fruitier and more harmonious. They should simply be *better!*" Leitz insists that "Wine grows in the vineyard; it isn't made in the cellar. There's no question that different soils give different flavors. Anyone who tastes a Berg Schlossberg, with its high proportion of slate, alongside a Bischofsberg, will taste the importance of soil in a hurry!"

"I work very clean," he says, echoing the *one* refrain you hear in every good estate. "My friends call me finicky about cleanliness," he continues. "I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance." On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the *greatest* dry German wines I have ever tasted. "I'm of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren't in any way suited for dry wine. You really

need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you're honest about it, there's probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness." He also practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market.

Johannes is done with his various building projects; the press-house is finished, the tasting room's there (and I'm sure the jacuzzi and the twin skee-ball lanes won't be far behind), the family's out from under a range of health-related challenges . . . and then there's you, dear reader. You have been buying these wines with great vim, and this is a good thing! It's all rather giddy but you know, it makes me happy. Because Johannes Leitz has it

all. He's a perfect expression of my holy trinity of value: soil, family, artisanality. His connection to his vines is a priori and intimate. His scale permits – *relishes* – a degree and type of attention any industrial wine producer (and many other artisans) would think insane. He's close to every part of it; the wine he drinks with you in your restaurant, having fun (and studying your response, believe me!), is the wine he nurtured *himself*, from pruning to binding to trimming to canopy-thinning to green-harvesting to selective multiple hand-harvesting to inspecting the fruit to fermenting in individual small lots to monitoring to aging on the lees to tasting again and again to determine the best moment for bottling, and finally . . . to doing it all again.

#### leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three rising stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

#### how the wines taste:

His wines are like he himself is, a mixture of serious and playful, finesse and earthiness, open and robust but also earnest and commanding. They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." And it's not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz's lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. I drank the 2000 Schlossberg Spätlese Halbtrocken, and it was like semolina dumplings in a sweetly fragrant mix of veal and vegetable broth. No other wines are like them. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type – when it's true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes' wines taste "sweet." They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are **intensely** fragrant, as though they wished to **convince** you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don't show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn't get there with bazillions of yen or with mega-technology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

#### GJL-138 2007 Rudesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels "Alte Reben"

Old terraces above the Roseneck are recently reclaimed thanks in part to my colleague Kevin Pike. Quantities are always very small and usually Kevin just doles it out without it ever seeing this catalogue. But this vintage is exceptional and I wuz on my *knees* beggin'.

First, though, a note: all the "Alte Reben" (old-vines) bottlings from Leitz will henceforth be sold as such, with no reference to Trocken or Halbtrocken or whatever. It is understood the wines won't contain appreciable RS.

A cool appley mineral wine with a sweet cask-y note; Johannes says it's a "Yoda: a wise old man," and what it most recalls to me is the lovely Wineck-Schlossberg 2005 from Meyer-Fonné in Alsace; it's ultra-violet blue-spectrum minerality, but these are esoteric vibes that scratch a deep itch for Riesling freaks.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-13 years)

### Rüdesheim Vineyards:

Usually the Taunus hills sit back from the Rhine about two miles, with vineyards carpeting their lower slopes. Only at Rüdesheim do the hills advance almost to the river — all the way to the river beneath the Schlossberg. The so-called Rüdesheimer “Berg” is one of Riesling’s most remarkable homes, an imposing mountainside facing due south, sometimes brutally hot and dry. It should be a UNESCO zone. The three great sites are SCHLOSSBERG, from which the most delicate minerally wines issue, from slatey soil with quartzite, like a Mosel-Rheingau marriage. ROSENECK is the fruit euphoria, with lyric and gracious aromas from quartzite with flecks of slate. ROTT-LAND is lower down; the wines are massive and brooding and earnest; Riesling as Serious Business.

Above these Grand Crus lie the DRACHENSTEIN (above the Roseneck) and the recently reclaimed BERG KAISERSTEINFELS (above the Schlossberg). To their east, rising imposingly behind Rüdesheim itself, sit a range of sites on richer soils ranging from limestony loess in the MAGDALENENKREUZ to a similar soil but mixed with slate in the KLOSTERLAY. Rüdesheim is an open-air living museum of *terroir*!

- GJL-140 **2007 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland “Alte Reben”** +  
As always this is the garbled old oak of Riesling; if it were Wachau it would be Kellerberg, though perhaps a sleeker and lower alcohol rendition with more overt mineral; solid and obdurate, with a stubborn stoniness, and a rye and roasted-barley richness.  
SOS: 0 (2-4 years; again 14-20 years)
- GJL-141 **2007 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland “Alte Reben” “Goldkapsel”**  
A flourish of power and richness that flirts with overstatement and is in any case, shall we say, explicit, with a punch like a mule, but it makes its point convincingly if emphatically, and people who like bold strokes of flavor will be blown away.  
SOS: 0 (2-4 years; again 15-21 years)
- GJL-142 **2007 Rüdesheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**  
This is a *Clos* within the city limits of Rüdesheim, on Rhine-river sand and with a sheltered and warm micro-climate; the wine has a very pretty cherry and peppermint aroma; empire apple and wintergreen on the palate, with charming and direct fruit and snappy acidity.  
SOS: 1 (1-3 years; again 8-12 years)
- GJL-134 **2007 Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**  
The Klosterlay is back down to earth with a sedate 91° Oechsle (after the 110° of 2006) and still has its Altoid zing and taut mineral. It was subdued from bottling on this occasion but was positively intricate and tasty as a cask-sample.  
SOS: 2 (4-16 years)

### THE POWER-TRIO OF CORE-LIST WINES!

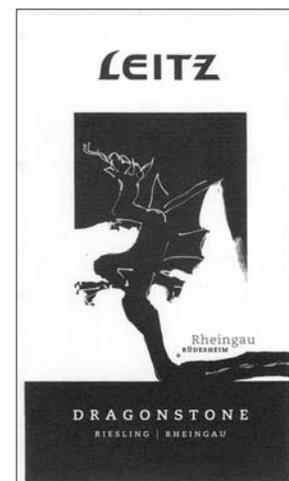
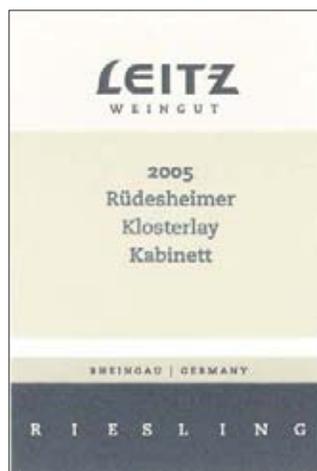
- GJL-136 **2007 Riesling “Eins-Zwei-Dry”**  
GJL-133 **2007 Riesling “Dragonstone”** +  
GJL-135 **2007 Rüdesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese**
- Har-de-har and all, but did you know Eins-Zwei-Dry wine comes from a Grosses Gewächs (or Erstes Gewächs or whatever the hell they call it in this region) called Geisenheimer Rothenberg, and could easily have been put into a heavy designer-bottle and sold for six times the price? There’s lots of apple and *charcuterie* and Rainier-cherry aromas; fibrous and crunchy palate, mint is in there too; a crisp Riesling that’s not fruit-driven but with all the 2007 juiciness; there’s a certain asperity on the finish, which is long and mentholated.  
SOS: minus-1 (now-5 years)

Dragonstone, or “Draggie” as Johannes calls it, is the best it’s ever been, with the fruit-density and charm of ‘07 and with more moderate sweetness than the last several vintages; here is everything there is to love about this still-excellent value, with surreally charming fruit; it was this quality that first established this brand—that, and the fact it was a single-site estate bottled Riesling of pedigree that sold for a fraction of what it was worth.

SOS: 2 (now-13 years)

The Magdalenenkreuz, “Maggie” for short, was 2 weeks in bottle, and I can’t give you any sort of accurate note. Again the earlier cask sample promised a rather quieter vintage than ‘05-‘06 but with the stately luminosity of this wine at its most typical.

- GJL-143 **2007 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** **+(+)**  
 One week in bottle, damn it. Man did I work it. Quartzite “yellow” flavors. Coaxing released some of its core-flavors, along with its length, grip and spice. Comice-pear, stones, made from all non-botrytis fruit. Based on the vintage and Johannes’ track-record with Roseneck, this should be a beauty.  
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)
- GJL-144 **2007 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 This is the botrytis-lady, though with exceptionally fine slatiness; indeed this is in every way exceptional; electric and neon and phosphorescent, yet refined and detailed, yet fruity and with notes of sweet corn and peekytoe crab; fruit strapped to a joy-buzzer here! A great citizen of a great vintage.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GJL-131H **2006 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+**  
 This queenly BA is one of those which elevates the *Spätlese* to a sublime level, and the botrytis feels less like an “issue” and more like a grace. Lemon-blossom honey and salty mineral and sautéed apple and vanilla bean; it’s more feminine, less sinewy than many ‘06s, and one of the few BAs I thirst to drink.  
 SOS: 4 (20-50 years)



# spreitzer

## rheingau • oestrich

I know how good this estate can be, but even so I was surprised how fine the '07s are; like a cross between the best of 2002 and '05, and likely to be Bernd and Andreas' best-ever vintage.

Because they're in Oestrich, where the wines tend to run fruity, one can forget this is a Rheingau estate. But one taste of the astonishing Jesuitengarten Spätlese brought home why this region attained its reputation for aristocracy. It is, however, a bastard to put into words.

Let's try anyway. Rheingau Rieslings are alpha. They assume the right to be in command. They have the natural bearing of the born leader, including the geniality that makes the best leaders. Yet behind it is an essential indifference to the *impression* they make on you. This isn't haughty, but they aren't going to preen for you. They have no desire nor need to ingratiate themselves. You'd seldom use a word like *gushing* or *seductive* to describe a classic Rheingau wine, but you'd use words like *splendid* or *impeccable*. And all of this is entirely compatible with deliciousness, just as all leaders display an irresistible magnetism.

Spreitzer has ascended to the top rank in the Rheingau. No one is better, and few are as fine. Yet the German press is likely to feel otherwise, in large part because of the emphasis they lay on the dry wines. This is reasonable enough. For my part I simply don't consider a German grower's dry wine. If they are good I am delighted, and offer them. But this is an extra, not the thing I come looking for. They could cease producing them altogether and I wouldn't mind. Nor would the wine-world be discernibly the poorer.

You might recall a Spreitzer wine finished among the top ten dry Rieslings in all of Germany three years ago. I loved it too, and selected it, and was delighted to show it to you. Our reviewers' enthusi-



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen**
- **Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 96% Riesling, 4% Spätburgunder**

asms extended to the "high 80s" — maybe a little too low. Yet the reverse is also true,

as Stuart Pigott wrote in a recent article for WEIN EXTRA. Noting the difference between the monster scores (high 90s) certain Dönnhoff wines received over here, in contrast to the around-90 the same wines received in Germany, he said: "Whereas across the sea tasters everywhere stood and cheered these great examples of German Riesling, inside Germany they were met with Hm, well . . . yes, I suppose . . ."

So it's the silly culture-wars between them and us which prevents them from recognizing how freakin' marvelous these Spreitzers have become. Help me 'splain it to them! Oh they get praise enough; (another "cluster" in *Gault-Millau*, another "F" in *Feinschmecker*, another "star" in *Mondo*, and another placement on DM's 100-best list) but with each of the last three vintages has exceeded what are increasingly high expectations, but alas in a style the Germans do not seem to cherish.

The wines certainly speak in the prevailing "syntax" of the times: crystalline, refined, perfumey and polished. These are Rheingau wines as Armin Diel might make them, as Peter Geiben might make them. Indeed it could be their diametrically opposed personalities to Leitz's wines which allows the two to coexist so benignly, without "competition" (the close friendship between the two helps I'm sure!). Where Johannes' wines are ruggedly individual, Andreas and Bernd's wines are, in the best sense, fashionable, spiffy, well turned-out. Thankfully the two of *them* are plenty unpretentious.

The wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined and they often show

reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

All harvesting is by hand. The must is cleaned by gravity for 24 hours before whole-cluster pressing. After fermentation (in wood or jacketed stainless steel, partly with ambient yeasts partly with cultured yeasts, depending on the vintage) the wines rest on their gross lees for some time before receiving their only filtration, with racking. They are bottled off the fine lees.

In 1997 Andreas and Bernd Spreitzer leased the estate from their father, who remains active. Johannes Leitz first tipped me off. He's friendly with Andreas and wanted to help. I really don't think it crossed his mind he was creating a competitor. Leitz is a guy whose friends will also be sweethearts, and I was intrigued to taste Spreitzer's wines.

I did, and liked what I saw. First opportunity, I was making the scene in Oestrich. I want to pause a second to draw attention to Leitz's touching gesture of friendship, both to me and to Andreas & Bernd. He brought us together, and he's *still* scouting around in the Rheingau for young new growers still below the radar.

Oestrich seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a

wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the nervy vigor of other Rheingauers, and the keen finesse of spiciness is often absent here. Oestrich is about *fruit*.

Still, I'd like you to see what Spreitzers can do in Hattenheim and Winkel ("Let's Go To Winkel With Spreitzer!" Now *there's* a slogan one can work with.) Read on . . .

In fact I keep urging Andreas, only half-jokingly, to grab any available land in Grand Crus with nothing but underachievers working them; this pretty much covers all of Rauenthal, to cite but one melancholy example. To be sure, Oestrichers can be delightful and in certain cases remarkable, but no serious observer would place these among the top sites in the Rheingau. All the more striking what Spreitzers make from them. Yet when I'm having trouble sleeping and I've replayed the entire 1986 World Series through in my mind, I'm likely to catalogue all the great sites whose wines would blossom in Spreitzer's hands: Hölle, Mannberg, Siegelsberg . . . Wülfen . . . Gehr . . . Baiken . . . Rothenberg . . . <zzzzzz>

#### spreitzer at a glance:

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

#### how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

#### GSP-047L **2007 Estate Riesling Trocken, 1.0 liter**

Here's another surprise; Andreas poured it as the "intro" wine by which you accustom your palate to tasting, but I loved it; it's oh so pretty and juicy, an addictive gulper with a fervent violet fragrance, a smooth texture, a *ton* of fruit and detail and charm.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)

#### GSP-048 **2007 Lenchen Riesling Erstes Gewächs, 6/750ml**

Still cloudy and I won't offer a "definitive" note, but the wine was promisingly juicy and had lots of mirabelle aromas. No reason to suppose it won't be wonderful.

#### GSP-049 **2006 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +

A classic Oestrich juice-bomb, and an almost overwhelmingly attractive Riesling; riotously appley and rosy-cheeked; lovely granular minerality, like the crunch inside a pear; long and "sweet" yet essentially dry; an inviting pool of flavor you want to dive into. This wine has yummied me out.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (2-12 years)

#### GSP-050 **2006 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett** +

Again the fine floweriness and almost a basil-like piquant tang; the saltiness comes from quartzite, Andreas says; lilac, wisteria, a fine angularity, and a complex minerality below a gurgling stream of fruit.

SOS: 2 (5-17 years)

- GSP-051 **2007 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett** **++**  
 CORE-LIST WINE, because this is just absurdly tasty Riesling, gang. If the Halbtrocken yummied me out, this wine totally made me its *bitch*. Whatever mama needs, mama gets! Unbelievably, almost unbearably pretty; a gaudy overture of fruit yields to a firm, shape-ly underlay of mineral, which holds hands with an exquisite floweriness, and disappears meaningly into madame's bedchamber. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (6-21 years)
- GSP-052 **2007 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 A *strong* contender for wine of the vintage, and you shouldn't dare to miss this sublime example of Rheingau Riesling at its best and most archetypal. Drier-seeming than the Kabinett, dense yet transparent, typically stoic and solid and durable, with "purple" flavors. *This* is why Rheingau had the reputation it squandered, for this is magnificent Riesling, commanding and complex and endlessly unfolding everything of rock and flower and salt and sweet.  
 SOS: 2 (8-28 years)
- GSP-053 **2007 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303," 6/750ml** **++**  
 It hails from a micro-cru called Eiserberg, from which a TBA with 303° Oechsle was gathered in 1920 by Spreitzer's great-great grandfather, and which was the record must-weight for Rheingau Riesling until 2003 came along. A gauzy rendition of this, or at least it seems so after the obdurate density of the Jesuitengarten, but it isn't at all slight, just a lovely quiet birch alongside a patriarchal elm. A breezy flutter of spice and this amazing mineral clarity, as if a bouquet were opening its very petals on your palate. Almost too intricate to grasp.  
 SOS: 2 (9-28 years)
- GSP-054 **2007 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** **+**  
 Given the Auslese-ennui we're all feeling, believe me I had to be *won over* by any I decided to offer. This one is sublime, cool and exquisite, Edenic apples rather than malt and maracuja; this is Auslese as absolute refinement and elegance, a rare kind of generosity that isn't overt but actually gives you more; focus and verve and a sort of Maillard-effect of superripe fruit.  
 SOS: 3 (9-30 years)



# why does place-specificity matter?

Once upon a time I sat on a panel discussing spirit-of-place, and a native-American woman to my left said something that lodged on my heart and has not moved since.

The salmon do not only return to the stream, she said, in order to spawn; they also return in order to respond to the prayers and hopes of the people who love them.



I thought that remark was innocuous enough, so I was taken aback when someone responded it was “pre-tentious New Age bullshit” (or words to that effect). I recognize there are sensibilities other than mine, more linear, more prosaic. Yet with all respect, most thoughts along the “mystical” continuum are reducible to linear equations if one wishes to frame them thus.

No, the salmon aren’t actually thinking “let’s go back to the river guys, cause the Indians are waiting for us.” No one means to say that. There is, though, among certain peoples, an immersion into nature different from our I-thou relationship, an inchoate assumption of *unity* among living things. The idea of the salmon “responding” is poetic, but the notion of interconnect-edness is entirely reasonable.

That assumption of a unity of living things underlies my own assumption that places have spirit, and wine is one of the ways places convey their spirits to us, and this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we claim that wine is an important part of life then wine must be bound into and among the filaments by which we are connected to all things. Wines which simply exist as products to be sold must take their places alongside all such commodities, soda, breakfast cereal, vacuum-cleaner bags. They can be enjoyable and useful, but they don’t matter.

Spirit-of-place is a concept that’s like really good soap; it’s lovely, it feels good when it touches you, and it’s slippery as hell.

It isn’t announced with billboards, you know. *Spirit Of Place, five miles ahead, bear right to access*. Not like that. Nor is it necessarily beautiful. The northernmost section of the New Jersey Turnpike is full of spirit-of-place, however repugnant it may be. I’d say it comes at the

moment of ignition between your soul and that place, and a condition of that union is that it happens aside from your awareness. It is an inference, as all soul things are.

I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still wines are not vivid in the way that young Riesling or Muscat is. They are pastel, aquarelle, restrained, gauzy. Add bubbles and they get frisky. But they aren’t born that way. Didier Gimonnet told me he’d been pestered by an English wine writer to produce a tiny amount of super-cuvee from an 80-year old vineyard he owns. . . . “I’ll never do it,” he insisted, “because the wine would be too powerful.” But isn’t that the point, I thought? Isn’t that what wine’s supposed to do in our skewered age? Density, concentration, power, flavor that can break bricks with its head! “I think Champagne needs to have a certain transparency in order to be elegant,” he continued. And then it came to me.

Here was the Aesthetic to correspond with the gentleness of the Champagne landscape. A *pays* of low hills, forested summits and plain sleepy villages isn’t destined to produce powerful wines. We have become so besotted by our demand for **impact** that we’ve forgotten how to discern *beauty*. And who among us ever tilts a listening ear to hear the hum of the land?

One reason the old world calls to us is that these lands do hum, a low subterranean vibration you feel in your bones. It has existed for centuries before you were born. It isn’t meant to be fathomed. It is mysterious, and you are temporary, but hearing it, you are connected to great currents of time. And you are tickled by a sense of significance you cannot quite touch. It cannot be the same here. Each of us Americans is the crown of creation. We invented humanity. Nothing happened before us, or in any case, nothing worth remembering. Memory is a burden in any case. We turn to the world like a playground bully looking to pick a fight. “Waddaya got TODAY to amuse me, pal? How ya gonna IMPRESS me? How many POINTS will this day be worth?” Maybe our little slice of earth rumbles with its own hum, but if it does, not many Americans want to know how to hear it, and most are suspicious of the value of listening at all.

Does spirit-of-place reside integrally within the place, or do we read it in? The answer is: YES. We are a part of all we touch, see, taste, experience. If we glean the presence of spirit-of-place, then it’s there because we glean it, because we are not separate from the things we experience.

I want to emphasize that point. The soul records,

but does not transcribe. Because we are a part of nature, what happens to us also happens *in nature*. This is self-evident. From this point one ventures into cosmology or does not, according to one's preferences. I prefer to believe spirit-of-place registers in our soul because *nature wants it to*. Because everything that happens in nature is part of a design, which we humans discern. You may believe or disbelieve in the purposiveness of that design. Myself, I feel if one chooses to presume there is no purpose, then what is there left to think



about? It's all senseless and random, la di da, what's on TV? Assuming it is not mere chance is at the very least an opening for more thinking.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? We need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste "flourish" when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can "exist" elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

But the same grape will be mute on "foreign" soil. Try planting Riesling where it's too warm or the soil's too rich, and it becomes a blatant, fruit-salady wine which most people correctly write off as dull and cloying. Has Chenin Blanc ever made great wine outside Anjou or Touraine? Nebbiolo doesn't seem to flourish outside Piemonte. I'd even argue that Chardonnay is strictly at home in Chablis and Champagne, since these are the only places where its inherent flavors are complex and interesting; it does easily without the pancake-makeup of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We "hear" these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. And so we see the lovely phenomenon of detailed and distinct flavors coming from contiguous plots of land. Vineyard flavors are consistent, specific, and repeated year after year, varied only by the weather in which that year's grapes ripened.

If you're a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don't have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you

can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

You wouldn't have to sermonize to *these* people about spirit-of-place. They are steeped within that spirit as a condition of life. Their inchoate assumption that Place contains Spirit is part of that spirit.

Let's step back at little. The Mosel, that limpid little river, flows through a gorge it has created, amidst impossibly steep mountainsides. Its people are conservative and they approach the sweaty work on the steep slopes with humility and good cheer. They are people of the North, accustomed to a bracing and taut way of life. Is it an accident that their wines, too, are bracing and taut? Show me someone who is determined to prove otherwise, and I'll show you someone who has never been there.

I'll go further. I believe the Catholic culture of the Mosel produces wines themselves catholically mystic. You see it in the wines when they are mature; sublime, uncanny flavors which seem to arise from a source not-of-this-earth.

I need wines which tell me in no uncertain terms: "I hail from THIS place and this place alone, not from any other place, only here, where I am at home." Because such wines take us to those places. If we are already there, they cement the reality of our being there. We need to know where we are. If we do not, we are: lost.



I don't have time to waste on processed wines that taste like they could have come from anywhere, because in fact they come from *nowhere* and have no place to take me. We crave spirit of place because we need to be reassured we belong in the universe. And we want our bearings. We want to know where home is. We can deny or ignore this longing, but we will grow old wondering at the ceaseless scraping nail of anxiety that never lets us feel whole. Or we can claim this world of places.

And when we do, we claim the love that lives in hills and vines, in trees and birds and smells, in buildings and ovens and human eyes, of everything in our world that makes itself at home and calls on us to do the same. The value of wine, beyond the sensual joy it gives us, lies in the things it tells us, not only its own hills and rivers, but the road home.-



which were uncommonly good from the tender 2005 vintage, and which were far less homogenous in '06. And it isn't the point whether these wines are good, or how good they are. You're showing me your fine painted ceiling but meanwhile your floor-boards are crumbling with termites, man! Other than the justly celebrated handful of top wines, the *quality-basis* of the region is perilously close to ruin.

The Pfalz is besieged with local tourism from the big cities Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Frankenthal and Heidelberg. Summer weekends are wall-to-wall swirl & hurl. For some reason (perhaps chemical emissions from the heavy industry near Frankenthal?) these fine denizens of taste have embraced masochism as their aesthetic template. The poor growers, who have to sell their wines, after all, have not only to comply, but also to *appear* enthusiastic, and to embrace a guiding philosophy of dryness. It goes emphatically against common sense, but livings must be made.

I don't know why the wines don't work. I drink plenty of honestly dry Riesling from Austria and Alsace. Indeed, I like dry Riesling. I'm not sure why a wine with 13% alcohol would taste thin and fruitless; I only know that most of them do. I have tried and tried to like them. It's tiresome and frustrating to kvetch.

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

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

But Dornfelder notwithstanding, the Pfalz takes itself seriously as a red-wine region—rather more seriously than is warranted by the wines, good though many of them are. I was heartened when Müller-Catoir told me they'd hacked out their Pinot Noir and would make only white wines from now on. The Pinot Noir was good, but it is even *better* when someone claims an identity instead of trying to be all things to all people. Let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

The reducto ad absurdum of all this is the truly ghastly set of rules applying to the "Erstes Gewächs" (Grand Cru) program. Everything is perfectly enlightened — low yields, old vines, hand-harvesting, minimum necessary ripeness — until the ideologues began

vomiting their ghastly ideas and insisted the wines must either be DRY (up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar) or "NOBLY" SWEET (above 50 grams per liter). It is distressing to be asked to accept these (often) brutally hot and bitter wines as arguments for Grand Cru status. It is distressing to see an entire community of wines strait-jacketed to squeeze into a marketing person's convenience. If anyone knows a stealthy little munchkin who needs a job I'd like to hire him to break into all these deluded wineries and drop Süsreserve into the tanks.

Let's suppose for argument's sake they start really getting it right; they learn whatever magic trick is necessary to create consistently and sustainably viable dry Rieslings. Then what? Then there's one *additional* region from which fine dry Rieslings come. What has been sacrificed, however, is just the thing which makes German Rieslings *unique*. Other places make good dry Riesling, lots of them. But NO other place anywhere on earth

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

makes these miraculously beautiful Rieslings with sweetness. Thus even *if* — and it's a big if — Pfalz dry Riesling was abruptly consistently excellent, I don't think I'd take the trade-off. Something one-of-a-kind in return for an also-ran? No thanks!

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

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

From this point the ways diverge. In what other region could you superimpose the laser-etching of a Darting with the big burly power of a Koehler-Ruprecht, with the fiery-yet-satiny persistence of an Eugen-Müller with the tingly mineral gleam of a Messmer with the leesy chewiness and compactness of a Minges with the little-bit-of-all-of-those-high-flying-you'll-break-your-crazy-neck-daredevil-glee of a Catoir? NFW, that's where!

# müller-catoir

pfalz • haardt

I am certain this is again the best estate in the Pfalz, and though I'm less certain the opinion-establishment will concur, I am certain I don't care. No one in Germany showed me a more consistently magnificent group of wines, and there's simply no way for German wine to be better than these are.

Things in general are shifting somewhat at Müller-Catoir, one senses. They joined the VDP. They cultivate the press now — in the past they sometimes seemed like a Carthusian cloister to which only the privileged gained access. Their private-customer business is a smaller proportion

of the total. Whereas they once appeared unconcerned with any publicity they got, they're now quite pleased. Franzen's "Wine Personality Of The Year" blurb was delightfully received. And finally, the two of us have reached a kind of ease which only arrives after many years.

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

A couple people I know share my very high regard for the new era at Müller-Catoir, yet they often say "Of course the wines are different now . . ." and this I don't entirely see. Naturally, Martin is his own man, but the wines are recognizably Müller-Catoir wines. The vineyards, after all, haven't changed. The striving for the outer limits of expressiveness hasn't changed. Martin Franzen stands, like his entire generation, on the shoulders of Schwarz and Catoir and the pioneering work they did in the '60s, '70s and '80s.

If the new wines are different these are delicate differences, and it requires memory and imagination to delineate. After all, we can't know what wines Schwarz *might* have made from the last few vintages; we can only



Martin Franzen

infer theoretically. Martin hails from the Mosel, and he's certainly more oriented to *Riesling*. His dry wines are a little drier. His wines are a little leesier than Schwarz's. His style seems more fluorescent, but I sense I am finding these things only because I'm peering so intently for

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

them. Martin himself believes his wines are less "opulent" than Schwarz's were. I wouldn't use that particular word, especially for the wines of Hans-Günter's later years, but there's little doubt Martin's wines cultivate minerality in a different way. Regardless, I myself would say the wines are 93% similar and 7% different, and also that the similarities are more crucial. The great wines of Müller-Catoir continue to convey a surreal brilliance and heart-rending candor.

Philip Catoir seems to be more engaged with the aesthetics of the wines than his father was. Things are shifting. The offering of 2007 has been consolidated into a tidier and more sensible assortment, as you'll see. I'm a persnickety terroir-ist, yet I couldn't say anything critical was sacrificed. There is, though, a sad shift away from Rieslaner, which I understand but which is nonetheless lamentable. Rieslaner was strongly associated with Schwarz who made an astonishing community of masterpieces from that most temperamental of grapes. Since his departure the Rieslaners aren't selling as fast — or so I suppose — and the estate made a sensible decision to reduce the acreage. The land will go over to Riesling but also to the Pinots, Blanc-and-Gris, which, however you justify it, is a serious downgrade. That said, the decision is absolutely warranted in financial terms: you have to make wines people will buy. I'd just like to have a com-

plete exchange of *people*; send all those dweebs on the first Richard Branson space-flights to some halcyon planet where all the wines are dry and bland, and get a bunch of *new* people here who'll know *GREAT* wine when they see it.

Another interesting change is in keeping with the times. The estate has re-introduced *casks* into the cellar. The first wines to see them will be the Pinots (with compelling results, as you'll see) and I won't be surprised if the eventual Riesling finds its way back into wood. Far from repudiating Schwarz's philosophy I think he'd have come to the same on his own. Stainless steel isn't the only medium in which to preserve brilliant primary fruit, and

it introduces issues of its own.

Martin fermented his 2007s at slightly higher-then-usual temperatures "to get more ripe aromas as well as finer aromas." There was clean botrytis at the end of August, and the grapes were already ripe enough thanks to two green-harvests. The vintage is the stuff of legend: 5 stunning Auslesen, one BA and SIX TBAs; this is almost prima-facie ridiculous! I tasted thirty wines in all, and would have selected 27 of them, and did select sixteen, such is my iron-willed discipline (though afterward in the car I blubbered like a baby at the wines I'd left on the table).

**müller-catoir at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

**FROM THE "KLASSIKER" SERIES:**

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

- GMC-117 **2007 Haardt Riesling Kabinett Trocken** +

I wrote "If this is this good then man, we're in for one hell of an afternoon." Amazing complex aroma; lemon blossom and bergamot and jasmine, with warm and cool notes alternating; the palate follows, with generous yet cool fruit and really explicit salt; again a paradoxical blend of filigree and creaminess. Gotta love 2007!  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 9-14 years)
- GMC-118 **2007 Haardt Weissburgunder Kabinett Trocken**

This is *crazy-good*, with gloriously expressive classic varietal aromas spoken with almost a Riesling diction; pure filigree luxury, and you will not find classier Pinot Blanc anywhere.  
 SOS: 0 (now-5 years)
- GMC-119 **2007 Haardt Muskateller Kabinett Trocken** ++

No secret I feel this is the best Muscat in Germany and thus one of the very best on earth. What's there to say anymore about this absolute sure-thing, the sex that's always perfect, the thirst that's always quenched? Except that it has almost a Riesling minerality, and it's an audience of many thousands laughing, and it delivers a huge mass of fucking delicious flavor with **11.8% alc.** So deal with THAT, alcohol bullies! Wine can convey no greater *joy* than this. . . .  
 SOS: 1 (now-5 years)
- GMC-120 **2007 Haardt Sauvignon Blanc Kabinett Trocken** +

The 1st crop, 25hl/ha, it tastes like Menetou though creamier and also more digital; in fact this is Sauv-B under a microscope with each fleck of nuance revealed; tremendously sophisticated, less *terroiré* than Wagner-Stempel's but it has the classic Catoir urgent-whisper of pure beauty and precision. Flavors? It's archetypal *European* Sauv-B, embodying everything there is to cherish about this variety, as cuttingly precise as a sushi-knife.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

- GMC-121 **2007 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett** +  
*Not trocken*, and in fact *Eselshaut*; It's a lavish peachy wine, drenched in orange-blossom and talc; in the best sense frivolous and witty, with high tones of freesia and comice pears.  
 SOS: 2 (5-15 years)

**FROM THE "TERROIR" SERIES:**

*All Spätlese quality, from Grand Cru vineyards*

- GMC-123 **2007 Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 This could have been labeled Grosses Gewächs—it is one—and I think they opted not to so it could be sold sooner; Catoir, like nearly everyone in Germany, is sold out of wine. This could almost pass for a Nigl, and this is how you do a really dry Riesling, in balance with inside-sweet fruit and 2007's creamy texture but with the swell of bouquet-garni and sea-salt typical of this sandy vineyard; fine length, and a gracious and courteous complexity.  
 SOS: 0 (1-3 years; again 12-16 years)

- GMC-122 **2007 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++  
 I remember years ago when Catoir first purchased this parcel—we have its picture in the catalogue somewhere (on the cover?)—and the two gentlemen Catoir and Schwarz were almost laughing with happiness. "Terry, this is the best, the *best* vineyard in the Mittelhaardt," Schwarz insisted, "Better than Kirchenstück, better than Kalkofen, better than anything else. . . ."

It is a *Clos*, surrounded on all sides by a wall, almost within the town of Haardt, and since Catoir's been bottling it separately one begins to see the reason for Schwarz's claim. Kudos to Martin and Philip for showing it to us all. This is the terroir-Riesling par-excellence. Hengst is often like this at its best, and this by any reckoning is superb Riesling jammed with complex rocky flavors; one of those why-Riesling-is-great wines.  
 SOS: 0 (now-3 years; again in 12-18 years)

- GMC-124 **2007 Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** +++  
 An amazingly *mineral* nose leads to a riot of salt and tangerine and green tea and just psychedelic expressiveness; a constant duel-to-the-death between the green stony side and the Kama Sutra orange side, and the thing doesn't stop until it's crashing and foaming as long as you can bear to hold it in your mouth; the finish is like those odd little blossoms that somehow poke out through the rocks. My god.  
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)

- GMC-125 **2007 Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese** ++  
 40-year-old vines now; this is again stunningly expressive Scheu (and there was a fabulously whacked-out dry version I didn't select for fear of cluttering the offering . . . ya want it?); ripe and round and almost eucalyptus; lavishly earthy and seeming not to finish, it clings so long with elderflower and melon and an almost Sarawak-pepper spice. There are still writers who blather that Martin doesn't "get" Scheu. *Gimme a break!*  
 SOS: 2 (now-12 years)

**FROM THE “KULT” SERIES:**

*These are the sweet boys. . . .*

GMC-126H **2007 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Auslese, 6/375ml** **++**

The first separate bottling from here for a sweet wine, and this is a ridiculous insane monster Auslese, both magnificently ripe and incandescently salty; a very sweet wine that will ask for decades, with an almost lurid balsam fragrance and the satisfying weight of a suede coat.  
SOS: 4 (12-36 years)

GMC-129H **2007 Mandelring Scheurebe Auslese, 6/375ml** **+++**

Even more fervid cassis, even more *livid* all in all; an eruption of fierce character here, and in essence this essence is everything anyone could ask from Scheu; one of its greatest-ever wines!  
SOS: 4 (now-16 years)

GMC-128H **2007 Herzog Rieslaner Auslese, 6/375ml** **+++**

Only shriveled non-botrytis grapes, at 145° Oechsle, and one of its aromas is vegetal, but only one, and that at the start before it fades under an avalanche of flavor for which no words suffice, so I won't (for once!) attempt it. Sweet wine can *not* improve on the galvanic complexity of this.  
SOS: 4 (now-16 years)

GMC-130H **2007 Schlüssel Rieslaner BA, 4/375ml** **+**

GMC-130H **2007 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling TBA, 4/375ml** **++**

GMC-130H **2007 Bürgergarten Muskateller TBA, 4/375ml** **+++**

**Mixed case of 12, 4 half-bottles each.** The BA is succulent! The **Riesling TBA** is otherworldly; you taste the core, the dry wine and the Auslese elevated to a Tantric orgasm of magnificence so encompassing it feels universal—and there are still *green* key-lime flavors here. It's nearly unbearable—at least my senses can hardly bear it after 23 wines each of which commanded my entire sensorium. You wouldn't believe me if I told you the acidity and sweetness here. And so to the **Muskateller TBA**—this I think must be extraterrestrial; it somehow still *smells* like Muscat, along with a seething cherry and charred meat and armoire; it's hard to imagine the implosive power here—the wine is MUCH bigger than our tiny senses, and the only sensible stratagem is to get a letter from your dentist, and surrender. <whispers> . . . 20 grams of acidity. .

*A final note: there are two Rieslaner TBAs still fermenting, and they are the biggest of the vintage. I think I'm scared. . . .*

**RIESLANER, THE RIESLING-VIAGRA**

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

# Beauty In The Ashes

Two remarkable things happened today. First, it is the 7th of April, baseball has started, the cherry blossoms in DC are already past-peak – and last night, it snowed. Not much, but enough to cover the ground and to coat the branches of trees, and to appear quite otherworldly against the new green leaves, as if someone had traced eerie white lines with a highlighter-pen. Spring green is markedly liquid and verdant in any case, but who has ever seen it against this silvery-white backdrop?



Two hours later, by mid morning, the snow was gone. Late-risers won't have seen it at all.

The second remarkable thing was the publication of an astonishing article in today's WASHINGTON POST in which Joshua Bell, one of the world's great classical violinists, agreed to play as a busker in a morning rush-hour Metro station, just to see whether passers-by would notice the presence of the extraordinary. Obviously the lives we live are all stupefying to some degree, especially when

we're shooting robotically through space and time on our ways to work, latte in hand, i-pod in ear. It won't surprise you to learn that almost *no one* stopped to hear Bell's performance, and that many who *did* were actually annoyed by what they perceived as an intrusion, such as the shoe-shine woman who had trouble schmoozing with her customers.

The author of the piece (the wonderful Gene Weingarten) is far too smart for the obvious cheap-shot. Nor will I take it. We cannot reasonably accuse those commuters of being (in Anne Lamott's lovely phrase) worthless Philistine scum. They're merely busy drones who've accepted that much of their lives – *our* lives – will be lived on auto-pilot. But why am I telling you this?

I deal with a commodity which none of us needs. We can live without wine. We might not *want* to, but we can. We care about wine in many and varied ways; at the very least, because it gives us pleasure. For some people wine is just a genial sensual diversion. Others become more deeply intrigued by its multiplicity; it makes a good hobby. Still others are more seriously curious about wine's role in culture and history. And for some of us, when we experience a wine of great beauty, we are compelled to pleasant speculations on the meanings of the aesthetic experience.

This current improvisation (I have no idea where this essay will go) is concerned with the relationships each of us forms to beauty. I'm also curious about how we manage when beauty is, by circumstance or design, a paucity in our lives.

I understand we don't have identical thirsts for strict beauty. Though as I say it, I don't entirely believe it. Just as our bodies *register* thirst differently as we age, I believe we have roughly similar needs for beauty in our lives; what differs is our *awareness* of the need. I remember being a little kid and having an LP of Songs From The Wild West, and hearing the song "Tumbling Tumbleweed" and crying because it was so beautiful. I suppose I am especially sensitive, not because I'm a better person, but just because I am made that way. If you are made differently, I'll be the last guy to try and force you to fake beauty-orgasms to demonstrate your precious sensitivity. But I do believe there is a universal thirst for beauty, and that it is ground out of us by the sedative effect of everydayness.

I am also convinced of this: no matter *how* much we have or haven't cherished beauty in our

lives, at some point we'll regret *it wasn't more*. This is especially true for Americans. Octavio Paz wrote these words:

*The North American wants to use reality rather than to know it. . . . We get drunk in order to confess; they get drunk in order to forget...We are sorrowful and sarcastic and they are happy and full of jokes. North Americans want to understand and we want to contemplate. They are activists and we are quietists; we enjoy our wounds and they enjoy their inventions. What is the origin of such contradictory attitudes? It seems to me that North Americans consider the world to be something that can be perfected, and that we consider it to be something that can be redeemed.*

(Thanks to Michael Ventura for bringing this passage to my attention.)

Wine, for me, has always been an unusually *pure* bringer of beauty. It is something akin to music in that respect, that is, it moves us without recourse to narrative and without stirring our empathies. In that sense it is perhaps even more pure than music, which is often contrived to produce certain emotions. Wine, as I said elsewhere, is music in the form of water. Since it is such an unspoiled conveyor of beauty, I respect it in a very particular way, and I feel it needs protecting. It's way too easy to stomp it into the ground with all our obsessions and manipulations. Not too many things convey beauty to us in such pure form. And beauty is a thing we sorely need.

However, a life *in pursuit* of beauty is vulnerable to a certain neurosis, and it can quickly grow merely precious. Groping for beauty is a good way to send it packing. Insisting that all wines must be measured by how skillfully they wiggle your beauty-knob or how quickly they open your tear-ducts is more than tiresome. *Some* wine is exceptionally vivid, and demands attention, and most of the time I am gratefully and respectfully willing to give it. Other times I want to be left in peace. And I am as grateful for the wine that discreetly washes down my mushroom omelet and salad – especially if it tastes good – than I am for the wine that compels my full attention. There are *look at me!* wines and there are *let me keep you company* wines and we need them both. And once in a great while, there are wines like Dönnhoff's, which simply play for you like Joshua Bell busking in the subway; they open a door but do not tap you on the shoulder – they just open the door. *If you are AWAKE to possibility*, you'll notice the open door, and if you're *curious* you will wonder what it leads to.

It leads to beauty. And beauty leads to gratefulness. And gratefulness leads to reverence. And reverence leads to prayer. And prayer, no matter who or what you pray "to" or even, perhaps especially, if you pray "to" nothing or no one at all, leads to a particular awareness, that everything is *charged* with divinity. *It is, you are*, the current that passes *between* you is, and this is *always* here, in every breath and snowflake and sip of wine. And loveliest of all, you don't have to attain this by dint of some tremendous effort or "spiritual practice;" you don't have to meditate or hold séances or even do Yoga. You just have to be willing to *relax* and step out of your damn life for a few minutes. Trust me, it won't always be Joshua Bell playing for you in the subway – but it will always be *something*.

Nor will this make you a beatific and benign person. It's not about "self-improvement." I'm as cranky as the next guy. All it will do is stop us from wasting too much of our little brief lives. If we're alert to beauty we'll appreciate things more. And as we do that we might become more aware of the difference between the real and the bogus, in many things *including* wine.

There are three questions worth asking: Who are *we* to insist this is all meaningless? Why *should* my soul be a stranger to me? Why *should* I accept the cheap and false when the valid and real is everywhere?

# josef biffar

## pfalz • deidesheim

2006 was Biffar's first year organic. Nice choice of vintages, guys! Let's be thankful they decided to soldier on. 2006 was also the first vintage with a new cellar master, the impressive Ms. Tina Herrbruck, who is one tres sharp cookie and who hasn't begun to show what she can really do, having arrived mid-harvest and a hard harvest at that. But things are astir in this quiet house on a quiet street in Deidesheim. A Yank like me has to remember things don't turn on a dime in the old world. They don't move in bytes, they move in sap-time, leaf-time, sugar-time.

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

treading water until the inheritance issues could be settled. Now they are, and I expect dynamic action to come. Look for the Biffar-blimp over Super Bowl 2008.

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

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

Grand Cru lands are the earth's erogenous zones,



Tina Herrbruck & Lily Biffar

some confluence of nerve endings which tingle at the touch of sunlight. The old ones didn't even *put* the variety on the label. If it was Grainhübel or Steinberger or Sonnenuhr it was presumed to be Riesling, just like Corton

Charlemagne is presumed to be Chardonnay.

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

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

fruit of various sites." Very revealing, this. Minerality is the Given when you work with Riesling in great vineyards. Fruit needs to be nurtured.

There've been various changes over the years; less green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight, Biffar's wines were more filigree the past two years, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference. They seemed relatively introverted, and I liked it; they looked inward because there's so much to see there.

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

The harvest is also worked in various ways accord-

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

Every year there've been birds singing clamorously while we tasted. I don't know why the blackbirds make

me so happy, but they do, and somehow I leave a heart-print at Biffar. The Pfalz is terribly active, starting Easter weekend, cars and pedestrians and cafes spilling out onto the sidewalk—for a number of city-folk in the Mannheim-Heidelberg axis the Pfalz is "wine country." But when I'm there in March it's all asleep in the buds and seeds, and you can hear the soil talk.

**Biffar at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GBR-089 **2007 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs**

The most textured and balanced of the 3 GGs, and also the most finely mineral; fragrance of sweated leeks and roasted corn, but an incisive high-toned leesy minerality, almost oystery, with a eucalyptus spiciness. Compelling dry Riesling but *decidedly* dry Riesling.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 9-12 years)

GBR-088 **2007 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Kabinett**

Why why why don't the Germans realize what a *perfect type* of wine this is—effortlessly balanced and tasty, grainy and salty and *complete*—you don't have to strain to appreciate it; a wonderful and typical and *useful* wine. They made 66 cases of it just for me, alas. . . .

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GBR-090H **2007 Wachenheimer Goldbächel Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**

This may be my favorite Pfalz site; it's queenly and seductive and hauntingly fine; plum blossom aroma, creamy yet detailed palate, botrytis is only a subtle note; an angular and allusive relationship between salt and berry and even a note of fennel-seed.

SOS: 3 (7-21 years)



# scheurebe: what gives?

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

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

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

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

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

First, it's been lumped together with a genre of crossings to which it is manifestly superior. It's the proverbial baby being thrown out with the bath water. Then, Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more* attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes

too demure.

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

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

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

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. Yet when it deigns to accept you it knows some moves you've *never* been shown. In 2003 it sulked in the heat. But in 2004 it came snarling back in full kinky regalia. Of course Scheurebe satisfies our desire to wallow in lust, which we *spir-chull* guys need so's we don't float away on our wisps of bliss. And so there's little point in *delicate* Scheu, or God help us *subtle* Scheu. If you like it at all you like it writhing and sweaty. Yet: this does not, or *need* not preclude a certain elegance, a certain stature, a certain, dare one say . . . aristocracy? Scheu may be slutty, but it isn't ignoble, and I wonder whether there's really *any* equivalent in the world of wine. Certainly Scheu can overstate, sometimes blatantly, but the *thing* it overstates is often marvelous and even *fine*. So, sybarites, you can have it both ways. Scheu is almost as noble as Riesling but unlike Riesling it has the naughty bits still there!

## **SCHEUREBES IN THIS OFFERING:**

- GDD-033 **2007 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GDR-165 **2007 Darting Durkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spatlese**
- GDR-167H **2007 Darting Ungsteiner Herrenberg Scheurebe BA, 12/500ml**
- GGE-023 **2007 Geil Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GGY-071L: **2007 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-072 **2007 Gysler Scheurebe trocken**
- GKF-132 **2007 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spatlese**
- GMC-129H **2007 Muller-Catoir Mandelring Scheurebe Auslese, 6/375ml**
- GMC-125 **2007 Muller-Catoir Mandelring Scheurebe Spatlese**
- GMS-137H **2007 Messmer Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml**
- GMS-138H **2007 Messmer Scheurebe TBA, 12/375ml**
- GSD-171 **2007 Schlossgut Diel Scheurebe Spatlese**
- GTM-111 **2007 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spatlese**
- GWG-030 **2007 Wagner-Stempel Scheurebe Trocken**



The estate was sold, to a very wealthy gentleman named Niederberger, who owns a Scherezade-like villa in Neustadt (where Hans-Günter Schwarz makes wine from .9 hectares of vineyards) and also Bassermann and Buhl, which, along with Deinhard, used to be a single huge estate.

Now very interesting things are going to happen, but this year will be the transitional one, and I expect to be roaring ahead with what should be extremely attractive wines in a year's time. In effect the estate will be split in two; the base-line wines sold at excellent prices will still go out under the Dr Deinhard name. The prestige-line, with all the Grosses Gewächs and their ilk will be sold as Von Winning, after the name of a former proprietor.

The new chap in command is a pistol, a balls-to-the-wall wine freak named Stephan Attmann, who came out of the wine retail trade and who's raring to go. He's one of those knows-everyone tasted-everything wine guys, and I'm very curious to see what he'll do with a bona-fide estate to run. They already have plans to add a hotel-restaurant (plus a couple VIP guest-rooms in the baronial house itself) and are in general quite ambitious.



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

Meanwhile I was able to identify two among the '07s I liked and thought you would too.

### dr. deinhard at a glance:

1st-quality Pfalz estate available in the U.S. at last; big range of Grand Cru sites rendered in a genial and intelligent way, AND (yay!) enough wine.

### how the wines taste:

Dense and minerally, with focused fruit and with almost unerring BALANCE in a range of styles. Gentle and charming more than forceful and shoulder-grabbing. Imagine a cross between Minges and Biffar!

#### GDD-033 **2007 Scheurebe Kabinett**

This is quite tangy and fragrant on the cassis-sage frequency; it could really sing with a few more grams of RS, but its angular charm is also compelling. SOS: 2 (now-5 years)

#### GDD-034 **2007 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**

It tastes Feinherb, but Stephan offered to sweeten it (thanks pard!) and the base wine is so good I'll offer it on trust, with no fear. (4-15 years)

#### GDD-006 **2001 Deidesheimer Hergottsacker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Great polish and detail; a fine smoky Grand Cru with more cut than the 2002; this is not at all unlike a Nigl Privat. And it is wonderful to see it with a few years on its fine bones; sommeliers especially should grab the chance to offer a Riesling out of diapers (the wines, not the somms). SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years, again 12-15 years)

2007 is an exceptionally deft and smart vintage for this producer, and Stephan is giving me the sense he's really settled in. At one point I remarked upon the moderate alcohol of one of the "serious" dry Rieslings, and he said "What's the point of waiting to pick if all you get is more alcohol and medicinal overripe flavors? When the grapes are ready they're ready, and we don't want big Riesling, we want elegant Riesling." That there's some capital-W wisdom, gang.

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

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

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines.



Stephan and Kurt Müller in the vineyard.

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

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

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

**müller at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

They used to be rather matte and caramelly as a whole, though the fabulous Auslesen from the Kirchenstück showed great fire and breed. The 2004s were be harbingers of a change, as they are more "modern," clear and bright. 07 ascends to yet another level.

- GEM-091 **2007 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 A Grand Cru fragrance, and (blissfully) light on its feet with 12.5% alcohol; currant leaf, black cherry, burning-leaves; the palate is smooth, spicy, and with all the juiciness and crunch of the '07s and with a sinuous length; an elegant lady with a pointed look in her eye.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-12 years)
- GEM-092 **2007 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese "Cyriakus" +**  
 From the oldest parcel, this is exceptionally expressive and fine, even profound. The best piece of the best site! More solidity and overt mineral, more length, but wonderfully no more ripeness, only a different terroir, fifteen feet away. Stephan's greatest dry Riesling to date.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 10-18 years)
- GEM-093 **2007 Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**  
 This is one of those I-hate-Halbtrocken labelings, as the wine has only 11.5g.l. RS; it's beautifully salty, as if 12 different *fleurs de sel* and smoked salts were mixed; an apex of basalt tang and a mint-to-eucalyptus earthy green penetration, yet there's that creamy '07 mouthfeel and the crunchy-smoky length. Pechstein, by the way, is one of the very *greatest* Crus in the Pfalz.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-12 years)
- GEM-094 **2007 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**  
 "Mariengarten" was an old single-site name which still has a certain brand-value among old-timers. Now it's a "prestige" *Grosslage* consisting only of the primo sites in Forst. This wine is entirely from the Grand Cru *Pechstein*, in fact. A ladylike flowery wine, cherry-blossoms; a charming whispery sort of wine, with a cherry-confiture delicacy and purity.  
 SOS: 2 (4-14 years)
- GEM-095 **2007 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**  
 This is why we love Pfalz Riesling for its singular virtues. The leather-apricot and lychee aromas are generous; the palate is dense but focused; the finish is spicy—it's ur-Pfalz, the sort of wine Bürklin stopped making, the elegant country gentleman with perfect breeding and no pretensions, but it's the mouth-coating spicy capaciousness that no other Riesling can deliver.  
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)

GEM-096H **2007 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** +

A squalling infant still, and marked more by sheer botrytis (at 116° Oechsle) than by its still-incipient fruit, though there's cherry and redcurrant in there somewhere; right now this wine is mineral-madness, like chewing a cherry pie with a crust of stone; almost a cardamom note in the finish.

SOS: 2 (8-23 years)

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

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

SOS: 4 (13-29 years)

GEM-090H **2005 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +

**First offering.** Again a lovely *drinkable* BA—his specialty; smooth but spicy, (relatively!) light but mouthfilling; a *demi-glace* of veal and dried apricot; how is it almost ethereal yet also so bellowingly juicy? It's *savory* as opposed to thick or heavy.

SOS: 4 (15-35 years)



# herbert messmer

## pfalz • burrweiler

After lunch as we were saying our goodbyes, I emphasized that my compliments about the vintage were genuine and not merely polite. "I think it's your best year since 2001, and maybe your best ever," I said. "I know," Gregor answered, "And not from egotism. Last year I decided to return to the vineyards and the winery after a few years' experimenting with delegating, and now I'm happier and the wines are better." And so it is, and this is a *splendid* vintage at Haus Meßmer.

Too bad Gregor doesn't like to fly, though god knows I understand. During our last two

encounters he's been about the wittiest and most fun guys I know. And y'all are to be congratulated for bouncing sales nice 'n up the past years. Believe me, it's nothing less than this stellar estate deserves, and I'll be working to make them even more conspicuous.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That's O.K., but our *reasons* for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he's lauded for his dry wines. He sells them like loco, and sometimes I like them too, some of them.

I've represented this estate since almost the very beginning, and nothing would please me more than to get chummier and to keep showing you wines like these. Gregor Messmer is an almost comically serious man. He would be comic if he didn't conduct himself with such quiet dignity, but really, you want to tickle him! I'll bet he'd tickle you back. But first he'd have studied *The Tickle Points Of The Human Body* and he'd be deadly accurate.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for



Linde & Gregor Messmer

that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

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

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

his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz world is the love of reductive viticulture. "What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling." We never de-acidify. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

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

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

Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable purity. And Messmer's wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They're as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass,

transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

I just brewed myself a pot of a Chinese green tea called Linyun White Downy. I'm no expert on the green teas, and in fact I don't drink them often, and when I do it's usually something in the Jade-Oolong family. I need a certain psychic space to let these Theta-wave teas be; they're quite still and meditative and limpid and if I'm stressed I won't register their virtues. Gregor's wines can

show an analogous quality of stillness.

The southern Pfalz suffered from draught in '05, partly as a residue of the parched summer of '03. Irrigation is now permitted in Germany, and I asked Gregor if he was ever tempted to deploy it. "Actually, I am fundamentally opposed to irrigation," he replied (rather to my delight), "It isn't the solution. I'd rather deal with draught by adjusting yields lower."

**messmer at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GMS-139L **2007 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

It's Halbtrocken but will not say. More mineral than usual, and finer than the last few years', though very chiseled and with the sandstone tang; a fridge-Riesling with a thoughtful mien, not a party wine unless you're doing Kundalini yoga at your party. Rather an easy everyday wine that respects your intelligence and doesn't demand your full attention.  
SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

GMS-127L **2006 Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**

Kinda cool how the 05 took off! The 2006 has a more Chalonais aroma, less blueberry than '05, and it's both more "serious" and less whole, less serene-in-itself, but it remains a value for crafted, honest basic old-world Pinot Noir.

GMS-129 **2007 Pinot Blanc "Im Goldenen Jost" Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml +**

Again like the '06, a strong argument for taking German Pinot Blanc *VERY* seriously—for taking the grape seriously, period. It recalls Prieler in the mix of yellow fruits, mineral, and the scallop-y 'sweetness'; a disciplined yet larger-than-life Pinot Blanc, and awfully deft for 14.3% alc.  
SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

GMS-130 **2007 Michelsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml +**

The site belongs to the village of Weyher; it's just north of Altenforst; the soil includes slate along with mineral-rich sand; it is certainly Gregor's most compelling dry Riesling; This is what Grosses-G should be, and it takes its place with the world's finest dry Rieslings; wonderful citric and chartreuse notes; mineral complexity in spades; melisse, lemon balm, flint, sweet hay, mirabelle; the palate trills a lusty song of lavish mineral, with an ore note almost like Kremser Kögl; a lavish and polished wine. "It's our 4th vintage here," said Gregor. "The vines are 15, and I'm just starting to get to know it."  
SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 12-16 years)

GMS-131 **2007 "Schiefer" Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

"Schiefer" means slate, and as you know I have no problem with wines named after their terroirs. But get this: the wine hails of course from the Burrweiler Schäwer, now anointed a "Grosses Gewächs." And if you *produce* a Grosses Gewächs bottling you *may NOT* produce any other *DRY* bottling using the site name. *Sweet* wine, that's OK. Just not a second dry wine. Um oh-kay. . . .

Actually, if the Pfalz VDP follows the example of the Nahe, they'll soon have to lose any *Prädikat* designation for the dry wines, so that the above will be called just "Schiefer Riesling Trocken" and maybe not even that, because the name *Schiefer* (slate) is available to everyone whose wine grows on slate, and sooner or later it won't be trendy any-

more to name your wine after your soil.

Regardless of this flim-flammery, there is indeed a *Schäwer Grosses Gewächs*, and though I liked it, I liked this one even more, and it made a better tandem with the above Gro-G. It's lighter than the "serious" Schäwer but it is just irresistibly juicy and friendly; a huge bouquet of hyacinth and irises and violets; the palate is a whole shelf of jack-in-the-boxes all springing up at once—fruit! fruit! fruit! fruit! and spicy! spicy! spicy!—balanced and just crazy-delightful.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-2 years; again 8-13 years)

GMS-132 **2007 "Muschelkalk" Riesling Kabinett Feinherb** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Time to get this back on the core-list, I think, if this amazing critter is anything to go by. It is of course the artist formerly known as Burrweiler Schlossgarten. It's swollen with vinosity, chunky and the sweetness is buried under waves of saturated terroir; an almost fiery finish of implacable stubborn power. Yowza.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (3-12 years)

GMS-133 **2007 Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb**  
 Very late picked with 96° Oechsle in order to "ripen the acidity," said Gregor. Tarragon and wintergreen and spitting cats, dude; the 18 grams of RS might as well not be there; the wine has a malic zing and paper-cut sharpness, and wonderful length. Me like.  
 SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

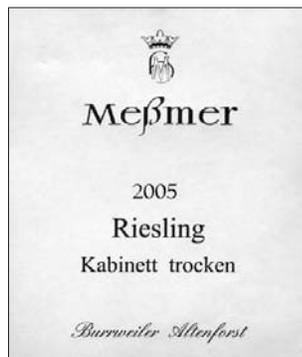
GMS-134 **2007 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 40 g.l. RS—exactly half what the 2001 had; boys, they've just about abandoned this style of Riesling ("The sweet-wine drinker likes them really sweet . . ."), but oh man, it's perfect; finely detailed slate nose and a gorgeously salty palate, like a potion of mined salts and violets and spearmint; the sweetness—or 'sweetness'—is engulfed in foaming waves of salinity and flowers; one of *THE* highlights of the vintage.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-24 years)

GMS-135 **2007 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 Mr. Midas-touch with this variety does it again, though the still-cloudy cask sample is only just starting to show its rosy grace.  
 SOS: 2 (now-5 years)

GMS-136H **2007 Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** ++  
 You won't buy this. It's hard enough with Auslese per se; it's gotta be crazy to do a *recherché* Auslese on top of it. You're missing a staggering, incredible wine, but the world is full of them, right? This is almost an Eiswein, stinging in its acids and as close as liquid can come to solid; almost a *gelée* of concentrated vinosity; I mean, it's wine-ordnance, the salt and juice are so explosive. There is in effect no finish since it builds a nation on your palate that stays until it's subsumed into the next wine. I mean, prove me wrong, but we can easily do without wines like these. . . .  
 SOS: 3 (now-12 years)

GMS-137H **2007 Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml** (+++)  
 GMS-138H **2007 Scheurebe TBA, 12/375ml** (+++)

*YABBA DABBA DOUX!* But don't ask me to share notes on these still-cloudy syrups; the BA with its piddling 190° and the TBA with an anemic 250°, but Gregor has made not some but many of the greatest dessert-wines I've ever had, sleek and detailed and miraculous, so . . .



# theo minges

## pfalz • flemlingen

Most of the news is excellent. Theo's had the best vintage he's ever had, and he's lost weight and looks totally buff. "This vintage was so much fun you hated to sleep in case you missed any of it," he says, and the splendid collection of wines backs him up.

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

couple weeks ago, as I tried to explain why I was meeting the news of his VDP status coolly. In fact it does me harm, except insofar as it does him good.

Still, it's interesting to count the number of growers currently in this portfolio who entered it prior to being anointed with the Imperial approval of VDP-dom. I count eight.

Minges has become quite the new-ager in his old age. Where Gregor is a cerebral sort of guy, Minges is constantly talking about energy fields and similar arcana.

And he often talks about transmitting *energy* into the glass; there is clearly a sort of vibrant force he's looking for. He's come to the attention of Hans-Günter Schwarz, who has been, not exactly "consulting," but available as an interested friend. Hans-Günter always said there either was or wasn't an ignition of simpatico between him and his many apprentices, and I'm sure as he got to know Minges he felt *This is my kind of man*, and he attended to the estate as a kindly force himself.

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



Theo Minges

have since become brothers-in-arms.

I doubt if there has ever been a greater *grower* than Hans-Günter. If you've ever known someone with a green thumb you'll know what I mean. I think vines

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

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

One year I had some yucky chest-cold thing while I was in Germany; it didn't hit the schnoz, luckily—I could still work—but it made me wonder what I'd do if I was KO for a few days and couldn't taste: what then? I'd hope I was laid-out on a day I was scheduled to visit Theo Minges, not because I don't like to see him (I do!) but because I know with this grower as with few (if any) others I could say "Sorry to have missed you; just send what you sent last year." He is that reliable.

Theo was chatty. And he talks fast. So I've learned to listen fast, because he keeps spouting out these gems. One year I asked him as I asked everyone, whether he acidified. "Almost not at all," he said. "You know, there are growers who usually de-acidify, and who added acidity this year—who in effect fight against nature, but I

see it differently. We are part of the whole; we don't stand apart from nature."

This is a crux of the matter, isn't it! To one sort of vintner, a vineyard is a mere production-unit, a thing which is used like any machine, to bring about a result he's already decided upon. To another sort of vintner, a vineyard is teeming with life. He goes out among his vines, his soils, his breezes, his birds, and listens. None of them speak his language but all of them speak their own, and this he tries to hear. He nurtures his vines and gathers the fruit they give, and follows the will of that fruit all the way to the alchemy of wine. Sure he knows what *font* he likes, but he knows he doesn't write the text; the text is larger than he but includes him. Indeed he is crucial; he takes the inchoate and urges it alive.

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

Minges himself is an old fashioned guy in an old fashioned house; he only just got a fax machine and doesn't own a computer ("Though my daughter has one; I can give you her email address if you want to send me emails," he offered. Somehow I'd rather call. . . .) By the way, you always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

Theo Minges was "thrown in the cold water early" at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility

which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo's opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course, planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

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

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Flemlinger Zechpeter site is planted in Riesling from MOSEL clones, planted 38 years ago by Theo's father. Everything is hand-harvested—not a necessity here, as the land isn't steep—and many separate passes are made through the vineyards. The grapes are pressed in a pneumatic press with very little pressure. Musts are rarely centrifuged; Minges prefers to let them sit overnight to clarify. Natural yeasts are usually used, though Minges has no ideological objection to using cultured yeasts *if necessary*. Fermentations are quite slow, at least four weeks, and no wine is *ever* racked before January; each wine spends at least a month on its primary lees to help them clarify and build complexity. "You have to leave the wines on their lees patiently," he says. "Otherwise, they become too reductive, too smooth; all their structure comes from acidity alone."

**minges at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GTM-108 **2007 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

As is often the case, Minges' Rieslings have a keen resemblance to Blanc de Blancs Champagne; a snappy, racy palate with loads of fruit and inside-sweetness; a finely detailed and spicy finish which itself leads to a deep minty tertiary finish.  
SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-12 years)

GTM-105L **2007 Riesling Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter**

Minges' Liters are always at or near the top in sheer *VALUE*, and this is no exception; it's a little drier than usual but is salty and long and full of the herbal-citric 2007 complexity; salty and gulpable. I'm culpable for the gulpable. For the asking price, this is one stunning Minges.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-6 years)

GTM-106L **2007 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

In fact unchaptalized, and *estate-bottled* (for the first time in several years), and as is often the case this is beautifully clear and zippy and is just a crazy-ass value.  
SOS: 2 (now-8 years)



- GTM-109 **2007 Flemlinger Zechpeter Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
 Salty! And comes very close to Catoir's wines from Bürgergarten in the Schwarz era; bergamot, quince and peach; a delightfully rich wine which seems to melt away like cotton candy into a mineral finish that's dry and smoky—a wine in two distinct parts, like acacia blossoms leading to sel gris. Theo's wines have always been vivid and snappy but there's a new dialectic and expressiveness here.  
 SOS: 2 (4-15 years)
- GTM-110 **2007 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
**CORE-LIST WINE (which replaces his Gleisweiler Hölle), and among the very best wines on the core-list; candied-ginger and freesia, talc and meyer-lemon dominate the ultra-fine fragrance; this is one of Theo's best wines ever, with sheer waves of fruit leading to an earthy, chewy mid-palate that anchors it and won't let it adore its own beauty; the finish is a koan of searching complexity. Prototypically great Pfalz Riesling of a type that's becoming an endangered species. Damn right it's on the core-list!**  
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GTM-111 **2007 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese**  
 For sure my most reliable, and reliably *typical* Scheu, even in impossible years like 2003. Man has the Touch. Ur-Scheu aromas; it's one of those that's like Provolone dipped in a pink-grapefruit *gelee* and eaten with a fried sage leaf. Lusty and expressive and classically extravagant, yet you'll barely believe the finesse of the finish.  
 SOS: 2 (now-13 years)
- GTM-112 **2007 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller Spätlese** **+**  
 A *first*, to my knowledge, and doesn't it just figure a guy like Minges would grow this finicky grape just because it tastes so damn good. Guys, apologize to her with this and she can't possibly stay mad at you. Theo's daughter made the wine (and made a lovely painting of the grapes) and dad's very happy, and should be; classic Muscat aroma with sweet cherry and peppermint; the palate is ringently zingy and almost steely, with a long, elderflower finish. Fermentation stopped with RS still in the wine, so a unique Muscat in this collection.  
 SOS: 2 (now-6 years)
- GTM-113H **2007 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++**  
 Ya gotta know I didn't want to love this but man I couldn't help it. Why even say how it tastes? The early palate is classy "typical" Auslese but the mid-palate goes into a vast forest of herbs and balsam, and the finish is endlessly intricate and luminous. Here is why we *CHERISH* Auslese, however 'inconvenient' it may be.  
 SOS: 3 (9-27 years)
- GTM-114H **2007 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml** **++**  
 Verbatim: "This Riesling is more searching than the Rieslaner, but how many Auslesen do I need? Yes it's majestically complex and exquisitely ripe, but . . . but; oh shit, I'm not gonna be able to resist it. From the oldest vineyard, and it never stops soaring except to access its fervid key-lime and pancetta-meaty taproot; the minty-sweet finish is icing on the cake."  
 SOS: 3 (9-27 years)



# koehler-ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

I confess I'm not sure what to do here.

It's widely known Bernd Philippi wants to sell the winery. Put it this way; I knew of no one in the Pfalz who *didn't* know. He has no kids to whom to leave it, and he's been there part-time anyway the past several years, what with his various projects in Portugal, Madeira and South Africa.

This puts me in rather a quandary. My loyalty is to Bernd Philippi specifically, not to "Weingut Koehler-Ruprecht" abstractly, but how much effort should I expend for something that will cease to exist sooner or later? Who knows whether the new owner will opt to perpetuate the monument-status of the estate? Maybe he'll decide it's an anachronism that needs to be

brought into the 21st century. I want to orbit closely enough that I'm there if the new owner's enlightened and simpatico. But what of the interim?

I'd love to have spoken with Bernd about it, but he was elsewhere when I visited.

Let me tell you why Koehler-Ruprecht is so particular, and offer a few wines exemplary of its special status.

I remember an old Charlie Parkerism (when asked how to go about being a great jazz musician): "First master your instrument," he said. "Then forget about all that shit and just PLAY." There you go! Bernd makes his way through the cellar like a virtuoso who no longer has to *think* about technique. And his wines are saturated with personal expression. His "voice," deep, resonant, gravelly, comes through in all his wines. Often remarkable, sometimes astonishing, sometimes *undrinkable* but always original, these wines are not for the faint of

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



palate, and no one feels lukewarm about them. They represent the purity of an old style you almost don't see anymore.

Bernd has no fear of oxygen; indeed, these wines' profound acid-extract structure seem to *relish* extended aging on the lees, frequent rackings, and lengthy storage in wood. I've known cellar-rats here who've told me privately that Bernd's winemaking breaks most of the modern rules, that by all reckoning they shouldn't work at all. Well, guess again. Other Philippi principles include no cultured yeasts, and none but the "classical" Geisenheim clones of Riesling. He likes alcohol and body and Nietzschean *thunder* in his wines. He doesn't like sweetness, and even his wines with residual sugar are on the dry side. Left to his own devices he'd drink nothing but dry wines.

Which is a pity, at least to me, because good though many of the dry wines are, even a modicum of sweetness often elevates them; really **profound** now, not *just* voluminous, with gut-grabbing flavors of ginger, dough and maize. These stand as the antonym of the current trend toward reductive vinification which—you may have noticed—I happen to like. But the world would be a *much*

poorer place without wines like these, great charging bears, with all manner of woody, animal secondary fla-

vors, yet supported by a rigid acid skeleton and capable of amazing aging.

**koehler-ruprecht at a glance:**

In many opinions the leading estate of the Pfalz — certainly among the top five. Of those estates, these are the biggest, most massively scaled wines. Extraordinarily old-style approach to vinification: no stainless steel.

**how the wines taste:**

They are uncompromisingly stony-gingery, dense, wine-y, not at all grapey. They tend to polarize tasters; if you love them they give you something you almost can't get anywhere else: a warmly satisfying old-fashioned *bigness* of flavor that's masculine and lusty. Other tasters just don't "see" them, as they lack the modern steely brilliance. Bernd's grudgingly willing to concede that the reductive style makes friends but in his heart he finds that type of wine too sterile and simple, and lacking the capacity to age. Bernd routinely makes elite-quality wines; in most tastings of Pfalz wines his are in the top group. I myself reach for them frequently and find they give that little **extra** that great wines give. If you don't know these you owe it to yourself to check them out, **ESPECIALLY IF YOU BUY FOR A RESTAURANT**, as these are among the *most* food-friendly wines of any in this vast universe of possibility.

GKR-100 **2007 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

We were tersely informed the "regular" Kabinett would "no longer be bottled." Ah me. This wine, which I have usually also offered, it as attractive as it usually is, in its ripe gravelly way.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-15 years)

GKR-097 **2007 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

A classically brawny Philippi-wine; granular, chewy, leesy and doughy; full and capacious, a manly man's Riesling; very long, big-throated yawp of vinosity.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-18 years)

GKR-098 **2007 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese (+)**

I have to hedge as there are still fermentation aromas here, but it seems to be a flowery sort of wine, almost lissome for this estate, but it's silly to say more.  
SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

GKR-096 **2005 Kallstadter Saumagen Muskateller Spätlese**

This lovely wine keeps getting better; it's dry (9.1 g.l. RS) and it's no small wine (13% alc) but what an amalgam of '05-malt and Muscat spice; mouthfilling and incisive; a big spicy and cheerful geezer with a zingy wit; wonderful balsam and mint finish. This is liquid delight.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-6 years)

GKR-099 **2002 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese ++**

Since this estate's wines are designed to be aged, it makes sense to show a wine with at least a little tertiary flavor, and I don't think anyone knew the amazing bouquet this superb vintage would develop, with jasmine and orchid notes like old Blanc de Blancs Champagne along with deep-shade balsam notes; gorgeously salty and a really exquisite mid-palate explosion into many-colored streamers of flavor; a great wine, and with 57 g.l. RS it's drier than many recent *Kabinetts*. Don't miss.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-27 years)

# kurt darting

## pfalz • bad-dürkheim

“2007 was a perfect vintage, and also a perfect antidote to the challenges of 2006!” said Helmut Darting.

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

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local cop. With Helmut Darting’s arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official “Meisterbetrieb” meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn’t be possible (theoretically!) to track down all the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. “Actually, no,” he said, “because I don’t always develop a rapport or sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!” With Helmut Darting it appears to have been a case of *simpatico instantaneoso*. Schwarz even gave permission for his pricelist text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting’s list, I knew Something Was Up.

If you’re unfamiliar with the reductivist’s creed, it



Helmut Darting

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

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

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

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

**darting at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GDR-159 **2005 St. Laurent**

This is oaky still, so don't buy it if you can't abide oak, but with air the cedary-plummy fruit emerges, and the cherry tobacco and new-shoes; it's satisfyingly round and gentle yet not at all soft, and there's an insinuating length.

GDR-158 **2007 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

This year I liked all Darting's dry Rieslings, somewhat to their dismay, as they have an avid clientele for them and hadn't allocated any to me. This was the juicier and more charming of two dry Kabs, and it's full of Pfalz sandy-soil juju; juicy-thick and firm with a spicy finish. Fronhof is like veal stock reduced with orange zest. A perfect by-the-glass Riesling.

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

GDR-168 **2007 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

I can't resist. This is firmer and brighter, with more lemon-balm and peach blossom, but it's still lavishly charming and I want you to see it even if it clutters this offering!

SOS: 1 (now-8 years)

GDR-160 **2007 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller**

Early harvested and "absolutely clean-selected" and—my heavens—is actually in fact chaptalized; this is a juicy Muscat, not a piercing one; in fact it's almost Riesling-like, so maybe it's a pivot-wine for those appalling misanthropes for whom Muscat is, don't ask me to explain it, too blatant.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years)

GDR-157L **2007 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

CORE-LIST WINE, and among the most successful in that group, for the upfront charm and extraordinary value it offers; this one is absolutely lovely, drier than usual, sleek and flowery and piquant and ginger-snappy and utterly fine and winning.

SOS: 2 (now-5 years)

GDR-162 **2007 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE, because this is always going to "show well;" it's fragrant and gregarious, and this '07 is a spicy rich wine, a consommé of Pfalz Riesling with a snappy dry finish and an angular malty mid-palate.

SOS: 2 (2-8 years)

- GDR-161 **2007 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Here, with the best sites, we see what Darting can do: this is firmer and more refined; high-toned lemon and ginger; classy refinement of jasmine and tilleul; I think the word is *breed*, though we just-plain-folks balk at such thoughts. It's like Kieselberg without the chalk-dust.  
 SOS: 2 (3-12 years)
- GDR-163 **2007 Durkheimer Nonnengarten Gewurztraminer Kabinett**  
 A sleek, rose-and-litchee version, not at all earthy, and with unusual grace for this sometimes lumpen grape; remarkable clinging length for a Gewürz with just 10% alc.  
 SOS: 2 (now-4 years)
- GDR-164 **2007 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 This is almost sultry; lots of bergamot and patchouli, and a deep peach and orange fruit astride a malty spice.  
 SOS: 2 (3-12 years)
- GDR-165 **2007 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese** +  
 The deep gravelly violet and lavender voice of the site blasts through whether with Scheu or Riesling, and this is a Scheu for Riesling-lovers; it's the thoughts of Riesling as it muses through *The Joy Of Sex*; the fragrance is pointed and the palate has a noble and kinky spice.  
 SOS: 2 (now-7 years)
- GDR-166 **2007 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** ++  
 Come on guys, time to cozy up to this amazing variety, and I don't recall a greater one from here; incredibly complex nose; implacably solid, complex palate, commandingly firm and spicy; so tangibly firm it seems only to consent to liquid form in order to humor you; from pure shriveled berries without botrytis. A masterpiece!  
 SOS: 2 (2-18 years)
- GDR-167H **2007 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Scheurebe BA, 12/500ml** (+)  
 Of a range of stickies, this is both the firmest and the sluttiest; like overripe bananas and guavas, and a really *horny* sweetness; it may grow nominally more correct after bottling, but I almost hope not.  
 SOS: 4 (8-25 years)



## 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.