



Germany 2013

Terry Theise Estate Selections





Theise Manifesto

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

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

*Distinctiveness is more important
than conventional prettiness.*

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

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

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Introduction

“I have a conviction that life itself has forms underneath it: that there are connections to be made between experience and memory that are not purely subjective but that wait patiently to be brought to the surface. I intuit that life has a shape, has a meaning, and that by working to make a story come alive, a writer can happen upon these underlying configurations, arcs, or ovals...”

I realize this may sound like mystical mumbo jumbo: what I am calling ‘the innate shape of reality’ may be nothing more than my aesthetic preferences, which always seek out the same tensions in raw experience, and then proceed to ‘discover’ the same patterns underneath them. Still, I cling to the conviction that there is some organic thread to the things that happen to us, which lurks patiently in experience, hoping to be found out.”

—Phillip Lopate

I spent a lot of the last four weeks trying to explain the market to my growers. The market of course is you. So who are you?

You are mostly people in your twenties and thirties, who have come of wine-age in a different world than I did. There’s a lot more coming at you, wines from a zillion places who either weren’t making wine when I was a pup, or else no one knew about them. Today there’s hardly a corner of Italy or Spain or Greece or Slovenia where some wine grower in a hidden dell with twelve rows of vines, three irritable sheep and a ratty scrofulous dog isn’t making wine that some intrepid (or merely lost) American importer hasn’t unearthed. And you want to have them. It’s fun, all this crazy new stuff, and you love to be part of the spirit of discovery.

It’s not only wine, it’s all of life that’s banging up against your windows. Your basic consciousness was formed by another syntax of input than I knew. It’s a battle royal in there, a mosh of material you can only pay glancing attention to, and so “glancing attention” becomes a defining feature of how you see the world. There’s a ton of stuff to sift through, and when any new bit of *stuff* swims into your ken, it better make its point and move along.

(I pause here to clarify: obviously you’re not all the same, and obviously generalities such as these are only *generally* true, and obviously there are infinite shades of temperament among you and I know that someone’s reading this and thinking “That doesn’t describe me at all.” But for all that, your world and therefore you are different.)

One thing modern German wine does not do is make

its point quickly. In fact it makes a fucked up mishmash of points all at once, many of them at odds with one another, and before long you’re confused and impatient, and maybe you think “I’ll revisit this thing when they have their shit together. Some of the wines are sure good.”

Here’s what I mean. One, a lot of what you’re being offered are Rieslings, and many of those have residual sugar. Yet the official “marketing” of the German Wine Institute seems to want to shove the dry Rieslings in your face, plus Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris and various red wines. Just what *is* this wine culture’s identity?

Two, you receive frequent sales calls from (or on behalf of) so-called “VDP” estates, because this grower organization is active in the marketplace. And one of its innovations has been to re-cast German wine categories and nomenclature along Burgundian lines. So they explain what they’re doing and it makes sense and you get it. So far so good.

But three, then you look at some random other label and all this stuff isn’t there. Instead there’s all these terms from an antique wine law written in your grandparents’ time, and now you’re completely confused. Is *this* how the German thing works or is *that* how the German thing works?!

And so, I explained to my growers, Germany is in a period of transition (if you’re spinning it positively) or else in an identity crisis (if you’re telling the truth), and having failed in either case to decide what it wants to be, it throws the whole damn mess at you and cluelessly expects your busy self to just suss it.



If the wines weren't as good as they are, you'd throw their ass into the street. But there's the rub—these amazing, one-of-a-kind wines.

Many of you have them conflated among the “classics” of the wine world, and thus they appear either stodgy or else unaffordable, as nearly all of the great classics have (sadly) become. If I were in my twenties or thirties I'd be seriously pissed off at these so-called classics, because I'd want to drink them and couldn't, since the only people who can finagle the scratch are Hong-Kong investment bankers or Swiss plutonium magnates. So screw it if I can't afford Barolo; I'll drink Gattinara or Boca or some Nebbiolo from Uruguay or even a native grape from Urquhartistan called “Phrzzic” that's said to be the same as Nebbiolo.

I seriously empathize because I can't afford those wines either. Oh sure, you may think I'm a “successful importer” but no one gets rich selling German Riesling and most of the supernals of the wine world are out of my reach. Hang out with me and I'm sure to geeze your ass straight to sleep; “Well young'un, in my time a fella could score a bottle of 20-year old Rioja for under twenty samolians, and hell, I could drink one of the top Côte Roties once a week....” I mean, I just saw a bottle of 1975 Clos de Goisses on the wine list of a restaurant in Alsace for **188 Euro**, which I'm sure reflects the price they paid for it back in 1985. Top wine is now a mere commodity whose costs are hyperinflated by the breathless bloviating of, let's say, certain reviewers. I can't possibly blame you for wanting no part of it. Neither would I.

But German wine is still not only affordable, it's actually a bargain, because it's still a buyer's market

even for the top ones. That's the silver lining for all the incoherence. The wines are ungodly gorgeous *and* you can afford them.

There's maybe another aspect to the question. For a lot of us, the image of “classic” is like one of those banks in the shape of the Parthenon; fusty, self-solemn, Terribly Earnest. Who needs this? It's all Masterpiece Theater in a glass. However, this arises from a conceptual error we ourselves make, by leaping to the conclusion that “classic” only denotes one limited thing. In fact the true classics of the wine world are those wines that have proven over time to be most delicious, most expressive, most powerful, most resonant and most transcendent. Classic wines are the tantric sex between grape and ground, full-body orgasms of flavor, toe-curling and scalp-tingling and the whole melting-into-the-universe thing, and when you have one of them in your glass you know, immediately: wine isn't just a diversion, a plaything or even an adventure. Wine is a bringer of profound and beautiful experience, the kind that invades us and makes us more alive, so that we think “I didn't know I could *be* so alive.”

That's what a classic is.

And Germany is perhaps the last place on earth where this experience is within reach of people who ride the subway to work.

That's why I want you to surmount the dismay and irritation you have *every right* to feel, because the payoff is unbelievable.

I want to help. So I'm going to tell you, in shorthand form, the few things you really need to know. These will get you 85-90% of the way there. The rest is fine-

points, bureaucracy and spit-shine. If I haven't imparted this to you in less than ten minutes of your reading and considering it, one of us has failed.

THE SHIT YOU *GOTTA* UNDERSTAND ABOUT GERMAN WINE TODAY

The single most important word on the label is **TROCKEN**. It means DRY. This isn't because dry wines are *better*—they aren't—but this one word will tell you the single most salient thing about the basic nature of what's in the bottle.

If you do not see "Trocken" on your label, the wine will contain at least some sweetness. If it is just a teensy bit of sweetness, so little you can't even be certain it's there, you'll probably see the word **FEINHERB**.

Germany's prevailing wine law was enacted in 1971. It was a piece of shit then and it still is. Today's growers observe just enough of it not to expose themselves to prosecution, and they ignore the rest. The law, written before global warming, mandated ripeness as the *only* factor in quality. A line was drawn between chaptalized and unchaptalized wines. The latter were assumed to be made from grapes ripe enough to go it alone. There was a kind of ladder of increasing ripeness, and as you climbed it you passed Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese and finally the dessert-wines, Beerenauslese (a.k.a. BA), Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) and Eiswein.

Spätlese was riper than Kabinett, and Auslese was riper than Spätlese, and because we associate riper things with sweeter things—think strawberries or peaches; the riper they are the sweeter they are—an Auslese was usually sweeter than a Spätlese, which in turn was usually sweeter than a Kabinett. This is why the "Kabinett" category has remained so popular; it is presumed to be the least sweet of the top category of wines. It also costs the least.

That category of unchaptalized wines is now called "Prädikatswein." The word appears on the label.

That is the old system in essence, and vestiges of it are still used. There's more— isn't there always?—but that's for German-Wine 202.

A parallel system has arisen, thanks to the activities of a grower's association called the VDP. It is a group of superior producers. Most of its members are in the top rank, though there are top-rank growers who choose not to join, for reasons of their own. The VDP has recast German wine along a Burgundian model. Pending an entire European Union re-draft of each country's wine laws (sure to entail a nightmare), the VDP's innovations are quasi-officially accepted.

VDP's system is simple. It establishes three or four tiers of quality. You have estate-wine, village-wine, and either Premier and Grand Cru wine, or just Grand Cru alone. This is decided by each wine producing state. (If you're curious, I personally favor the 4-tier model.)

(continued on page 8)

A Dedication

This year's offering is dedicated to Rolf and Alfred Merkelbach.

It was my second appointment of the day, following a somewhat voluptuous collection at Meulenhof. I knew that 2012 was a vintage of high-acid wines yet with a lot of concentrated fruit and dense extract, and I had a feeling I knew what was in store here in Ürzig.

Johannes Selbach's wife Barbara was there, along with their son Sebastian, who joined several of my visits in order both to taste and to observe us tasting. He's at the stage of wanting to taste everything, a stage I know well; patterns seek to form and he wants his head above the water. In these instances the less I say the better, because it's preferable for him to have all the white-space he needs to make it be his, not a simulacrum of mine or anyone else's. So I asked if he'd ever tasted Merkelbach, and he said he hadn't.

Both Rolf and Alfred were ailing. Some shitty virus was going around Germany, and everyone was hacking and light-headed. As we sat at the tasting table poor Rolf's lungs were so wheezy it sounded like a cat was meowing to be let into the room. So the brothers were subdued, and looked their age.

If you don't know, the gentlemen are in their late seventies. They never married. They work a barely-2-hectare estate all on steep slopes, divided into about 35 different parcels. They do it all themselves, with part-time help for harvest and for exceptionally busy times in the vineyard cycle. They don't green-harvest—believing it's a sin against providence—and they don't pick selectively in multiple passes. If you know the "en-bloc" series of wines at Selbach-Oster, in which three parcels are left to the last possible moment and then picked in their entirety, you'll be interested to hear that *all* of Merkelbach's vineyards are picked that way. It's always been done like that.

Thirty years ago when I first visited these villages, they were full of tiny estates like this one, every little street festooned with signs to taste and buy direct from the grower. Today there are fewer growers, and they've gotten bigger as vineyards came onto the market from luckless neighbors who were closing their doors. Merkelbach was typical of the artisan production structure of an earlier time, and they haven't changed. But the times have.

Now these bigger estates have to compete for a slice of a smaller pie, as wine is no longer a routine (*over*)

A Dedication (continued)

everyday beverage, but instead a drink for specialists and aficionados. An active press has arisen to lead such drinkers to the best hooch. And as you know, as soon as you've established rankings and hierarchies you induce growers to examine your criteria and adapt their wines to them. It's human, it can hardly be helped. So everyone's wines are pimped up to get the scores they need and to land on top-10 lists. Everything's richer, more concentrated, sweeter (if sweet at all) and more alcoholic and imposing (if dry), and so the entire grammar of wine has changed entirely – except for a small few holdouts like Merkelbach, who aren't even aware they *are* holding out, or what they're holding out against. They're just making the wines they've always made, honest, true, fresh and light-bodied Mosel wines.

After the first wine was tasted—a Kinheimer Rosenberg as always—I told Sebastian these were ur-Mosels, something essential and close to the source of the thing's identity. It sounds silly to say they make me feel “young” again, but they have a way of collapsing time, so that the first whiff of the first glass takes me back immediately to my formative virginal experience of these wines back in the late 70s. That smell is why I loved them. That smell is like no other smell. The purity and modesty of that smell and those flavors are a return to an Eden of bliss. As modest as the wines may seem, they possess something that makes them impervious to corruption, from the enticements of ego or the temptations of falsity. I raise the glass, and the decades dissolve like the foam on a glass of Champagne. There it is again; there it always is. The fragrance isn't huge, but it contains the sum of love and gratefulness for a lifetime in wine.

Of course this is important at this time in my life. One is paring down. The fundamental things apply – but where does one find them, and what do they apply to? Yet I'd argue these things are even more important to you, because you almost never experience them, they are too seldom found. Or when they are found, one senses the enactment of a pastiche of authenticity. Even when the wines are truly authentic, when are they ever *this* beautiful?

And when are they ever *this* accessible??? Please look at the prices Rolf and Alfred want us to pay for the work of their entire lives. For truly small-batch, hand-crafted wines done on such steep land that no machines can be used. Did you know that Merkelbach's wines are produced *cask-by-cask*, and that each cask represents about 112 cases of wine? Did you know that even if they wanted to create a

wine with more volume, their biggest holding tank only holds two fuders? Did you know that nearly all their vineyards are old, ungrafted plants, some between eighty and a hundred years old? Can't you imagine that if such wines came from some more fashionable place, they'd cost exponentially more?

I hope I am wrong, but I suspect that for people of your generation, there are so few authentic things left in the world that you hardly learned how to recognize them. Anyone could lead you to some young hottie making sexy-pants wines and who's active on Twitter, or to some crusty old coot in an austere and forsaken corner of Spain or Italy who's making wines whose obscurity is, let's say, understandable. We get seduced by the story, but the wines are iffy. Come on, admit it. So if you think I'm just flying my silverback flag by dedicating an offering to two guys nearing eighty, whose wines haven't changed a lot in thirty years, I think there may be aspects of the world you don't yet understand.

As we sat there tasting the outstanding collection of 2012s, I felt again how unadorned these wines are. They are faces that need no makeup. They're articulate but never chatty. They are completely beguiling but never seductive. They are full of substance and yet weightless. They taste eternal and yet also eternally fresh, as though the gravitas of slate were dancing with a gurgling cooing innocence. Even other wines I *like* have more affect than these do. Merkelbach's wines are pure life-force, and I cast about trying to remember when I'd ever tasted anything like them. And then it came to me.

I leaned over to Sebastian and said, “You know, these are the kinds of wines Hans, your grandfather made, and these are the kinds of wines that formed his paradigm of what Mosel wines actually are.” He gave me a searching, entire gaze that nearly undid me. Souls moved about the room.

Rolf and Alfred have also seemed to condense a million pages of Buddhist study into two divine and simple lives. They need very little, and are thoroughly happy. They love their lives, and though they're starting to consider what might happen when they're no longer able to work their vineyards, each time they step near the brink they pull back—“Oh, we're not ready to give it up just yet, we'll just do it as long as we can.” Think about it: do you know anyone who is leading the exact life he was meant to lead? Someone who is unreservedly happy, whole, integrated?

I can name two people, and it is to them I dedicate this work and these words. Bless you both, thank you both, Rolf and Alfred.

Alfred Merkelbach

Mosel // Ürzig

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



The new vintage is one of the very best I've tasted in 27 years here. It's both a superb collection and a quintessentially Merkelbach vintage. I liked every single wine I tasted.



You'll note the plethora of "Sommelier Alert" designations. This old style of Mosel Riesling was never very sweet, unlike too many of today's wines. First of all, these are lighter in must-weight and don't need much sweetness to be in balance. Second, they hail from a time when sweetness wasn't a thing you *tasted* but a thing

that *served*, a crucial if invisible agent of harmony and wholesomeness. Very few of Merkelbach's wines taste "sweet" but they exemplify my adage about apples: we don't eat apples because they are sweet, but if they weren't sweet we wouldn't eat them.

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

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



About the Vineyards

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

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

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

2012 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett #2

GME-196

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

There are two *fuder* (the name for the Mosel-cask holding about 112 cases of wine), this one and #1; both were very good but I preferred this one by a hair.

By the way, the same parcels go into the same fuders each year, so that the fuders are seasoned with that small slice of land. It isn't too romantic to surmise that the fuders in some way remember the land, is it?

This had a more vivid slate and green apple, and a mischievous poke of acidity; it's the drier of the two, and a more fundamental Mosel would be hard to find.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #8
SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-194

This is virtually *Feinherb*, with no perceptible sweetness but with blazing clear terroir; from a lower parcel on more weathered crumbly soil, and what it loses (perhaps!) in fruit it gains in pinpoint balance and naked mineral.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #11 +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-201

Oh stop being so perfect. Hard to conceive how the “genre” improves on this; licorice and slate garrigue and as salty as an oyster shell.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett # 18 + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-202

From an old, steep vineyard planted “some time before the war,” and of course ungrafted. The wine is again not only flawless but actively and tangibly perfect. Tingly brilliant and with gauzy cirrus lightness, but this “flyweight” (as Schildknecht calls them) is both infinitely more complex and will live many times longer than bigger, more ostentatious wines. Absurdly vivid slate and sassafrass.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #7 +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-197

Less acidity than Ürziger and Kinheim this year, but by no means soft and still feeling dry. Spearmint and walnuts and Granny-Smiths; a neon buzz of slate, tastes like it was fined with *sel gris*.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : n/a

GME-192

CORE-LIST WINE. But unlike in other years when we’ve blended two fuders to get at least 225 cases of this “item,” in 2012 we opted to let them remain singular, and we’ll ship them sequentially, this one first. It’s spicy and smoky and salty and wry; charming but not *fetiching*, arrestingly beautiful but not coquettish. A testament to meaning and beauty in the form of a whispered prayer. Like walking into a room with an overripe quince sitting in a basket, and your sweetheart is making dinner, chopping ginger.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #19 +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-200

The “sweetest,” relatively speaking among these, giving more apple and strawberry and kiwi—I mean, these wines make you feel you could *shit* strawberries—but the final third of the palate clamps down again with charred slate and salt, and the finish is sternly dry. The wine proves many things: its acid isn’t terribly high (8.6 grams/liter) and yet the wine is so springing leaping brilliant... nor do you need extreme acid to mitigate residual sugar, which is 52 g.l. and tastes like half that amount.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese “Urglück” +
SOS : 1

GME-198

This is the name of the original parcel, locally renowned. It has the greatest force of terroir. But be aware: this is massively *mineral*, and with its moderate sweetness this entails a certain asperity. Lovers of stony, dusty and tart wines will be in heaven. Seekers of sunny charm, turn back and look at the above.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-199

From a parcel below the sundial, with crumbly weathered soil; it’s really fleshy and quince-y with a spicy back-palate. Piquantly beautiful in an angular way, it’s by no means too sweet for savory foods.

(continued from page 3)

The actual classification of vineyards is (inevitably) tendentious and controversial, but the system is a huge boon to consumers, because we now can know that *if a vineyard site appears on a label it is an important one*. Otherwise the wine simply carries a village name or just the estate's name.

These wines from classified vineyards can be made in different styles. If they are DRY and among that category, the TOP dry wine from the estate, they're called **Grosses Gewächs**. (Try "grocer's g-vex.") Until this year certain regions called them **Erstes Gewächs**, which means the same thing and will soon become uniform in any case. If the classified site's wine has SWEETNESS then it falls into the Prädikatswein quality-ladder.

The Nahe estate Schlossgut Diel is a classic example. They produce a Grosses Gewächs called *Goldloch* which is serious and dry. They also produce Kabinett, Spätlese and (usually but not inevitably) Auslese from the same site under its full name *Dorhsheimer Goldloch*, which means "Goldloch of Dorsheim." All of these wines carry the little insignia for classified sites on the label.

So, if you want to be decently professional, I would argue this is all you need to know. There's a lot more you could learn, were you so inclined, but I promise that if you master what I've outlined here, you'll be equipped to handle 90% of what Germany throws at you.

IS IT A DRY-WINE CULTURE OR A SWEET-WINE CULTURE OR BOTH?

Within Germany it is decidedly a dry wine culture. I'll limn this point in detail in a subsequent essay about dry German wines, but for now it's enough to say that the omnipresence of dry wines within Germany is a dubious example of this country's temptation to do things in large implacable blocs. There's a kind of "totalitarianism of taste"—in Florian Weingart's perfect phrase—that is a little unnerving, because everyone's taste is (or should be) particular, and yet every German likes just one type of wine: dry. Likes, or supposes he does. Or thinks he must. Either way, if you were dropped from the sky and landed in Germany you'd conclude it's a dry wine culture.

Outside of Germany it is a not-dry wine culture, because we in other countries can perhaps see with greater perspective that the not-dry German Rieslings are a singular and precious gift to the world and to the cause of beauty. So we cherish and nurture those wines, to try and ensure they don't vanish. This isn't because we're stubborn, conservative or digging in our heels to refuse to move with the times. It's because the times are fucking wrong. *Both styles can and ought to exist together*. This isn't a last-man-standing fight to the death. So the answer to the question, in truth is: It is both a sweet and a dry wine culture, but not if the Germans themselves have anything to say about it. Other than a few token dessert-wines they'd just as soon see the sweet wines go extinct.

HOW THIS CATALOGUE WILL PROCEED

I'll do what I've done up to now, try to isolate and explain the *salient* aspects of a grower's work. Where greater depth is called for—and it often is—I'll cordon off those writings in discrete essays you can read if you have the time or desire. That said, I will not address you in tweet form. That would insult your intelligence. I will, though, respect the demands on your attention and seek to give you what you most need to know in the smallest possible space.

Some of this will be very chop-chop, matter of fact. But not all. Because one of those salient things about German wine growers is that some of their stories can't be told in short-form just-the-facts prose. To do so would be unfair to both them and to you.

For readers closer to my age who may be dismayed that my normally discursive ruminations are curtailed, I'm sorry. But there are twenty seven years worth of back-catalogues, plus a book, and I'll find plenty of time to write more of those antic foamy passages that are so much fun for us both. But these folks need to get through this material and still have time to do their laundry, and I can't have their dirty socks on my conscience.

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

I have never sought the "elite," though I do assert that right *within* wineries, where I choose my favorites and leave the others. I want of course to have *some*, maybe even lots of "elite" growers, but I also want to have really good, lusty, vital, honest examples of wines in every "echelon" of quality. Not because I'm strutting my egalitarian cred (rather the reverse, since I'm an unabashed elitist) but because *I enjoy the variety*. No one would claim a Schneider is "as good" as a Dönnhoff, but what can I offer you for those times when an *exalted* experience is simply not called for?

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

We are at risk of squandering this capacity to enjoy that which is simple, because we seem to need to insist it is *merely* simple, or that simple isn't good enough for us. 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." In one case we cultivate an appreciation of the highest refinement of beauty, in the other we cultivate an appreciation of the joys of honesty, integrity, goodness, companionability. We don't have to choose. We get to have them both. As long as we're not



cowering inside our dread and insecurity insisting “only the best is good enough for me, or rather, for *me*.”

I am constantly tasting new estates. A portfolio is never fully settled. You have to be very careful not to coast, and I often ask myself “If I were coming to this grower for the first time, would I want the wines?” That doesn’t mean I go all lord-of-the-flies on my suppliers; even the most talented and caring grower will have a dud vintage once in a while. When that happens you steer customers elsewhere and wait for the next fine year.

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

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

* THE 2012 VINTAGE *

Perhaps you remember last year I said I was getting weary of minute meteorological explanations for a vintage, finding them otiose. Perhaps you don’t know what “otiose” means. It means futile or ineffectual, but isn’t quite exactly either of those things, having also a quality of irrelevance or uselessness. It’s one of those cool words that threads the linguistic needle. Anyway, I don’t think you want to know each detail of the growing season, so I’ll spare you.

What matters is this: early in the cycle right around or just before flowering, the weather wasn’t ideal and they had either fungus infections (*peronospora*, or downy mildew) or *coulure*, a failure of the blossoms to “set.” This was more pronounced as one went north, and most growers in and north of the Rheingau reported a 30% reduction in crop size, whereas the Rheinhessen and Pfalz were closer to normal.

The summer was cool and damp everywhere. Growers began to think the small crop might be a blessing in disguise. No one expected great results. The weather changed in late August, and remained almost constantly dry and sunny for a remarkably long time, giving producers a chance to pick what they wanted when they wanted (“We actually took weekends off,” was a common refrain) as opposed to needing to bring the crop in before the next storm or cold front.



Leitz wrote me, in his quite special style,

"The late summer was fantastic. Middle of August 40 degrees. Harvest really BEST!!! and stress less- like never before. Dry and sunny and decent degree daytime and nearly freezing at night. Means no shitty fruit flies or wasp assholes who spread the vinegar rot the last 3 vintages.

So we picked the most healthy grapes since a long time. And!!!! Funny thing, the sunshine for 5 weeks was not turned into oechsle (they stayed very low) it turned into fruit. I never tasted as fruity juice before."

This echoes an often-repeated trope for 2012—the welcome lack of botrytis. In fact there was almost none. This gave growers all the leeway they could desire to wait to pick, and fruit was concentrated by dehydration. An American living and working in the Pfalz named Bill Hooper wrote this to me, speaking only for the Pfalz but in fact generally applicable: "What sets 2012 apart from other recent vintages is that due to a long, cooler season, [the] physiological ripeness has been achieved before a significant drop in acidity." And 2012 is indeed a high-acid vintage at least for Riesling. (It was permitted to add acidity to other varieties.) Yet we've come to see this through the prism of vintages that have generally been lower in acidity than was the case up to and including 2002. We're spoiled. 2010 was a freak, of course, yet there

were few instances where I *felt* acidity on the palate, high though it may have been on paper.

This is because the wines are amazingly dense and full, materially rich in substance, yet not even slightly fat. German has two perfect words for these things: *dicht* (meaning a many-layered palpable density) and *fülle* (meaning not just fullness but a concentrated juiciness that's almost semi-solid), and so the wines are markedly generous and concentrated for a so-called "high-acid" year. Extracts were such as to prompt an image of liquid geology in many wines.

You're going to have to call this an outstanding vintage, especially in points north. Yet the Pfalz offered its own share of surprises. The season was 2-3 weeks earlier there, and one heard tales of a rush to pick for fear of rot, anticipated due to a *warm* front. But then the Pfälzers took it on the chin in the last decade, and can be indulged if they seem skittish and pick hurriedly. But not all of them did. And for each estate whose wines seemed perhaps unfulfilled, there were others who made their best vintages in memory, and at least one who emerged transcendent.

A cold night on 25/26 October gave hope of Eiswein but it wasn't cold enough. The grapes "looked like sorbet," several people told me, and what they did pick that morning had a subtle Eiswein tang, and went into the few Auslesen the vintage gave. Afterwards there was a drop in acidity, and the picking continued well into early November. This meant several things. One, because the picking was so late, fermentations were colder and

therefore slower, and for growers seeking to make wines with sweetness, they had plenty of leisure to consider the perfect moment to stop those fermentations. Two, and more important for me personally, the wines were about 3–4 weeks *later* than last year, and my visit was one week earlier, which means I was tasting substantially less developed wine than I'd tasted a year before. (This will also be true for any colleague who tasted much before April 1st.) Some of what I tasted seemed atypically raw, and I'm sure this was the reason.

Some growers' wines go through a sharp angular stage before fruit emerges and the flavors thread together. I saw it here and there, and allowed for it. But in some instances there was a sourness present, for which I could find no explanation. Please understand, sourness is something you *taste* as a flavor on the tongue, whereas acidity is a felt sense of something caustic. High-acid wines can be smooth, and low-acid wines can be sour; think of the bitter finish of most Gewurztraminers, for example; a very low-acid variety.

Most growers will have had among their best vintages of the last decade in 2012. But what is it like?

It's *loaded*. It's seldom tensile, but neither is it spherical. The wines are crammed with saltiness. "Mint" was a common descriptor. 2011 tasted facile next to it, and 2011 is not a facile vintage. But '12 is of another order.

It's hard to compare to earlier years. One could say it's like '09 but less yellow-fruit, more mineral, and richer. It's nothing like '10, not as spiky. It's like a *much* riper sibling of '08. It's not flowery the way '07 was, and it's *much* cleaner than '06. It's a little like '05 without the botrytis but with similar concentration; indeed it was Selbach's best vintage since '05, to which it nearly compares.

It's a fabulous vintage for Muscat, and a perplexing vintage for Scheurebe, but Scheu is often tardy and I was a lot earlier than usual. Some were clean but varietally mute, while others (Minges!) were full-throttle kama-sutra kink.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE IS:

—bearing in mind that Mr. Dönnhoff's number has been retired, as it were—well what is it? I struggle between an estate who have clearly and dramatically ascended, and one who has again shown a markedly powerful performance such as they have often done over the last 10–15 years. But attention must be paid, we have a new Belle-of-the-ball, and ladies and gents, leave your shoes at the door for you enter a holy place—the winery of the vintage is **VON WINNING**, who have attained a stunning crescendo that fully realizes the lofty ambitions they began with.

OTHER MARKED SUCCESSSES:

It won't surprise you to learn that **Leitz** continues to

perform at a stellar level. My number-1 runner-up to Von Winning has got to be **Selbach-Oster**, who have their best vintage since 2005 and who again conveyed a virtuosity over a very large range of wines, making it look easier than I know it to be. **Von Othegraven** is strongly expressive and aristocratic, wines of both dignity and deliciousness. **Carl Loewen** shows again that he's the sleeper in this portfolio. Both Adam and **Willi Schaefer** were superb. It's a lot of names, but it's a shit-ton of good wine!

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett. *This disqualifies it from being Kabinett of the vintage, but wow, I don't remember a more amazing Kabinett from this estate.*

RUNNERS-UP INCLUDE:

(a couple of Auslesen that were amazing plus a fiercely spectacular and equally fiercely expensive dry wine...)

von Winning Kirchenstück Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Loewen Ritsch Auslese

Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10

Strub Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Feinherb

THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

(other than those already cited above)

Selbach-Oster "Schmitt"

THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Minges Gleisweiler Scheurebe Trocken

THE KABINETTS OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

(excluding those already cited elsewhere)

von Othegraven Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett

von Othegraven Wawerner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

Merkelbach Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #18

Schmitt-Wagner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

Weingart Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

In fact, and amazing as it seems, I was most (pleasantly) surprised by tasting the *Regionals* at Selbach. They are wonderful and full of integrity; in fact they show as much if not more commitment to quality than the estate wines do, because one assumes regional wines will be mundane and "commercial," and you'd be happy if they were merely clean and drinkable. But in fact they're good. They'll never be lionized, or get high scores, or attract the enthusiasms of wine aesthetes, and no one will give as much as a pat on the back to Johannes Selbach for troubling to make his "humble" wines this good.

I call this honor.

THE GREATEST DRY WINES ARE:

The entire range at **von Winning**, with the **Kirchenstück GG** reaching the absolute apex, and the **Paradiesgarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken** offering the most ri-freaking-diculous value.

Leitz Hinterhaus is again a masterpiece

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

von Othegraven 2011 Altenberg Riesling Alte Reben Grosses Gewächs

Adam Goldtröpfchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Spreitzer Wisselbrunnen Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Strub Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Trocken

THE ABSOLUTE TOP VALUE:

Schneider Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese, offering the elite stature of this supernal Grand Cru at a still-attractive price. Fella's on the way up, so don't expect this to last...

THE MOST DROOLINGLY STUPID-TOTAL-FUN WINES:

Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken LITER

TIME TO WRAP YOUR ARMS AROUND FEINHERB!

SOMMS! Are you feeling fried? Sixteen days without a day off. Too many doubles lately? Craving some, any little sliver of down time?

I'm here to help. Here's what you do.

You take any of the wines on this list, and you go in to work before evening service, and you take bottles of these wines, the same one or various ones, whatever you prefer, and you put a bottle on each table in the dining room. One on each. Then you scan the room, exchange a few words with staff, and clock out. Take the night off. Watch the ball game, do your laundry, have dinner at home with your sweetheart. *Your work is done.* The perfect white wine is on every table already. The troops can handle the reds.

If I or you or anyone were given godlike powers, and we could design the *ideal* white wine for the table, a wine that would manage to harmonize with nearly anything (and with many things perfectly), a wine that was so delicious the bottle would empty in a flash and another one be ordered, a wine without tiringly high alcohol, a wine with freshness and substance—this is exactly precisely totally truly-madly-deeply the wine we'd create. But we don't have to: it already exists.

I'll define *Feinherb* in the glossary at the end of the catalogue, but for now what you need to know is: these are classic examples of (yet) another adage I've coined: The perfect dry wine is often not perfectly dry.

In practice "Feinherb" can be used for anything from 10 grams/liter of RS (and most palates taste sugar discretely starting at 12g/l. "Brut" goes to 15) to somewhere in the high 20s. It's the zone where sugar is stealthy and as good as invisible. It's extending the fruit, increasing the aroma, moderating the alcohol, and dancing with the sweetness already in your food. But you *do not* taste it. That is, unless you're that pathologically bitter ghoul who hates *any* surmise of sweetness. Put another way, a good dry Riesling is wonderful; a Feinherb Riesling is insanely wonderful, and is more flexible.

I'll list them here. Note that some don't actually say "Feinherb" on the label, but it's how they taste. And if you *really* want to be the hippest somm in town, these bottles of liquid perfection will be infinitely hipper with your food than that Micronesian amphora Vitovska you want everyone to be jealous of you for scoring.

Geil Bechtheimer Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +
Strub Niersteiner Hipping Thal Riesling Spätlese ++
Strub Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese ++
Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken LITER
Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken LITER +
Kruger-Rumpf Dautenpflänzer Riesling Feinherb + (+)
Dönnhoff Estate Riesling +
Weingart Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett Feinherb ++
Weingart Spay Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +
Weingart 2011 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Spätlese Feinherb ++
Spreitzer Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +
Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb, Alte Reben +
Reuscher-Haart "Überschwang" Riesling
Adam Hofberg Riesling Feinherb ++
Selbach-Oster 2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Feinherb
Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +
Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb "Uralte Reben" +
Leitz Riesling "Terrassen" + + (+)
Minges 2011 Riesling Halbtrocken
Minges Riesling Halbtrocken LITER
Meßmer Riesling Feinherb LITER
Meßmer Riesling Muschelkalk Feinherb
Meßmer Gelber Muskateller Feinherb +
Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +

CORE-LIST WINES

The core-list, with which we have been very successful, was created to ensure greater continuity and help you build brands. It began as an empirical record of having consistently selected a certain wine over many years. The wine needed to be in "good" supply (by small-batch standards). Yet for all that it's been fabulously received, it's created many "candid exchanges of views" (in the parlance of diplomacy) among my staff and me. I want you to know this: *no wine will be offered merely because it's on the core-list.* Every wine will continue to earn its way into this offering. In the (extremely unlikely!)

event a core-list wine is yucky in the new vintage, off it goes. If we've done our jobs properly, that will almost never happen. Core-list wines will be clearly indicated in the text (with notes in **bold print**) and I'll explain why each wine is on the core-list.

HARD-CORE-LIST WINES

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

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

Here they are:

Eugen Müller 2012 Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocke
Minges 2008 Riesling Sekt Brut
Minges 2011 Riesling Halbtrocken
Darting 2012 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken
Strub 2012 Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Trocken
Gysler 2012 Scheurebe Halbtrocken
Schneider 2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese
Hexamer 2012 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling
 Feinherb "Porphy"

von Othegraven 2012 Wawern Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage

HOW I SELECT

The first principle for me is to tell you the truth.

If I offer a wine it's because I liked it and think you should buy it.

I'm fallible, wine is changeable, and I can make the isolated mistake, but I won't suggest you buy a wine I don't think you should. Period.

This entails a risk with producers, who are correctly proud of their wines and who themselves have favorites they hope will be sold in the States. The risk is exacerbated by my laying everything out in writing, and though this

A New Way to Measure Sweetness

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol. I don't think the standard sugar-pyramid of German wines is Serviceable any more. Thus I started noting each wine I planned to list according to an intuitive scale I tried to apply consistently. I call it the SENSE-OF-SWEETNESS scale—SOS for short—and you'll see it following every tasting note. It should be a more reliable guide to the actual taste of a wine than any word on any label. Here's how it goes:

- **IT STARTS FROM ZERO.**
Zero is the point of no discernable sweetness.
- **MINUS ONE (-1)**
Indicates sugar is discernibly absent but the wine is in balance.
- **MINUS TWO (-2)**
For lovers of austere wines.
- **ONE (1)**
Signifies barely discernable sweetness.
- **TWO (2)**
Signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive..
- **THREE (3)**
Signifies sweetness important of itself. Remember, I reject any wine of grotesque or vulgar sugariness.
- **FOUR (4)**
is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!

PLEASE BUY MY MOVIE!

Nearly every time I have ever been to Germany I've found myself feeling "Nobody knows how beautiful it is here, and nobody guesses how lovely the Riesling culture actually is, now how inspiring the people are."

We've brought customers over in small groups for 21 years now, but what I really want is to bring everyone over, because I'm convinced that not only would you find this place deeply inspiring, it would also cast a pitiless light on many of the bogus things around you that masquerade as real.

Of course that's impossible. So I made a film to try and capture the flavor for people who haven't been there, or to remind people who *have* why they were so stirred. Plus I'm at a time in my life where I want to give testimony, to honor the taproots that have nourished me.

It's 53 minutes long, and I kept my gormless self out of it as much as I could. The film's about *them*, those people, those places, those lives and that beauty.

Here's how you get a copy: TerryTheiseMovie.com

Six reviews to date—all 5-stars.
You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll order a pizza.

text is written for you, it's also read by them.

Do I pull punches? Never. I may seek to write diplomatically, and I will always be humane and respectful, but I've built a covenant of trust with my customers for 27 years now, and it could be squandered in six months if I started dissembling or broke faith with my core values.

Otherwise, I try to build a sensible assortment, which entails leaving very good wines behind sometimes. I can live with that. Now and again a grower will convince me to offer a wine that has obtained iconic status, and I've been known to do that even when I didn't like the wine. In those cases I'll write a truthful tasting note. You'll make up your own mind.

DADDY'S FUCKED UP TASTING NOTES

I write as the spirit moves me. Some notes are free-flow and others are more detailed. I don't calculate, and I never write with sales in mind, unless I'm convinced a certain wine isn't getting enough attention.

I use cognates and associations, but I'm not convinced how useful they are. I tend to use them more on days I'm tired. When I'm alert and engaged I more often write in images and tones.

I almost never give analytical values, nor do I detail cellar or vineyard practices unless these are salient for any reason. After thirty five years tasting, I know the parameters in play. But some of you seek that information, which I appreciate—sometimes. It's good to be curious and eager to learn, but I sniff at times an unseemly desire to accumulate dubiously relevant information so as to sound knowledgeable to one's peers. I also think that obsessing over such details can obscure one's view of the big picture.

Here's an **ESSAY** I published on this subject in a recent Zester Daily. Skip over it if you don't have time for essays.

Lately I've been frustrating my customers, which is never a wise thing to do. We get asked all the time for analytical stats on the wines we offer and details about our winemaking practices. My catalogues tend to pass over such things, because I've reached a place in my drinking career where I find them otiose. This might seem snooty. So let me explain.

First, a wise quote from Peter Jost (of the estate Toni Jost), who said: "Judging a wine by its analysis is like judging a beautiful woman by her X-ray films." Second, and further support for my theory, a remark I received from esteemed German winemaker Helmut Dönnhoff many years ago, when I asked him for the figures of a wine in my glass. "You don't need these anymore, Terry," he said. "Analyses are for beginners."

*But there **are** beginners, I must remember, and they're curious, and it's peevish for me to deny*

them the understanding they seek. If a drinker is interested in knowing how a wine was made, or in knowing what its acidity or residual-sugar or extract might be, this is entirely valid if she is trying to collate her palate's impressions with the facts of the matter. That is a useful way of thinking—until it isn't anymore.

THE ECSTASY OF DEFEAT

I well remember traveling with an earnest young colleague who sought to guess how a wine was made strictly from its taste. He was especially eager to identify cask versus stainless steel aging. I loved the guy, but I knew the perplexing denouement that quivered a few days down the road. For indeed, at one winery where all the wines were done in cask, my pal was sure they used steel, and yielded to his dismay; however hard he tried, he just wasn't getting it. When I told him he'd crossed the Rubicon into a place of far greater wisdom, he thought I had a screw loose. I tried to reassure him that being right was reassuring, but being wrong invited epiphany; you ascended to greater understanding through your mistakes.

I remember, though, the urge to understand, to find explanations, to learn the causes and effects of flavor. We mustn't frustrate that urge — it's human to be curious and I think we should respect curiosity. But we also have to help drinkers understand the limits of this vein of knowledge. It is a closed system that gives the simulacrum of expertise while actually leaving us in an airless chamber of our minds. We feel terribly knowledgeable discussing the details of a wine, but there's a big-picture glaring at us that this approach won't let us see.

If you're hungry for knowledge of how a grower trains his vines, prunes his vines, binds his vines; if you seek to know the density of plantings per hectare and the space between the rows; if you're curious about which clones were used, how the canopies were worked, if and when the winemaker did a green harvest, if the grapes were picked by hand, with what-size teams and with one big bucket or several smaller ones, then these are things you ought to know. Shame on me for finding them ancillary and ultimately trivial.

MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS YEASTS

If you want to know the wines' total acids, the amount of its sweetness, the must-weights of the grapes at picking, whether it fermented with ambient or with cultured yeasts, how it was

clarified, what vessel it fermented in and at what temperature (and if the temperature was technologically controlled), whether it sat on its gross or fine lees and for how long, and whether it was developed in steel or in wood—I don't mind telling you. But it worries me some. Because I fear that for each one of you who sincerely wants to compare what his palate receives with what's actually inside the wine, there are many of you who want to enact value-judgments prior to tasting, because you've decided what's permissible and what's despicable. (This nonsensical approach is rampant in Germany.)

I am decidedly not in favor of excluding tasters from any wine because they disapprove of the effing yeast that was deployed, or because they won't go near a wine with more than X-grams of sweetness. Who wants to enable something so repugnant?

Nor am I willing to abet the sad phenomenon of people talking about wine with what seems like authority, because of the "information" they've accumulated, whereas they're actually blocked from attaining true authority by the rigid limits of their approach. If you're stuck in the "how," you'll have a rough time finding your way to the "what." And that is where true wisdom lies. The wonky isn't a bad place to be, for a while, but it's a dangerous place to stop, because like all objects of beauty, wine is more than the sum of its parts. If you're busily probing into technical minutiae, will you remember to consider not only the application of technique but the expression of a vintner's spirit? Will you remember to pause for just a second and consider how a wine makes you feel?

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.

INVASION OF THE YOUNG'UNS

A lot of them I knew when they were kids, an unsettling feeling. The more I myself age, the less I understand "age" abstractly. I feel no loss of vigor or juice, though my needs and priorities have altered and continue to alter. When I began this improbable little crusade on behalf of German wines, most of the growers I bought from were older than I. Often I played with their kids, or dandled them if they were especially bonny. Now these little beings are brusque 20-somethings with all kinds of 'tude. In fairness, they're not all brusque and a lot of them are really very sweet. But there's a breach in social syntax, a sort of crevasse with our respective sets of assumptions eyeing each other from the two sides. Though again, not always.

Most important, I think, is that the young person came of age in his/her particular world, and doesn't (or can't) know whence that world derived. His world is just the world. What led into it, how its reality developed from the things that came before, these are abstract, like "history." This is markedly true with the sweet-dry divide, as the young German vintner sees (what he calls) the sweet-wine era as aberrant, and he can't perceive how or why *dosage* could ever have been countenanced.

That's the zeitgeist of this particular moment, but it's the nature of zeitgeists to be mutable and for trends to come and go in phases. Usually it skips a generation, and you often hear a grower say "I'm going past my father, back to my grandfather's practices."

Here are the estates in which a generational change has taken place, or is somewhere in the process:

- Stephan Müller (at Eugen Müller)
 - Sebastian Strub
 - Johannes Geil
 - Alex Gysler
- Cornelius Dönnhoff
 - Jakob Schneider
 - Georg Rumpf
 - Caroline Diel
 - Stefan Jakoby
 - Christoph Schaefer
- Mario Schwang (of Reuscher-Haart)

I appreciate all the frisky energy, and while I don't mind if they see me as some sort of Elder, I'm no one's loveable Uncle Farty. When it goes well, they bring *esprit* and I bring perspective, and the dialogue is open and respectful. In nearly every case the new blood either maintains or improves the quality of the estate's wines. Sometimes they just change, and if I don't like the change as much as they're sure I ought to, we part ways. And the reason I bring any of this up at all is, someone selling German wines will try to tell you—already has, if I'm to believe what I'm told—that they're the cutting edge of modern German wine and I have the old guys. It isn't true.

Sommelier Alert!



It had to happen, somms: there's a backlash against the whole matter of caring about how wine and food flavors are combined. This strikes me as incoherent philistinism, but I fear we need to pay it some heed, especially you guys, who interact directly with the public.

A justly celebrated and highly talented wine writer who lives in northern California published a piece in one of the wine magazines recently. It was provocative, and I was duly provoked. I wrote a rebuttal, from which I excerpt here.

In your opening paragraph you assert that "[no]one can be" in the business of matching wine and food.

I do understand that to the degree we all become granular and persnickety about creating (or wreaking!) the perfect wine-food match, we are in peril of falling down a rabbit-hole whereby the thing becomes not just impossible, but in some way absurd. Indeed, I think it's more absurd than impossible. We've all had synergies of wine and food in which entirely new and beautiful flavors were created that weren't inherent in the wine or food alone. We've wondered at it, we've been stirred and moved by it, and we've felt the entirely human desire to bring it about again, to find some way for this extraordinary moment to be less haphazard.

The mistake—what I'm calling the "absurdity"—

is to suppose that we can succeed. Because, as we both know, such moments cannot be replicated, but only (and fitfully) approximated. However, the odds of establishing harmonies of wine and food can certainly be increased if one pays ordinary attentions to the few probabilities in play.

That's where the path diverges, I think. One way leads to a kind of geekyness neither you nor I find helpful. But the other path leads to something I'd have supposed you'd cherish as much as I do; a diligent and caring study of flavors, and how they work with one another. After all, we do it all the time when we cook, and wine is just another flavor in liquid form, so why shouldn't we attend to the suitability of a wine with our grub? The question then is, can we relax while doing so? Can this be compatible with ordinary life, common hospitality, warm conviviality?

I'm concerned that by painting in broad strokes—however brilliantly and entertainingly—you're at risk of banishing the entire concern with flavor to the realm of the "intellectually messy." There are a lot of sincere flavor pilgrims out there, and just because some of them go too far doesn't mean we should stigmatize the ones who don't. Tell me, would you describe mixology as intellectually messy?

I can't agree I've ever had a "thrilling dinner" where wine and food were "antagonistic at best." I've had delicious dinners, I've had lovely times with beloved people over dinner, but if there are serious dissonances on the table then I either choose to ignore them in service of the larger good, or I recognize that they've diminished the enjoyment of the meal. Even if I ignore them, they're still there. There's nothing like a really ugly wine-food match to "[rip] the wonder" out of wine. I'd like to prevent that from happening. If that entails sussing a few basic principles, then I'd better start learning. And I'd better know when enough is enough.

My writer friend replied, in part:

If one itty bitsy piece of parsley can cause you to fret about your glass of pinot noir (excuse me, I meant riesling), then something's wrong.

Should pleasure be so tightly scripted? Does food and wine have to be lifted into a stratosphere of near perfect compatibility (not to mention execution) before it can be enjoyed?

And then I began to see the crux of the meta-message. First of all, I have to ask whether someone living in the very heart of a place where most of the wines are inimical at table has acquired a distorted frame of reference. But even if I'm wrong, or just unreasonable, my friend is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I replied:

I think—or suppose—that we basically agree that obsessing about getting food-wine matches perfect is fraught and contrary to the spirit of relaxation and pleasure. The question is, where is the line between paying nominal and (I'd argue) necessary attention, versus going overboard?

Let's say my glass of Riesling is a 2001 Dönnhoff I've been holding since the vintage, and am finally drinking, and have approached with high expectations of great joy. And let's say the wine fulfilled my expectations and I was indeed joyful, until a bite of raw shallot in the salad dressing both distorted and bludgeoned the wine and also assaulted my palate with raw allium? I can't imagine you'd argue I should ignore these things in order to observe the greater pleasures of relaxation. Would you?

Would you suggest hikers hit the trail without a map? "Must everything be so scripted? Can't we just walk and go wherever looks the nicest? It's supposed to be relaxing, remember?" Yes, but I can't relax if there's a risk of getting lost!

Scripts don't have to be followed literally, but can be used as guides, where they are quite reassuring. And food and wine compatibility is ABSOLUTELY rooted in reality. It's just flavor! All flavor compatibilities, whether on the plate or between the plate and the glass, are reality based, and if we ignore them we don't get "relaxation," we get anarchy.

I never set about to sell wines that “go well with food.” It just happened that way, because the kinds of wines I liked spontaneously were precisely those most flexible and useful at the table. Flex and a comradely wish to be helpful are what matter most to me in the wine-food nexus. Clarity, grace, moderate alcohol, good acidity, minerality and a focus on balance and fruit will give the highest odds of a pleasant melding of flavors.

I hit upon the SOMMELIER ALERT idea after I found myself on the phone at great length with restaurant buyers, walking through the offering to find the wines I thought were best for your purposes. No one has that kind of time, so I codified it. And the first thing I'd like you to know is, this isn't a list of “the best wines” and also that wines not flashed as Somm-Alert are also going to be nice with your food. In some cases you buy the most exciting wine-*qua*-wine and worry about the food matching later. That's cool; I'd probably do it too. But, the wines I put on the list are part of a mise-en-scene whereby I envision a big-ish table, a 6-or-8-top, and there's all kinds of food being ordered, and what possible wine will be flexible enough to pivot among the whole unruly circus of tastes? “This'll go with damn near anything,” is what I'm thinking.

My criteria, to the extent I even have them (this being more intuitive than anything else) are, vivid up-front flavor – I'm not convinced the restaurant experience is strictly conducive to *subtle* wines – a lot of scent, a refreshing and attractive personality that has your guest reaching often for the glass, and most of all a stealthy sense of sweetness. That is, not a taste of sugar that's somehow been disguised, but an actual ration of sweetness that corresponds to the sweetness in many of your savory courses. I offer plenty of bone-dry wines and I know there are times they are perfect, just less often than not-entirely-dry wines.

There's also a sense of embedded sweetness/richness that arises from physiological or phenolic or aromatic ripeness – the seeds and skins are no longer bitter – that can make a very dry wine seem to faint toward sweetness. Mischief can ensue, especially if the wine smells flowery or fruity; some drinkers will infer sweetness that actually doesn't exist, and if they object to “sweetness” then you can insist all you want that it's *not there*. It won't matter.

Mind you, these are not compromise-wines. They're simply amazingly flexible and accommodating wines. Some of them are quirky, some of them are angular, but all of them arrive at the table asking “How can I help?”

Pfalz

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



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

THIS IS NOT A SCREED AGAINST DRY WINES. I LIKE DRY WINES! This is a screed against sheep-think and dogmatic uniformity. I want there to be excellent dry Riesling from the Pfalz, and I want it alongside Rieslings with sweetness (and I don't mean “noble-sweet” Auslesen) and I want growers and their customers to be flexible and ecumenical and *honest* in their tastes.

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

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

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

What is a Palate?

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

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

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

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

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

I do believe there are larger truths—or Truths—about wine, and we can make value judgments about them and argue all night – civilly I hope. But when it comes to scents and flavors of individual wines, I am much less sure. Here's a blatant example. One thing I know about my own palate is that it grows over-sensitive to tannin if I have tasted a bunch of young astringent whites. If colleagues are present I'll always ask them "Does this wine strike you as extremely tannic?" and when they answer no, I'll know it's just me. Alone, I'll suspect it's just me. I've started to taste the red wines first for just this reason. So this "palate,"

this part of ourselves that we use to apprehend wine, shouldn't we begin by knowing it, and shouldn't we share what we know with our readers? I mean, just to be minimally *useful* to them?

I like detail more than I like size. In fact I instinctively recoil from wines I feel to be bigger than I have room for. When I detect skeins of flavor I am happy. When a wine enters my palate and then breaks down into many colored rivulets of flavor,

I am *very* happy. I like wines which show *persistent soft-sell*. The persistence is how I know the wine is serious, and if it has the *real* goods it doesn't need to hard-sell.

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

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

I like balance but I will tolerate a fascinating "flaw." Ideally a wine is both balanced *and* fascinating. In a balanced wine the flavors seem *preordained* to exist in precisely **that** configuration. No knees or elbows poke out.

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

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

Müller-Catoir

Pfalz // Haard

vineyard area // 21 hectares

annual production // 12,500 cases

top sites & soil types // Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog (sandstone);
Haardter Herrenletten (loam, limestone); Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten (loess);
Mußbacher Eselshaut (gravel)

grape varieties // 60% Riesling, 10% Weissburgunder, 5% Grauburgunder,
5% Muskateller, 5% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 5% Spätburgunder



You may not have known that Catoir was perhaps the most important and influential estate in not only the Pfalz, but in all of Germany, through the 70s 80s and 90s until the retirement of legendary cellarmaster Hans-Günter Schwarz in 2002.



Schwarz revolutionized German grape growing and cellar work, and an entire generation of German vintners stands on his shoulders.

It has, though, been eleven years now since Schwarz left, and the estate lives in the present even while being proud of its great legacy. The current cellarmaster, in his

Müller-Catoir at a glance // Maybe the greatest estate in the Pfalz and one of the top few in all of Germany. Brilliant primary fruit driven wines of supernatural steely clarity and multi-layered depth. The overused word aristocratic perhaps best describes them.

how the wines taste // Extremely spritzy and highly leesy—one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronom! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

eleventh year now, is Martin Franzen. He's about the most agreeable guy you'd ever want to meet, and the students and *stagaires* he hosts at the winery are in awe of his knowledge and helpfulness.

The chattering classes talk about how the wines have changed. They say that the Mosel-born Franzen makes them to emulate the cooler style of that more northerly region. They are indeed less overt than many of their peers in the Pfalz, because this vintner is most interested in overtone, nuance and penumbra, and he chooses not to make the fleshpots that would get him "high scores."

Apart from which, as an introvert myself, I respect introversion in all things. The introvert's self-sufficiency can be mistaken for aloofness, but it isn't; it's just contentment and peace within one's skin. It takes

courage for Catoir and Franzen to make these searching, even ethereal wines, and let the critical chips land where they may.

I didn't see Franzen this year, as he was feeling poky and kept to his bed. Most of what I tasted was either freshly filtered or just bottled, and I suspected that the rather attenuated wines I was tasting were not entirely back to form. Catoir also concluded their harvest on Oct. 25th – just before that below-freezing night – and just as the estates in the "classic" Mittelhaardt (Deidesheim/Forst/Wachenheim/Ruppertsberg) were starting to schwing. This may also be a gesture of style, not to wait for every possible ripeness and *force* but rather to pick for refinement and delicacy. Whatever the motive, these lovely aristocrats are atypically cool and sleek for 2012s.

2012 "M-C" Riesling Trocken

GMC-183

SOS : 0

Sandier and more granular than usual – probably from bottling—and while a still admirable and solid everyday dry Riesling, I expect its usual fruity citricity to emerge as the wine recovers

2012 Haardt Riesling Trocken

GMC-185

SOS : 0

Remember the VDP's new organization: this is the "village-wine."

Also clipped from bottling, but there's a sneaky length and herbal sense (Vetiver); orchid and oleander and osmanthus, leading to a minty finish. Tasted near the end of my trip, these were the silkiest wines I'd tasted.

2012 Bürgergarten Riesling Trocken +

GMC-188

SOS : 0

So, this is a Cru wine but not at the level of GG. They finesse it somehow! And even just-bottled this is dramatic and expressive; orange-rind and Satsuma and smoky salt and garrigue. Its basic dryness is exaggerated by the mid-palate depression from bottling, but there's more spectacle here.

2012 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml (+)

GMC-181

2012 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 1/3L (+)

GMC-181J

SOS : 0

Also available in double-magnums. Cask-sample, it was tense and stretchy, more pointed than any '12 I'd yet tasted, with a chile heat and a resinous minty finish

2012 Haardt Scheurebe Trocken +

GMC-186

SOS : 0

This was the first one I tasted to really *smell like Scheu*, which in my world is a very good thing. Don't know Scheurebe? It's why you can ignore all but the very best Sauvignon Blancs, because this grape does much the same dance, but far better.

All kinds of cassis now. The palate is hale and relaxed compared to the vigilant Rieslings; peppermint and rosemary and currant-leaf; a serene yet animated shimmer flows into the finish, which yields to low notes of fried sage.

2012 Haardt Muskateller Trocken + +
SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMC-187

I used to go to Alsace to buy Muscat. I don't any more. With a single exception (ZH's Goldert) the very best dry Muscats are coming from Germany and Austria, and I know of none better than Catoir's. The best vintage since the legendary 2001, it shows heavenly aromas. Wow, *here* is the *fülle* of 2012 in spades, and the wine has a ridiculous clarity and juiciness, and almost suggests bacon.

An aside: Dry Muscat is the absolute mind-fuck wine to beginners or to anyone who's not familiar with it. It smells almost ridiculously grapy and leads the unwary to suppose it will be sweet. These wines aren't. And so the unready palate whipsaws back, recoiling from the shock of how it can taste so different than it smells. I adore these wines, they're my slutty wine pleasure, though even my slutty wine pleasures entail a certain discrimination. While a wine like this is quite *direct* compared to Riesling, it isn't obtuse or coarse—rather the opposite. It's the polish and grace even as the wine is so effusive that makes it more than a mere simple pleasure.

2012 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2

GMC-182

Typical aromas with the lime oil notes of their '12s; incisive and detailed; the palate is charming in a verbenachartreuse style, with notes of wild vineyard peaches (a.k.a. "pêche de vigne"); it's certainly a wine-with-sweetness, and Philip Catoir and I talked a little about reducing the sweetness on these types of wines in general – but the wine's not at all unbalanced. I am, but the wine is fine.

2012 Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : 3

GMC-189

This has the spicy granular wildness it always shows; licorice and caraway, and though it's sweet it's galvanized by its zip and spiciness, complexity and green-tea notes. Potentially outstanding, it only needs time to absorb its sweetness.

2012 Herzog Rieslaner Spätlese + +
SOS : 2

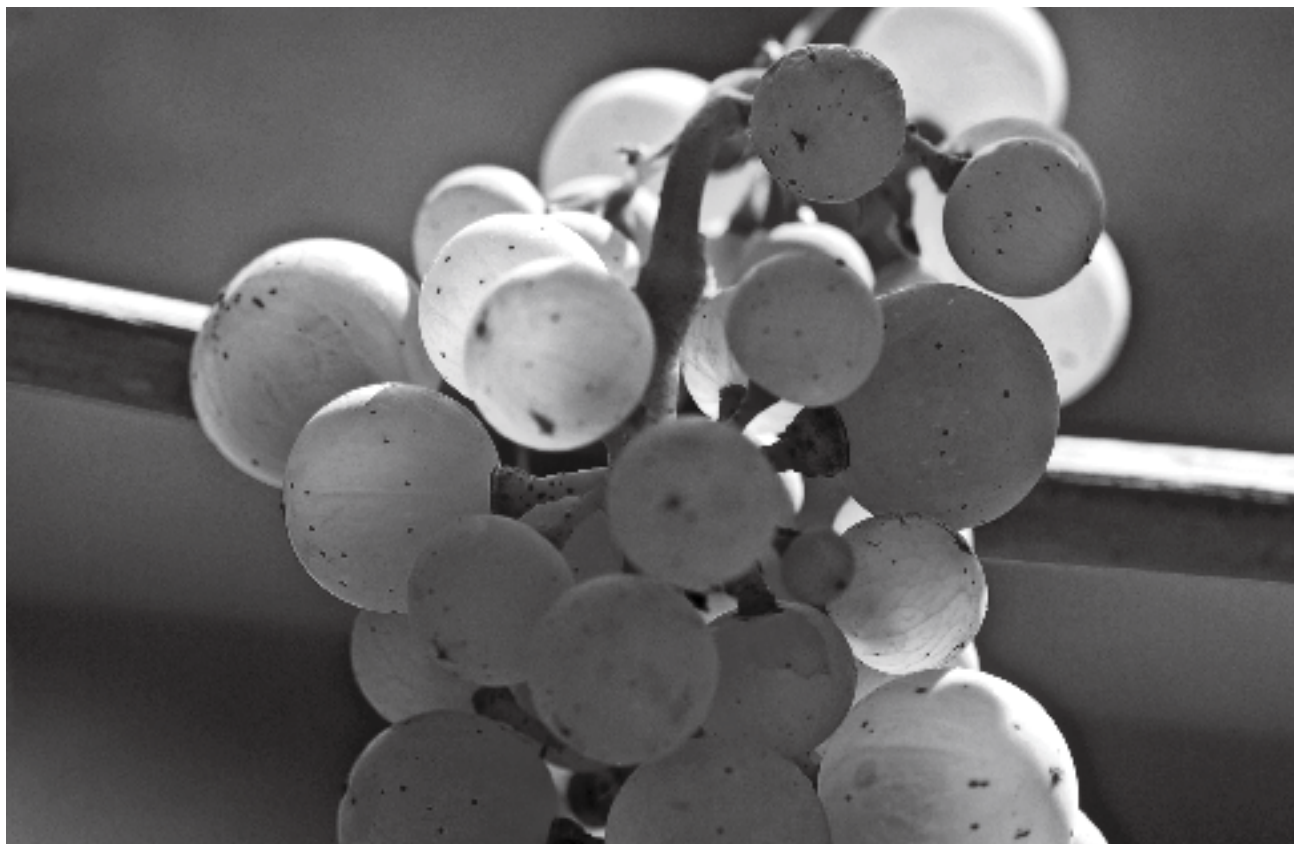
GMC-190

It tastes drier than the Rieslings, though it isn't: it's just the salty implacable force of this amazing variety, the tough skin and massive extract. Rieslaner doesn't yield an inch; it overwhelms you with torque and complexity, and this salty beast will make you its giddy grinning bitch.

Rieslaner, The Riesling Viagra

Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anywhere else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Hans-Günter Schwarz loved it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives more acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most singular great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would never himself do such a thing...

Scheurebe: What Gives?



Um, I happen to like it, that's what gives.

It was crossed about 80 years ago by a Mr. Georg Scheu (hence its name). I imagine Scheu was looking for a wine with Silvaner's advantages (big berries and early ripening) paired with Riesling's structure and class. His introduction also claimed the Scheurebe would be a Riesling-like wine suited for sandy soils (which Riesling doesn't especially like, or rather Riesling *growers* don't like, as the yields are mingy).

Scheurebe ripens 7-10 days ahead of Riesling, and has a little less acidity, but it's essentially a Riesling structure, i.e. firm and citrusy. It does indeed like sand but doesn't give its very best results; the wines tend to be 1-dimensionally tangerine-y.

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

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why? Theo Minges told me, "A lot of bad Scheurebe was made from too-high yields. You got cat-piss and sometimes botrytis on top of

cat-piss." But times changed, and after a general retreat in acreage, the variety is being rediscovered by good growers sensitive to its manic potential. But you have to respect it. Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more* attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

Scheurebe keeps very well but doesn't age as dramatically as Riesling. Ten-year-old Scheu is only a little different than 1-year-old Scheu.

Tastes differ, of course, and what's sizzling and emphatic to me might be blatant and vulgar to you, but we who love Scheurebe are truly in a kind of thrall to it. It has little of Riesling's spiritual depth, but neither does Riesling have Scheurebe's erotic power. We need both for a balanced diet! Riesling may indeed represent All That Is Fine And Good, but Scheu offers All That Is Dirty And Fun. Scheurebe is bad for you; it's fattening and wicked and hair will start growing on your palms as soon as you pull the cork. In other words, there's no down-side...

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



WINERY OF THE VINTAGE!

When magnate Achim Niederberger bought this estate several years ago, and installed the genially manic Stefan Attmann to run it, I was already representing the little legacy winery of Dr. Deinhard, and I wondered what would happen.

Fast forward to now, and von Winning commands a prime position at a curve in the road in Deidesheim, itself the prime tourist magnet of the Pfalz, home to two Michelin starred restaurants and to many of the elite estates of the region. Winning opened its own place to eat, the lusty-refined *Leopold*, and are about ready to open a hotel across from the winery. It is investment on a grand scale, ambitious and conspicuous, and it might easily have been another rich guy's vanity project.

But for Mr. Attmann. For below his passionately hectic exterior, he set himself one single goal. "There's no point in working this hard if you're not going all out to make *great* wine. Good wine isn't enough."

As the estate improved with each year, rising steadily through the German critical firmament, it grew clear that Attmann took a kind of pan-European view of what greatness in wine signified. He didn't look to the likes of Egon Müller or to Dönnhoff. His heroes were the Burgundians. He wanted his wines to be *mighty*.

This involved raising Rieslings in oak casks, not in barriques but rather in the traditional "Stückfass," that holds around 1,000 Liters. As these were new, they imparted a degree of flavor to the wines, but Attmann was sure of two things: one, the influence of oak would fade—and yes, that's what they all say—and two, that his Rieslings would have so much of their own power they would subsume the wood in which they were made.

For several years I harbored mixed feelings. (Note: when I say "mixed feelings" I don't mean uniform lukewarm

feelings; I mean various measures of different *strong* feelings.) Some of the wines showed thrilling teases of future profundity. Others were (to my palate) excessively woody. Some wines were incisively detailed and direct; others were just sharp.

There's a moment when you're watching something being built, an actual building or the interior design of a restaurant, when the thing first starts to show its finished form. It's a keen and lovely moment, all those plans and ideas, taking 3-dimensional reality at last. I had that feeling this year at von Winning.

It looks like their ascension year, 2012. The wines are astonishing across the board. *Across the board*. You know what that means; it isn't just luck, and it isn't an accident. It was the goal, and they reached it.

Attmann is clear that this is his life's work. He wants every possible *substance* in his wine, to taste as if it were alive. He doesn't fine and won't filter if he doesn't have to. If you're cultured-yeast phobic, all these wines are ambient-yeast fermented (which the Germans call *sponti*, for "spontangärung") and he'd rather never have to rack them off their gross lees until bottling. It's a kind of atavism of the cellar that makes for inspiring contemplation, and for stunning wines.

They are stunning through and through and in all price ranges. But they are supernally stunning at the top of the range, in the Grand Crus, and the best I can say is, these cost what they're worth. Placed alongside any of Europe's great white wines, they have their place, they warrant their prices, and many of them are relative *values* vis-à-vis much of Burgundy. They remind me of really serious Chablis, which as you know is great wine that costs less than it's worth, because the clientele for firm, minerally powerful dry white wine is smaller than for voluptuous creamy flavor-bombs.

How much do you really care about great dry Rieslings?

Dr. Deinhard at a glance // Big doings at this fine old name, an estate on-the-move, so grab on tight and catch a rising star.

how the wines taste // All I can say now is they taste like great Pfalz wines; it's too soon to know what Attmann's "signature" might yet be. The collection of Grand Crus is enticing.

Or does it begin and end with Clos Ste. Hune for you? Sales of the great magnificent Austrian examples are mingy compared to their true stature and value. Or are we really stuck in the mire of wanting wines that aren't *sweet*, oh no god forbid, but also not really *dry*, or if they're dry they also have to be *smooth* and juicy? Of course if you're reading this in the first place, you're in the vanguard of taste and these aren't issues for you. And yet I wonder.

A small note about labeling. The wines are divided into parallel series, with the "traditional" Pfalz styles going out under the Dr. Deinhard label as before, and the ambitious profound styles sold as *von Winning*. I myself will divide the offering roughly by price and then by variety. It's a large offering, because I couldn't help myself. And I advise you to hold on *extremely* tight, because you have never tasted Rieslings like these.

2012 von Winning Riesling +
SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-069

CORE-LIST WINE. This sits next to Dönnhoff as the zenith of quality at the estate-Riesling level. It's unchaptalized, and has a delicate note of cask. It's perfectly dry because it isn't brutally dry. It's sexy and spicy in that gingery Pfalz way, and it's juicy in the way of the vintage. It has some of the angular charm of Meßmer's *Muschelkalk* bottling, but with even more finesse and curvaciousness. It's amazingly seductive. Your customers will love you for pouring this, or putting it into their shopping baskets.

2012 Scheurebe Kabinett (Dr. Deinhard)
SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-071

Delicate sagey aromas lead to a balsam-y woodruffy palate; an unnervingly well-behaved sort of Scheu, slim and full of aloe-vera. It's no weirder than all those Jura wines you (and I) dig so much.

2012 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Spätlese Trocken (Dr. Deinhard)
SOS : 0

GDD-072

An entirely tasty, juicy and balanced dry Riesling; it isn't fruity-floral nor especially mineral, but rather buckwheat, hay, barley, rusk, brown-butter; fervently aromatic and determinedly long, it visits the palate with comfort and ease. Cellar-temp please; an ice bucket will suffocate it.

2012 Deidesheimer Paradiesgarten Riesling Trocken + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-074

This was literally astonishing. I never anticipated such quality from this site, which sits above the Leinhöhle just below the woods—perhaps an advantage in the new climate era? I mean serious WOW; soursop and ginger and talc in an enticing bouquet; explosively expressive on the palate, like some cool spice-drenched pudding; perfectly balanced and insanely attractive.

2012 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Spätlese (Dr. Deinhard) + +
SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-073

Kudos to them, for making this wine at all (in the pathologically sugar-averse German domestic market) and for not making it *too sweet*. Aromas of corn fritters and papaya chutney, talc and vanilla bean; salty depth and polished class on the palate; really glossy and glowing and serenely fetching. Its sweetness is so well integrated.

Rieslings from classified vineyards

2012 Ruppertsburger Reiterpfad Riesling Trocken, 6/750ml +
SOS : 0

GDD-075

The appetizer for the main course(s) to follow. It isn't mineral, but rather smoky, belly-rich and robust, corporeal and mouth-filling and butterscotchy, spicy and generous, and yet solid and refined even with its big open bones.

2012 Langenmorgen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + (+)
SOS : 0

GDD-078

It's the manly side of Pfalz Riesling, and we debate whether this is a Grand or just a Premier Cru; yet the wine is articulate, herbal and peppery, cedary and woodsy, long, studious and spicy, with an almost *urgestein* minerality, suave even while it's rural, and gentle even as it prods with its leafy message.

2012 Kalkofen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + + (+)

GDD-079

SOS : 1

A decidedly woody aroma leads into a sensationally ripe and generous palate, as if Fevre decided to make Grand Cru Chablis in Deidesheim. But as the tropical opulence emerges it seems to foam over the barrel, and finally the solid power of this site is nearly overwhelming. Potentially a masterpiece: the Les Clos of Deidesheim.

2012 Kieselberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + + (+)

GDD-077

SOS : 0

I haven't tasted a Pfalz Riesling like this since Müller-Catoir's 2001 Bürgergarten Spätlese (#2134, from the Breumel) in the Schwarz era. Tremendous detail, high toned vamping spice and fruit that smashes off a wall of jewels, charged by an orgasmic saltiness and spice. Will it absorb its wood? If so it will become the stuff of legend.

2012 Pechstein Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + +

GDD-080

SOS : 0

Nothing but a jet-blast of manic salty basalt here; neon brilliance and about as much terroir as you can cram into a wine. Sure you'll find some feckless geologist geek who'll insist it is "scientifically impossible" for "mineral" to get into wine. I propose to waterboard this person, using this wine.

2012 Kirchenstück Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + + +

GDD-081

SOS : 0

On the heels of the legendary 2011, now this. If it continues Germany will have found its Clos-Ste-Hûne, not only in sheer stature and grandness but also in dialect; it's currant-leafy marly saltiness comes with a strong granite tang, and there's poise and contained virtuosity. A glory of internal, silent, endless complexity. The Pechstein is vivid, active; this is numinous, reposed, haunting. It has all the wisdom of a lifetime yet is still curious, wondering and pensive.

You want to know what *great* white wine tastes like? This is what it tastes like.

What's a circus without some clowns?

2011 von Winning Sauvignon Blanc "I," 6/750ml + +

GDD-068

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

No *way* did I expect this.

Part cask and part steel, and serious Sauv-Blanc, grasping at stature, and comparable to the best of Styria – as good as any Hochgrassnitzberg I remember; superbly sapid and complex and magnetic, leesy and grown-up and amazing. If this quality can be repeated, I'll drop my objection to German Sauv-Blanc!

2011 Sauvignon Blanc "500", 6/750ml + +

GDD-070

SOS : 0

You have to go to the best-of-the-best of Dagueneau to get better Sauv-B than this. A selection of the best 500 Liter barrels, from a vine density of 9,500 plants per hectare, as in the Europe of 100 years ago, from the Paradiesgarten, and what it reminds me most of is Haut Brion Blanc or the best years of Polz's "Therese." So don't quake at the price. Perhaps the most ambitious Sauv-B ever made in Germany, smoky and incense-y with loads of roasted red pepper, and a strikingly complex finish.

2012 Gelber Muskateller + +

GDD-076

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

In fact from the Grand (or Premier depending on whom you ask) Cru Leinhöhle, and there's exactly one single 500-liter cask in existence. It's amazingly delicate, complex, almost civilized Muscat; nearly Riesling-like in its minerality, it recalls Nikolaihof's masterly bottlings. Long mid-palate richness and creamy-green, aloe and spearmint.

Eugen Müller

Pfalz // Forst



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

The estate will never be “trendy” because they sell nearly all their wine to a loyal private customer base, and so they have no need to “make the scene” or “get high scores” or go to parties with the popular kids.

But Stefan Müller has nonetheless raised the quality of the wines since taking over from his father several years ago. They're now straddling the line between analog and digital, and they've become more polished.

It helps to have truly exceptional land. And when you find a grower like this, you can score terroir-saturated wines of impeccable aristocracy, yet the prices are most gentle and the folks are super down-to earth.

Got a second? Let me give you a primer on the great vineyards of the best communes of the Pfalz. If you're serious, you should know them, so let's begin:

Forster Kirchenstück (which some feel is the best site in all the Pfalz), **Jesuitengarten**, **Pechstein** (these are the big-3), **Freundstück**, **Musenhang**, and **Ungeheuer**.

Deidesheimer Hohenmorgen, **Grainhübel** (the best-of-the-best), **Kalkofen**, **Kieselberg**, **Leinhöhle**, and **Langenmorgen**.

Wachenheimer Goldbächel (which I'd put on par with Kirchenstück though the styles are 180° apart), **Altenburg**, **Rechbächel**, **Gerümpel**.

Ruppertsberger Hoheburg, **Reiterpfad** and **Nussbien**.

In sketch form, the Ruppertsbergers are strong Premier Crus, but not quite entirely Grand. Wachenheim they say is “feminine,” and these are indeed queenly and sometimes swooningly perfumed. Partisans of Forst/Deidesheim will

argue which is “best.” Forst is more Cajun is the way I'd put it. Forst is full-throttle, overtly expressive, yet with breed and finesse – it isn't sloppy. Deidesheim's more grown-up; it's there at the party but it goes home by midnight, after having had a roaring good time. Forst goes on roaring. Wachenheim declined the invitation because it had theater tickets. Ruppertsberg was invited but felt a little out of place. Forst stumbled into bed in the wee hours, but was up promptly the next morning to work against deadline on an article on Latvian interpretive dance.

Weingut Eugen Müller is an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

It bears mentioning that *these* dry Rieslings are among the juiciest and easiest to drink of any German examples I've encountered. And yet they're far from easy. Loads of salty-savory-mineral complexity abound, but they're simply less huffy and a ton more fun. And while Stephan Müller's wines continue to grow more polished and less hearty than his father's wines were, they remain companionable and chipper and unaffected by any need to be Very Serious Indeed.

I had an interesting bit of palate-juju that day. The first five wines all tasted sharp to me. A second pass

Eugen Müller at a glance // This is a winery on the move, and the next few years will tell a new tale. There's a sensational collection of vineyards and new energy in the cellar. This is what the Germans call an *Aufsteiger*, i.e. one who is climbing.

how the wines taste // They used to be rather matte and caramelly as a whole, though the fabulous Auslesen from the Kirchenstück showed great fire and breed. The 2004s were harbingers of a change, as they are more “modern,” clear and bright.

through didn't change them. I began to suspect it was me. I asked my peeps. Seemed to be me. And so I rinsed my mouth and ate a few grissini and went back to the wines – which of course all changed. It never hurts to be

reminded of the small but decisive changes in your body chemistry. Maybe I was dehydrated, or maybe something from the previous night's dinner was still in the sensorium somewhere – who knows?

2012 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett Trocken

GEM-132

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

How the *fark* do you say that word? Try “oon-geh-hoyer,” and if you say it five times it sounds like a cheer, and you'll giggle.

Stefan remarks on a cassis note I myself didn't discern, but the wine is generous and maybe there's a currant-leaf nuance in there somewhere, along with the abiding richness of 2012; silky and grainy, rusky and leafy.

2012 Forster Ungeheuer Spätlese Trocken “Ziegler”

GEM-133

SOS : 0

So OK, why isn't this a “GG?” Because Müller isn't a member of the VDP. Smell the can of worms about to open? A vineyard classification cannot possibly be associated with membership in a marketing group, however fine its members or laudable their standards. Either the *land* is potentially great or it isn't.

Another twist to the saga: The “Ziegler” is the old name for the particular sirloin parcel this wine is made from. Pre-1971 wine law, the wine would have been labeled “Forster Ziegler,” but many of these small names were collapsed into the single-site names now in use, because they wanted fewer names, to make everything simpler. But many of today's growers are using those names again, which is technically illegal and exposes them to prosecution. However, the EU appears to be ready to *grant* the use of these old site names again, so we're in abeyance. Meanwhile, Müller has a big –Z– on the label.

This means you can buy a quasi-outlaw wine and strike a blow for individuality while you're at it. The wine has a savory aroma like a fragrant kitchen where a great chicken stock is reducing and the carrots and herbs were just added, so the house suddenly smells herbal, like marjoram. So the wine has a salty/mineral mélange, less caramelly than usual, more silvery and shady; it's a very dry Riesling yet without corners; gravelly but smooth.

2012 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken “Cyriakus” + (+)

GEM-130

SOS : 0

Here's where the idea of absolute-value comes into play. This wine is, let's say, about 65% as good as the Great One from von Winning. It costs about 22% as much.

Again a single-parcel, this time done entirely in cask; aromas are markedly complex and salty, and the palate is a master's thesis in minerality; very long and fennelly, filling the mouth with scree and mint. A true (and remarkable) Grand Cru wine.

2012 Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +

GEM-136

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. Pechstein seems to be every Pfalz lover's favorite vineyard; it's so uncompromisingly salty and tangy and pulverized-rocky. This wine is sleek, insanely salty and beautifully angular and mineral, and markedly long for such a craggy being; now we're in wisteria and aloe and licorice territory; a ridiculously charming piquant Riesling with a finish like jackhammered terroir and a hyacinth in the next room.

2012 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett

GEM-137

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. Also Pechstein, a super-aromatic lot fermented with a less vigorous yeast that guarantees an incomplete result (i.e., residual sugar) which he prefers to “abruptly” stopping fermentation by sudden chilling or sulfuring. So, please think about it: he chooses a particular yeast strain because it is less invasive or manipulative than to diddle with fermenting wine by technical intervention. The wine is into raspberry and raw bacon now, and with each sip it seems to get drier and more steely, with *fraicheur* and mint.

2011 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese
2012 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese (+)
SOS : 2

GEM-125
GEM-134

This wine always needs at least a year in bottle to start expressing its leathery savory self; the '11 is now classic, all butterscotch and new shoes, but the '12 is another thing entirely, like a person who's lost 20 lbs and fits into the clothes (s)he looks best in; it's saltier and higher strung, and I wonder what it will look like a year from now.

2011 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml ++
2012 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml ++
SOS : 2

GEM-127H
GEM-129H

So when I sat with Jay MacInerney for the Wall St. Journal article, I said I'd bring along something to drink. I could have chosen anything, blown him away with a great Dönnhoff or with a Selbach Eiswein or a Leitz Roseneck. What I *actually* chose to bring was the 2001 Kirchenstück Auslese from Müller.

Every year for the last fifteen or more, this wine has been a masterpiece, and I can think of few if any parallels in the wine world—or in *my* wine world—of such sustained stellar performance year after year.

2011 is and remains a masterpiece of the exotic flowery style, “a city made of cherry blossom” as I wrote last year. Bearing in mind that *these wines are never very sweet*, this one is more typical for the “Auslese” idiom. The 2012, though, is a swollen subterranean wave of mineral. You start at *OMG* and end with *WTF*; because even in the context of so many great years this is singular and amazing. Fantastically salty and cherry-blossomy, with obdurate length and deeply embedded mineral.

From one of the great Riesling vineyards on earth. The price, let us observe, doesn't reflect this...

(And if you're interested, there's still a few cases of the astonishing 2008 Kirchenstück BA to be had, one of the greatest of its genre I have tasted in the last decade. It's GEM-112H and is a ++[+] wine.)

2012 Gewürztraminer Spätlese “Reiterpfad”
SOS : 1

GEM-135

Last year it was a coincidence brought on by the failure of flowering in the vineyard that usually makes up the bulk of the estate's Gewürz, but Stefan so liked the results he decided to do it again. There's more litchi than rose, and even more of the concentrated vinosity of '12 than the variety's usual sultriness; it's quite solid and salty, essentially dry, though with 10.5% ABV. It's a subtle Gewürz for people who believe they dislike the variety.

Herbert Meßmer

Pfalz // Burrweiler

vineyard area // 25 hectares

annual production // 26,700 cases

top sites & soil types // Burrweiler Schäwer and Weyhrer Michelsberg (slate);

Burrweiler Schloßgarten (loam, limestone); Burrweiler Altenforst (sandstone)

grape varieties // Riesling, Grauburgunder, Weißburgunder, Gewürztraminer, Muskateller, Spätburgunder, St. Laurent



Herbert Meßmer

Meßmer is the kind of estate I like and no one else cherishes the way I wish they would. The wines are scrupulously clear, perhaps a little cerebral, kind of wire-rimmed-glasses kind of wines.



That kind of clarity and judiciousness scratches an itch for me, but others might yearn for more sensuality and hedonism. There's also the problem that you don't know Gregor Meßmer, because he hates to fly and doesn't

..... speak English, so he's never been here. But, if you're a wine lover whose tastes extend past the party-hearty, I know you'll like these and also that you'll find them rare. It takes courage to make such wines, and we who like

Herbert Meßmer at a glance // Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

how the wines taste // What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor's careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it's facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a respect for the grape which only shows when you're nature's humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor's wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

them are underserved.

Gregor Meßmer initiated biodynamic viticulture starting with vintage '11. "I'm the sort of man who deliberates a long time, but once I decide I implement immediately," he says. So let's watch and see what happens. The transition, as you know, is the hard part. But when I asked him how it was going, he said "Maybe less difficult than I thought. After all, I had paved the way over many years while I was considering it. So that when we took the final step, it wasn't such a radical change."

While we are all very glad to have found such a happy success with the Meßmer Pinot Noir in Liters, I won't deny it gives us mixed emotions. Gregor's is a rich, complex domain, full of interesting and superb wines from a number of grapes in a number of idioms, and it's a shame when 75% of one's business comes from a single (relatively) everyday wine.

"What nature gives, we want as much as possible

to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

"The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking'." That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."

2012 Riesling Feinherb, 1.0 Liter

GMS-182L

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Two excellent vintages back to back here; this one is winsome and long, full of fruit and grain and ideally balanced (and barely discernible) sweetness; the finish is deliberate and minty.

2011 Pinot Noir, 1.0 Liter

GMS-178L

SOS : n/a

Thank you for discovering this! And as a token of my gratitude I give you the best-ever vintage of it, and a huge step over the good-if-light 2010. Much darker now, really ruby to a crimson rim; the palate is all primary fruit, but much more intense. It's bottle-stunted today, but you'll notice the upgrade when you change vintage. Nine months in large barrels—3,000 to 5,000 liter—and the quality is truly absurd.

2012 Riesling Kabinett Feinherb "Muschelkalk"

GMS-179

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. It means fossil-bearing-limestone, not what you think it means. You're watching *way* too much porn. This '12 is drier than usual, or maybe it just seems that way, but as always it's incisive and spicy, with pink peppercorn and allspice all into a *foxy* and salty finish.

2011 Schärer Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

GMS-177

SOS : 0

It's pronounced "shaver," and it's the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace. Clearly a Grand Cru, it's a particular kind of one, smoky and with a kind of urgestein char and the smell of a rainy pine forest. A *particular* wine with a bit of Piri shoot-smoke and pepper.

By the way, "shoot-smoke" isn't an image, but it isn't a very helpful association unless you've been in Europe when they're burning the cuttings from freshly pruned vines. It's a specific smell and this wine shows it, but you have to take my word for it. Or set your plants on fire.

2010 Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

GMS-169

SOS : n/a

He may opt to call this "Spätburgunder" but this isn't determined as I write. There's only one wine in any case. And quite a wine it is; stylish and lovely, textured, a little shy, classy and cool; a paradigm of old-world Pinot Noir.

2012 Muskateller Feinherb

GMS-186

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

I have every vintage of the last five years in my cellar; that's how much I love it. It's gotten a little drier each year now, which works with '12's richness; it's wonderfully juicy and minty and hyperactively happy, plus it's gorgeously long.

2012 Scheurebe

GMS-183

SOS : 1

He bought the fruit from three growers, one of them organic and the other two are worked and harvested by Meßmer; it's a classic '12 in its creamy solid richness, and it's a lovely grapefruit-y Scheu, quite long and detailed. Not a dry wine but the sweetness is like a guava, not a marshmallow.

2011 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese +

GMS-176

SOS : 2

Not creamy exactly, more like liquid silk, and showing all the wild plums, saltiness and smoke of the great site; a tangy length, really a clinging rock-dust length, as impressive as this wine has ever been. I'm currently drinking the still-youthful 2001 vintage, and Gregor says (and I agree) this '11 is fundamentally better.

2012 Gewürztraminer Spätlese

GMS-184

SOS : 2

He's become aware of how seldom one finds such a wine from this variety, and is charging accordingly. It's polished and glossy and elegant for a grape that's often lumpen and obvious.

2012 Rieslaner Spätlese + +

GMS-185

SOS : 2

Really a miracle; for a wine as explosive and shatteringly expressive as it is, there's something almost cerebral about it. Exceptionally focused and detailed and crisply articulate; a sheet-metal glare of brilliance and yet crystalline diction and precision. It's like Riesling on *crack*. Amazing candied lemon finish. Take it to your next tasting group and you'll be the alpha that night.

Theo Minges

Pfalz // Flemlingen



vineyard area // 25 hectares
annual production // 15,000 cases
top sites & soil types // Flemlinger Zechpeter and Burrweiler Schlossgarten (loess-loam); Gleisweiler Hölle (sandstone, limestone)
grape varieties // Riesling, Scheurebe, Muskateller, Gewürztraminer, Grauburgunder, Spätburgunder

In a few years you'll be clamoring for these. That's because there's a new face at the domain, Regine, and the girl is whip-smart and passionate and imaginative, and when you meet her you'll love her immediately.



These are also the kinds of wines you say you like. In one more year they'll be certified organic (through EcoVin), and papa Theo would fit right in with the natural-wine crowd, at least by temperament. He's a practicing Buddhist and is constantly talking about energy fields and how to transmit them from the vineyard to the cellar to the glass. It's part of the reason he doesn't rack the wines, as he feels the gross lees are like "mother's milk". He leaves several wines to age at considerable length, on their gross lees and without sulfur, until bottling. This is all in the quest for a sort of vibrant force; Minges wants his wines to quiver.

But I don't want to imply he's one of the naturalistas, albeit the basic sympathies align. He's *my* kind of "natural"

wine grower, as we agree about the excesses afflicting some of that community's wines. "They wanted to go back to the roots, but found themselves in the mud," he said – wisely.

He's also one of the *very* few growers in the southern Pfalz who will still make Rieslings with sweetness. They take their place alongside the dry wines, as they should.

Lately I'm finding Minges to be the spirit-kin of Nikolaihof, not because the wines are similar—though some are—but because the ways of life are aligned. There's a kind of respect shown to wine in each house, an assumption that wine is an equally valid being. This isn't the same as the way one might regard wine as an aesthetic object, how good or how great it tastes. That's like judging a dog by how many tricks it can do.

Theo Minges at a glance // Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying mineral-lesy 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.

2008 Riesling Sekt Brut

GTM-143

SOS : n/a

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. He does all the work himself. The base wine is aged on the fine lees for a year before going *en tirage*. It's then on the lees for three and a half years (disgorged in March 2013, and to-order thereafter). It's the Riesling equivalent of Varnier-Fanniere, albeit not quite as refined, but the price is very right for an estate-bottled fizz with chalky-floral Riesling cut.

2012 Gleisweiler Scheurebe Trocken +

GTM-157

SOS : 0

Regine said "This doesn't need makeup or lip gloss; it's already beautiful." For 2012 it's a hugely expressive Scheu, even having just been bottled. Full-on feral catty plus the richness of the vintage; the wine is a wonder.

2012 Burrweiler Gelber Muskateller Trocken +

GTM-158

SOS : 0

Refined Muscat fragrance is moderately intense, and the palate follows with rich juicy vinosity as opposed to a fervid jab of varietal juju; it arrives on the mid-palate as a nuance, then an echo, then a long chord that never stops peeling; a discreet saltiness, and at last it expresses more grapiness than elderflower.

2012 Pfalz Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter +

GTM-159L

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This remains one of the world's bargains, especially this '12 with its stubborn length and jasmine-peony aromas.

2011 Riesling Halbtrocken

GTM-145

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. This was always bottled in Liters, but y'all don't buy a lot of German liters anymore, because the Austrian wines are considerably lower in price. But this wine is excellent – so I asked for a special bottling in 750s, and now we have a virtually *perfect* everyday Riesling at a lower unit-price, and theoretically everybody's happy. Effulgent with joy. If not, you will be, when you taste this lovely vintage of this lovely wine, limey balsam-y wintergreeny, and fresh and delicious, and markedly long for its level.

2012 Pfalz Riesling Kabinett

GTM-153

SOS : 2

White flowers and chalk, like Margaine's demi-sec in still form. It's rich and tense, juicy and high-toned; quince and spearmint, salty and focused. It is *not* seductive, it's energetic. The finish is quickly spicy and dry. It's the wine of a brave man because it's the wine he wants, too "sweet" to sell to the Trockenistas and not sweet enough to scoop up high scores. Thus, a bottle of liquid integrity.

2012 Pfalz Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GTM-155

Regine describes it perfectly: “It’s erotic, a lush female playing a harp.”

I liked it very much; ambrosial, peachy, yet with herbal and hay-like tones, and the longer it was in the glass the greener it tasted – balsam, aloe vera, yet all riding atop a *very* rich wine.

“It’s rather on the sweet side, isn’t it,” I observed.

There’s three components; would you like to taste them?” Theo offered.

“Very much.”

Three wines arrived. The first, from limestone, is *perfect*, with exactly the sweetness it needs, just enough to disappear into the wine and not be noticed. ++ quality. It had about 45 grams/liter of RS. The second lot was the “green” one, pure verbena and wintergreen, racy and nervy. About 65 g/l RS. The third was the peachy beast, more of an Auslese in style, very fresh and spritzzy, a *sponti*, and quite a bit too sweet with over 80 grams.

The blend was in proportion to the volume of the respective lots. If he were to change it, he’d have “sweet” wine left over and nothing he could do with it. But it is *dangerous* to send these over-sweet wines out into the world, because it damages the market for that-which-isn’t dry. Taste a wine that’s grotesquely sugary and you’ll be correct to recoil—*Well PTUI, who can drink this cloying stuff; it’s DRY for me from now on!*

But that first lot... that was perfect. And so we discussed the question, and Theo agreed with my observations in general, even while facing a quandary for this situation in particular. At the end he agreed to bottle the wine with less sweetness. So I hope it ends up **SOS: 2**

2012 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GTM-160

A bit delicate compared to the dry wine, but mandarins and ground-cherries and currant-leaf and pancetta—and it’s in bottle just a week—but impressively stormy and impetuous, with satsuma and coconut. Scheu *should* be a wild weekend with a temperamental lover, and this is one you just shook awake, for nefarious errands of eros.

2012 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Spätlese + +
SOS : 2

GTM-156

Maracuja, plantains, oleander, all soaring over this implacable varietal artillery blast of saltiness and this metallic glaring surface intensity, yet it’s also oddly interior and almost meditative. The finish is savory-sweet, like carrot-cake. Amazing.

2012 Flemlinger Herrenbuckel Gewürztraminer Auslese, 12/375ml + +
SOS : 2

GTM-161H

Maybe the most extraordinary wine I tasted in four weeks in Europe.

It’s from three components of very old pre-clonal vines. “Some of the bunches were red, others yellow and others orange, depending on which direction they faced,” he said. You have to go back to H.G. Schwarz’s and Catoir’s 1989s to find the German equal of this. Geezers like me will remember. This wine is massive yet clear and refined, not only salty but *brilliant*, even minerally. I have no idea what the ABV is—nearly 14% for sure—but it seems slim even with its intensity.

Kurt Darting

Pfalz // Bad-Dürkheim

vineyard area // 25 hectares

annual production // 20,800 cases

top sites & soil types // Spielberg and Herrenberg (limestone-marl);

Hochbenn (sandy loam)

grape varieties // Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Muskateller, Scheurebe, Burgundersorten, Rieslaner, Pinot Noir, Pinot Menuier, St. Laurent, Dornfelder



Kurt Darting

When I first introduced this estate back in 1992, they were seen as mini-Catoirs, offering a similar primary-fruit-driven vivid style of wine at really low prices, from a young vintner who trained and remained pals with Hans-Günter Schwarz.



The wines are still delicious, the prices are still low, but there's nothing else for the hipster to grab on to – as if tasty wines at low prices weren't enough. I'll put it this way: say you'd spent a bunch of consecutive evenings eating cutting-edge food, very edgy and compelling. (Lucky you; I love that kind of food too, and wish I were your bff and could have joined you.) Then one evening you're in a more mainstream restaurant and you're served a perfect piece of wild turbot, cooked correctly

and garnished sensitively. And you take the first bite and think, *ah, FOOD. I forgot what FOOD tasted like, and how good it could be.*

That's Darting. The paradigm of a responsibly commercial winery. Everything is delicious in any zone of sweetness, and the wines are charming and arrive at the table eager to be helpful. Perfect wines when the nth degree of complexity isn't warranted. And they are not contrived—just honest!

Darting at a glance // 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.

Pfalz

2011 Pinot Noir

GDR-224

SOS : n/a

I was amused to see Darting's ostensibly "modest" St. Laurent finish 4th among the best St Laurents in Germany in the current Gault-Millau. And so I'm more confident than ever to offer you this juicy, charming and forthright PN. It's a little oaky but no more than that crianza Rioja you love; a juicy fruit-driven finish with a tiny jalapeño kick from its 14% ABV.

2012 Pinot Meunier

GDR-223

SOS : n/a

Just a huge fun wine; a mouthful of maple, pumpernickel and chocolate; generous, undemanding and addictively tasty, with a chestnutty finish. Oak plays a discreet supporting role.

2012 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter

GDR-225L

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. A squeaky-clean Pfalz clone-90 aroma. (The clone was popular about 40-50 years ago because it gave exotic tropical aromas almost Scheurebe-like; it is degenerating and is seldom so pronounced any more.) A lively animated palate leads to a fine loess-y dusty finish; the whole thing is in *perfect* balance, full of charm and joy.

2012 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken +

GDR-226

SOS : 0

Much more complex and refined, and a *steal* for the money. This is brilliant cellar work, as it has robust acidity (8.1g/l) and not a lot of RS (6.3g/l). "The last few grams of sugar are hard to ferment," says Helmut Darting. "It stresses the wine and creates bitter substances." This has infinitely more charm and joy than most dry Riesling with far greater pretensions, and its finish is seriously long.

2012 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Kabinett Trocken

GDR-219

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

A polite, almost restrained Muscat, classy and juicy, grapey but not catty; more of a shimmering minty spice than a stinging vein of grapiness. Fresh-bottled, which might be taming the feline.

2012 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter

GDR-220L

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. This has gotten drier over the past several vintages—it needed to—and the '12 has 40g/l of RS with 7.8g/l acidity.

There were several instances in which I felt the wines to be over-sweet, and when I learned Helmut had given them *dosage* to show me his intended final blend, I asked to taste the raw material. I liked it better, every single time, and I did here. It's a classic juicily concentrated '12; pure, delightful, never better, with a passion fruit and nectarine finish.

2012 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett

GDR-221

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. This normally rather sultry wine is more exotic and green-orange in 2012, and malty as always.

2012 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett +

GDR-222

SOS : 2

Now that they've given up the Spielberg, this remains the one "Cru" vineyard in their lineup. It shows. Limestone and marl aromas, and here again I opted for the drier au-naturel sample, which reminded me of Deidesheimer Kieselberg, all sweet-corn and semolina and ginger and stones, with a deliberate, stony finish after the cox-orange fades. ("Cox-orange" is short for cox-orange-pippins, the world's greatest apple, a small late-ripening fruit that's intense and almost half way to a nectarine.)

2012 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese (+)

GDR-227

SOS : 2

Again as-is from tank with no dosage, and it shows more interplay, vinosity and terroir; solid, chewy and juicy, peach and candied ginger and spices; the finish is minty-spicy, not dry, and I suspect bottling will help this wine by slimming it down.

2012 Dürkheimer Fronhof Scheurebe Kabinett

GDR-228

SOS : 2

You could surmise this is a spicy Grüner Veltliner with residual sugar; there's some Scheu-typical sage, but it's subtle all in all, more apple and grapefruit than overt cassis, but '12's *fülle* and spice are there, and the wine is long and dense, if not especially kinky.

2012 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewürztraminer Kabinett

GDR-229

SOS : 2

In fact a very ripe Spätlese (potential alc 13.5%) that stopped fermenting with RS, so a lot of density and muscle for old-school sweet Gewürz. Again, finesse is the issue, and if you can't manage Alsace anymore with its 35g/l RS and 14.5% ABV, here's something varietally true and drinkable.

2012 Forster Schnepfenpflug Huxelrebe Beerenauslese, 12/375ml *

GDR-230H

SOS : 4

I asked them to remove the difficult and cluttered general-site name "Forster Schnepfenpflug" from the label. Perhaps they will – but I'm not their only customer, and for all I know the Canadians *like* "Forster Schnepfenpflug." In any case it's a true BA, around 140° Oechsle (see glossary) and so it's drinkable, not syrupy, from mostly dehydrated grapes with almost no botrytis. I thought I'd be indifferent but in fact the wine is quite loveable. White raisins and honey but with good acidity and vinosity and not too exotic.

Rheinhessen

Today's Rheinhessen is a profile of the right generation in the wrong place at the wrong time.



The young growers – most of them anyway – are energetic and idealistic and passionate about producing high-quality wines, and ridding the region of its reputation for mediocrity. To a large extent they've succeeded, thanks in great measure to Messrs. Keller and Wittmann, who've made and justified bold claims for Rheinhessen's potential to give great wines.

One wishes for three things. One, that we could somehow superimpose this fraternity of fine vintners over the Rheingau, where under-achieving from great land is still the general rule. Two, that we could wrest the mentality of today's young Rheinhessen grower away from the schizoid and rigid division of his production into wines-too-dry and wines-too-sweet. And three, that we could somehow restore the tarnished reputation of the Rhine-front, i.e., Nierstein and Oppenheim.

On a bizarrely clear day last month I was walking the plateau west of the red hillside that spills into the Rhine

north of Nierstein, and I could see no fewer than three wine regions, or the hills that define them: the Hessische Bergstrasse to the southeast, the Taunus (Rheingau) to the north, the Donnersberg (southern outlier of the Nahe) to the southwest, and even the Haardt hills (Pfalz) peeked through a gap in the trees to the south. For years, the Rheinhessen was a rolling, doughy sort of place, a softening among the more tensile regions that encircled it.

I like driving through it.

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.

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



These are my oldest friends in Germany, and so I'll beg your indulgence if I write at greater length about them and their wines.

The HEADLINES are—if you're pressed for time—that 2012 is this estate's best vintage since 2001, and the wines are starting to fill out with wonderful mid-palate juiciness. They're successful in *every* idiom, from very dry to just off-dry to sweet, and they're keenly expressive of Nierstein's singular terroir.

My annual tasting trip always begins and ends in Nierstein, with the Strubs. Both experiences have imprinted upon me, as tangible feeling and intangible yet affecting spirit.

Arriving in early March after a year away, things are usually closed, but breathing and urging – Winter is softening, nature is opening her eyes again. Then four weeks later when I return, all that tasting and all those people under my belt (not to mention all them *schnitzels*) it's often full-on Spring, greener and milder.

We drove back into Nierstein on a weirdly brilliant day, the Rhine a fluid blue, the red-slope a gaudy wave of rust. I realized again what a singular place this is. And felt again an old sadness that it isn't as cherished as it ought to be.

Some good things are happening though. The big ugly unused granary has at last been demolished. One blight fewer to look away from, thank goodness. And the commuter road that threatened the great vineyards will now become a tunnel, so the vineyards are spared, and the workers get home to watch the ball game.

It is good that the vineyards are spared. Good also, that some prominent Rheinhessen growers have invested in Nierstein vineyards; it's both an endorsement of their greatness and a source for wines that will demonstrate it.

And yet... a walk around the town tells a melancholy tale. One producer has a display of barrel-facings on which are written the names of important Riesling vineyards, yet in his display window are bottles of Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. But give this hack some credit; it's not easy to diss and pander at the same time.

And then there's the really sad tale of the Brudersberg. This small site sits in a south-facing combe between Hipping and Pettenthal. It's sheltered and steep. And for many years it was the jewel in the crown of the standard-bearer for the region, Freiherr Heyl zu Herrnsheim – their top site, which they owned exclusively. Those days are vanished, the estate went bankrupt, and the Brudersberg ended up in the hands of a proprietor who doesn't really "get" white wine, and so the villain has planted Lemberger and Merlot. In a *great* Riesling vineyard. (His attempt to grow organically has given him stunted little vines about half as developed as they ought to have been after three years in the ground, so maybe the gods aren't through with him yet.)

I stood outside my hotel one morning looking at an elegant placard for another wine estate that's no longer there. In the 60s and 70s Nierstein was full of venerable (and mostly good) growers. But few have survived. In those days, the Heyl estates's proprietor Peter Von Weyarn waged a quixotic campaign to declare the "Rheinterrasse" a region *separate* from the rest of Rheinhessen. He correctly surmised these great vineyards, steep and thus expensive to work, couldn't compete against flat sites growing new crossings selling for pennies on the D-Mark in the supermarkets. I look at all the shuttered estates, and

Strub at a glance // Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar—with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to "read" and understand.

how the wines taste // They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. Walter's recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they're ripe and lush. They're very often reductive and spritzzy, complex and long.

realize he was right.

The few surviving growers, including my dear friend Walter Strub, are members of an association lauding the sites of the “Roter Hang” (as it’s now called). They do what they can. They recall Von Weymarn as a visionary, and yet even that had a tragic side. The Heyl estate attempted to grow grapes organically, starting in the Brudersberg, long before it was trendy and long before there was a base of know-how to be drawn upon. They flew blind, and didn’t stay aloft for very long.

There’s a school of thought that says it’s virtually impossible to grow grapes organically in such steep land and with such a humid microclimate. I know of no Nierstein vintner who’s tried and managed it, and the Germans are markedly green-oriented and eager to convert to organics – to the extent they actually can. I wonder whether Sebastian Strub, the heir-apparent, will take the estate in this direction.

Sebastian’s arrival is important. For many reasons. It’s caused Walter to think about what he’s actually endowing his young man with, and one rather sweet symptom of this is a new-found (or newly expressed) affection for Nierstein. I remember when Walter called his home village “this ugly place,” but a few weeks ago as we discussed what would be built in place of the despised granary, Walter said “Nierstein will become the jewel of the entire Rheinhessen, the most beautiful village of the region,” and I was touched to hear the affection in his voice.

Walter is a generous father. He’s fundamentally a

generous man, but there’s another aspect in play; Walter himself had to assume control of the winery somewhat abruptly when his own father took ill, and he wants to give Sebastian all the time and companionship he possibly can. To launch the child with love, into a decent and beautiful world... there’s a thing to strive for.

Sebastian’s done various *stages* at Dönnhoff, at Glatzer, at Darting, and he stayed for several months in New Zealand.

Meanwhile he’s at Geisenheim doing the classical viticulture curriculum, at home most weekends and of course for harvest and bottling. Walter humanely steps out of your gaze if you ask him about the wines. “They’re Sebastian’s wines now,” he might say, and it is loving and respectful and not quite true. Both men’s hands, father’s and son’s, are holding the reins. Soon the son’s grip will tighten, soon the father’s grip will slip slowly away, soon the routine yet poignant passage will enact itself again, and it is my unearned privilege to witness such love.

The wines are responding with deeper flavors and richer textures. The singular success of 2012 shows that 2011 was no fluke; this is an estate on the move, and these are two vintages of wolfishly delicious lip-smacking wines. The estate is becoming more flexible – Walter actively loves new ideas, and he’s always said “the worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision.” The wines are more multi-faceted, more serenely animated. The normative goal is still that the Grand Crus on the red slope be made dry – if the wines cooperate, but I think the greater principle is to respond to what each wine seems to want.

2012 Niersteiner Grüner Veltliner Trocken

GST-176

SOS : n/a

As always I tasted the range twice, four weeks apart, as the wines are “changing every day” according to Walter, and because of the perspective it confers. This is as ripe as the previous vintages have been but the wine is stronger and more adamant in flavor, though not markedly in *varietal* flavor. It reminds me of Schwarzböck’s Kirchberg, and it may just need time, or else bottling will focus it.

2012 Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Trocken +

GST-177

SOS : 0 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. Technically “Kabinett” which will (I think) appear on the back label. The wine is superb! Walter’s already guzzling it in his evenings; dude’ll drink it all if we don’t grab it. Focused, incisive, pointedly mineral yet wolfishly juicy; it’s like an essence of blueberries without the sugar; follows the excellent 2011 in what’s starting to look like a chain. You’d be hard-pressed to find a more addictive dry Riesling.

2012 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Trocken “Im Taubennest” +

GST-178

SOS : 0

This mirco-parcel bottling will likely say “Spätlese” on the back label. The wine is marvelous, full of substance, with less alcohol-ripeness than the ‘11 (a good thing) and on its gross lees until mid-February *with* battonage, so a creamy texture yet somehow it doesn’t taste leesy. Carob-y aromas are typical for this Grand Cru (it is indeed a Rheinhessen GG), a delicate autolysis is there as a nuance; true GC authority, solidity and complexity; Riesling for lovers of CHABLIS at its gnarliest most stubbornly ornery self.

2012 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Feinherb “Thal” + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GST-180

Again Spätlese; this is from the bottom of the hill where the soil is more weathered and holds moisture better than the steep section. Like the 2011 Pettenthal, it is a *perfectly* balanced on-the-dry-side Riesling; immensely fetching and complicated aromas, orange rind and subtle mint and green tea; the palate is juicy and you swear it freshens your breath, getting more mineral as it grows more tertiary, and all of this massive *fruit* resolves into a frisky dry finish. W-O-W.

2012 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Feinherb “Roter Schiefer” + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GST-179

Spätlese again. And this is the single best wine from here for a dozen years – not to be missed. Approaches a point of sensual perfection where it not only tastes but *feels* good. And it's complex enough to ponder. I mean, really; chocolate and boxwood? It recalls Dönhoff's Krötenpfuhls but with more body. Serious terroir-drenched dry finish.

2012 Riesling “Soil To Soul”
SOS : n/a

GST-172

CORE-LIST WINE. Ha! I find I did not for some reason write a tasting note. Maybe I went to pee and when I got back there was a new wine in my glass. Maybe I'm just a nimrod. In any case, I recall the wine was markedly excellent, even better than the superb '11, and you'll be glad to own it.

2012 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2

GST-173

CORE-LIST WINE. The vineyard is a paradox: a warm micro-climate yet a cool soil (clay and limestone, slow to warm) gives ripe grapes *with* high acidity and low pH, and at times this wine has seemed impressive yet its acid poke has made it hard to drink deeply. That has changed. This '12 is weighty, as savory as corn-fritters sautéed in butter, thicker and less pointed.

2012 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GST-174

CORE-LIST WINE. High windy plateau on almost pure limestone, though this wine usually hails from a more sheltered parcel with 50-year-old vines. Again the best edition of this wine in *many* years; spearminty aromas, a racy quivering palate yet with a sanguinity and repose – as balanced wines often have. Cucumber and tarragon get more penetrating with air.

Weingut Geil

Rheinhessen // Bechtheim



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

This laudable estate would be much more conspicuous on our trendiness radar if they'd do the usual things, such as raise prices, put their wines in stupidly heavy pretentious bottles, create a label effulgent with high solemnity, and make all their wines dry, except for a token couple of cloying over-sweet sweeties.

If, in other words, they became like nearly every other Rheinhessen estate. I sometimes hear myself thinking, "Why can't any of these deluded clowns be sensible once in a while; why can't they bottle wines in various balance zones, why can't they charge prices commensurate with their lower production costs, why are they all so rigid and doctrinaire...?" and then I realize: oh wait a minute, one of them is already doing all those smart things, and they're not rigid nor doctrinaire.

That's what I want Geil to mean to you. The ne-plus-ultra of complexity is not to be encountered here. What you'll find are classy and delicious wines, wines of the country but also with polish; juicy wines but also with clarity and focus, and all from one of the few young Rheinhessen vintners to have his head on straight. They're a kind of Riesling tabularasa, before the perquisites of terroir.

Here's some of what this sensible chap has to say about his vineyards and winery:

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

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

"No year is like another, and winemaking-by-recipe doesn't bring the best results. Naturally modern

techniques such as cool fermentations are generally advisable. The question of whether less is more should be asked!"

"For me aroma is the most important factor; it's the first impression, and should be clear, varietally typical and express its origin."

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we sometimes have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We're in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We'd prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be natural, but we do keep a little Süßreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO₂."

Bechtheim lies just where the hills begin, on the west flank of the Rhein plain. The key sites for Riesling are **Geyersberg** — the best one — made up of chalky loess and tertiary marl. The **Rosengarten** is above the village, on gravelly sand and clay, and the **Hasensprung** rolls off to the west on similar soil.

Weingut Geil at a glance // Honorable traditional Rheinhessen estate energized with the arrival of a young lion. Outstanding modern white wines (Riesling, Scheurebe, Rieslaner) at wonderfully reasonable prices. An emblem of the quixotic new generation in Rheinhessen.

how the wines taste // Firm, delineated, clear, complex, healthy and radiant. I would teach a seminar with them, saying "This is the quality you can now expect from a solid young grower in Germany making wines in unexceptional conditions from good but not great land."

2012 Muskateller Trocken

GGE-066

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Two lots, one with 85° and the other with 93°, so Spätlese quality, which may account for its creaminess and restraint, given the fervent aromas. It's classy, herbal and shady, with almost a GrüVe marjoram note, but most striking is the silky-sleek yet rich texture. Exploit the craze for all-things-Muscat, look at this insane price, and pour this baby.

2012 Bechtheimer Riesling "S" Trocken +

GGE-067

SOS : 0

Back-label will say "Spätlese," and here you can see the adoption of the new concept of estate, village and site wines. Half-*sponti*, half-cultured yeast, and another stylish Riesling, the type in its pure form and in the best sense unremarkable. All it is is worthy, delicious and companionable.

2012 Geyersberg Riesling Trocken +

GGE-068

SOS : 0

I tasted the three "Cru" Rieslings and liked them all, but this one appealed to my lover-of-mineral flavors, and it also had the most refined diction, in a way reminiscent of Nigl; quite tertiary and mineral in fact, if not exactly stony. Salty. I hope I'm not damning it by calling it *interesting*. For it is.

2012 Bechtheimer Riesling "S" Feinherb +

GGE-070

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Again Spätlese on the back label. And again, the *perfect* dry Riesling that crawls into your life crying to be drunk in happy satisfied gulps; this could even go higher in RS and still claim a plausible dryness. For sheer helpfulness and length, what more can be asked?

2012 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett

GGE-064

SOS : 2

The drier of two versions I tasted. Cox-orange and white peach to begin, lime and orchid-oolong to end, and it extends its farewell a long-g-g time; the wine has wiggle but a stern no-nonsense finish.

2012 Bechtheimer Scheurebe Kabinett

GGE-065

SOS : 1

CORE-LIST WINE. The site name is off the label because there's a transition in origin for their Scheu, which they're planting in a site more suitable for its special voodoo self. This one shows orange and grapefruit with just a surmise of the claws of Scheu, but it's much less sweet than before, and Scheu develops unpredictably; this is quince-paste and Manchego and elderflower right now.

2012 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese +

GGE-071

SOS : 2

It's really *the* vineyard for Riesling if you like its lime and Sencha and salty-herbal woodruff-y renditions. It has about *half* the sweetness of the token-sweet wines the trendy guys bottle, and reminds me of good Nahe wine from Bad Kreuznach. Just lovely and *sensible*.

2012 Bechtheimer Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml +

GGE-072H

SOS : 2

I mean, it's Rieslaner. That is, it shows the usual quality of magnificence; it isn't tender, it's never tender, just feverishly expressive and complex, so much so that it seems *drier* than the Riesling Spät. An intelligent approach to balance, and he has Muscat, Scheu and Rieslaner?? No wonder I love the guy.



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

Gysler is now fully biodynamic, Demeter-certified and all.

He's also gotten decidedly hands-off in the cellar. The wines are left alone from fermentation until bottling, and fermentation is – wait for it – with ambient yeast. Like, yay, right? It's what many of you say you want. *Spontis!*

But let's consider the question more deeply.

A vineyard that has only recently undergone transition to organic/biodynamic is often still in a phase of nitrogen-depletion – if nitrogen fertilizers had previously been used, of course. They tell me that a nitrogen-depleted soil makes for somewhat feeble wild yeast populations. If that's how you ferment, you may end up with some exhausted yeasts, which in turn means a slow or even sluggish fermentation. Which in turn favors the development of so-called “Böckser” aromas (hydrogen sulfide) along with the naturally caroby sponti note. This may be exacerbated if your wines are done in stainless steel and if you bottle under screw caps. Mind you, it's still a manifestly better world under these regimes, but the wines can show inconveniently funky in the 1-2 years after bottling – just when we're tasting them and deciding whether to buy. Will anyone give these wines the needed 3-4 minutes of swirling? How can we, especially in one of the huge tastings? I can, and did, but I *had* the time.

A vintner can eliminate H₂S with a copper fining, but maybe he doesn't want to fine at all, or maybe he hesitates to reintroduce copper, as it's all he was permitted to spray in the vineyards. So he sends some stinkers out into the world. Into a world that judges a vintage and makes snap buying decisions when the wines are unruly infants. Fine, I get it: it's our world. But I have a harder time accepting a customer's hesitation for wines like these if that customer is *relishing* all kinds of funky wines from elsewhere – oxidized, repulsively phenolic, borderline unclean (borderline?), and excusing it by citing the wines

“naturalness” as if to say “If you don't use deodorant you better expect to smell, and to like the way you smell.”

We talked together about all this. Alex is a decent, smart and humane guy, and I wanted him to know how the wines presented themselves out in our world, because I believe in them and in him, and I want them to be loved. He registered what I said, and when I tasted the wines again four weeks later – which I did – they were showing fine. I'd rather worry less about how they “show,” since y'all seem so forgiving of other wines that show pretty dubious, but those wines come from hipper places and are marketed with a lot of romance, some of it spurious.

And here's a RANDOM TOURETTE'S YELP: You guys are *way* too smart to be intimidated by the German language, and I won't accept that hoary shopworn excuse any more. You sussed “Savignin” and you got your mouth around “Txackolina” and so I am sure you're intrepid enough to handle “Scheurebe” or even “Hermannshöhle.” Be honest: the first time you looked at *Cinsault* or *Carignan* were you certain how they'd be pronounced? Of course not. Yet I hear all kinds of sniveling from otherwise capable people about “the German language,” and sorry, but that's bullshit. Or else you're not as smart as I think you are. And *I'm* too smart to be wrong about that.

Gernot Gysler at a glance // 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.

2011 Riesling “S” Trocken

GGY-105

SOS : 0

An internal designation for his top-quality dry wine. This is again a *sponti*, half of which fermented and was aged in a new (but untoasted) 1,200-liter cask, on its gross lees until bottling nine months later. The balance was in steel on its lees until March, and both did malo but without leaving movie-theater-popcorn goop aromas. It's a manly sort of Riesling, with attitude and a sinewy Ribeauvillé profile, plus something pipe-smoky, especially in the tertiary finish.

2012 Scheurebe Trocken

GGY-106

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Here's an idea: how about 86-ing that NZ SauvBlanc and doing something really cool and fun? This is what SB could be if it weren't so often mundane; every leafy green, subtle sage, delicate redcurrant, and angular charm. Plus, you know, DEMETER and all. Just sayin'.

2012 Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter

GGY-102L

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. I showed it to my local (MA) sales force thinking we'd rush on by this critter. No freaking way. The wine is seriously *good* and radiantly healthy; this '12 is less maize-y and a little more “cool” and gray than the '11; gray like stone and lifting fog, and in common with Wagner-Stempel's, a Silvaner for Riesling drinkers.

2012 Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter +

GGY-101L

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. Once you taste this with Chinese take-out you'll be ordering Chinese six nights a week just for the fucking bliss of drinking the wine. Super-expressive Scheu aromas recall something like a Sancerre with 15% elderflower syrup, and this is just perfect everyday wine, crammed with its wry charm. You know a guy who's naturally funny, like can't-help-but-be? A guy where people say “I don't know what it is about him, but every time he opens his mouth he cracks me up.” This wine is that guy.

2011 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett

GGY-096

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. On the money; kirsch and wisteria aromas with top notes of lemon zest and tarragon; the palate veers green, it's less stiff than usual; wintergreen and ozone and Braeburn apples, but the final finish is stone again.

2012 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett

GGY-103

SOS : 2

CORE-LIST WINE. This will ship with our Fall DI orders, and we'll stock the 2011 in the interim. Again a *sponti*, and in every way this wine is moving in the right direction: drier, more mid-palate juiciness, flavors pulling in rather than pushing out to the edges of the sweetness-acidity tension, i.e., to the whole flavor *as a Whole*, and not an equation of components. Spiced apple, pink pepper, carob; charming kirsch-y finish that implies a salty aside.

2009 Spätburgunder “Unfiltered”

GGY-097

SOS : n/a

None of that feeble Marienfelder clone stuff; this is Geisenheim clone 2013 in fact, small-berries. And it's excellent Pinot Noir by any standards, ripe (13% alc), 30% new Allier barriques with the rest used to various degrees; suave blackberry aromas, smoky, elegant silky palate with sweet top-notes, a tertiary mid-palate of black-trumpet mushrooms and a finale of wet forest floor. Adult, lovely murmur wine, with an effortless richness.

2010 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe BA , 12/375ml

GGY-092H

SOS : 3

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

“Natural Wines”—Where I Stand

I encourage every producer with whom I work to go as far in an organic direction as they feel they can. I applaud and support every step they take.

I do not and never will guilt-trip them for the steps they don't take. That is both counter-productive, and adds to the coarsening of civility in the world.

If someone tells me they are organic (or bio-dynamic) but aren't certified, I reply that I will not inform my customers as such. It is unfair to attach to the organic “brand” to help sell wine *unless* you're willing to fill out the forms. Those who do undergo the inconveniences associated with certification are the only ones entitled to the use of the term. For the others, virtue must be its own reward.

My fundamental value is to reject all fundamentalism. The only good dogma is no dogma. This *explicitly* includes dogmas I may find personally appealing. These are the most dangerous ones.

That said, it is clear that an intimate relationship to one's land is a prerequisite for meaningful and *located* wines. Vintners who nurture such close accord with their vineyards will feel a kind of humility and love, and this conduces naturally to an environmental conscience. But these many and varied human beings have many and varied consciences, and none of them must live up to my ideas of environmental purity. The perfect is the enemy of the good. And it is only by encouraging and accumulating good that the perfect can be reached—if ever it can.

As regards bio-dynamics, I am in sympathy. Whatever my skepticisms may be, I can't possibly feel that any aspect of bio-dynamics is harmful. I'm personally not convinced by the preparations buried in the cow horn, but so what? It is harmless. I am concerned by the risk of bio-dynamics being turned into a quasi-religion, and am dismayed by the zealotry I sometimes glean from its supporters — or True-Believers.

Beyond the questions of organic/bio-dynamic there's the entire sensibility that's been (unfortunately) given the name “Natural Wine.” Unfortunate because it suggests an either/or formula whereby anything not sufficiently “natural” is thus unnatural. My mind spits those things out, because they're crude and obtuse. I would rather examine value weighted questions by analyzing the continuums they operate along.

I will defend the natural wine community from attacks from outside, especially when they hail from the wine establishment that supports the overblown overextracted over-manipulated bruisers that get so much attention and such “high scores.” Compared to the evil those wines do, a few stinkers from some

misguided hippies are hardly worth fussing over.

But within the natural-wine community I see far too many naked emperors and far too much credulity. A certain dewy-eyed blurred vision is fine, even charming. But when it gets militant, holier-than-thou and ideological, then I taste a bitter thing.

There are too many people far too eager to polish their haloes at the expense of honest vintners and clearer thinkers. We want to feel good about our values, of course, but the *prevailing* values should be humility and a respect for the complexities in play.

I'm very fond of many of the wines in the Natural sensibility. Others I find repulsive. Yet all of them are defended as though they offer the keys to the palace of Perfect Goodness.

I'm eager to find an amphora wine I can like, because I like the stories and the impulse behind the quests. Sadly for me, the wines I've tasted have only demonstrated that there were very good *reasons* for human intervention in the process of making wine. I do, though, respect the vintner who has invested time, money and soul in such a project; it can't be easy for him to admit “Well that didn't work, did it! Recess over; back to school.”

People in this “movement” are very silly on the subject of sulfur. Not long ago, Stuart Pigott wrote an open letter to Alice Feiring on this topic, which appeared on his website. I'm very fond of Alice, I respect her and consider her a friend. But Stuart's argument is cogent, and I think you need to see it:

“In her book, ‘Naked Wine’ (Da Capo Press, Cambridge/MA, 2012) Alice Feiring raises an issue of fundamental importance to Riesling and all other wines. I'm talking about the contentious question of the **sulfur** added by winemakers to nearly all wines. The freshness and stability of wine, including the great majority of organic and biodynamic wines, is dependent upon that sulfur. It's normally added in the form of sulfur dioxide (technical term: SO₂), which dissolves in the wine where it acts as a preservative (technical term: antioxidant) and has a hygienic effect (technical term: bactericide). Put simply, what most of us regard as the fresh taste of clean wine would rarely, if ever, be possible without that sulfur dioxide.

“Natural” wines, or “naked” wines as Feiring prefers to call them, either have no added sulfur or almost none, and as she repeatedly points out that this makes them generally less stable and correct storage crucial. For her this negative is more than outweighed by the gains in taste she perceives, but many other professionals dispute. She points that some “natural”/ “naked” wines have an odd deep yellow or orange color (due to oxidation).

However, she clearly considers such wines purer and more authentic than others.

Let me stress again how much I like the way Feiring writes. Most wine writing is leaden, either because the writer lacks the ability to bring the subject to life on the page, or because the format is so rigid that it forces the writer to try and walk with lead boots on. 'Naked Wines' shows what's possible if the writer is talented, has a distinctive voice, and the format doesn't drag the whole thing down to the banality of a shopping list.

Some of what Feiring writes disturbs me though. 'Where and Who is in the Feiring Line?' (see below), was all about what struck me as geographical prejudices (most strikingly against California and for France) in 'Naked Wines'. Today the subject is sulfur in wine, which raises a fundamental question about the role of the winemaker, or "vigneron" to use Feirings term for winemakers who grow their own grapes. Is her/his role to protect wine from spoilage or should they let all natural process just blow because nature is holy? Don't forget that microbial spoilage is also a natural processes. Stand by for a rocky ride through the Sulfur Zone!

On page 43 Feiring states that, *"When I visited the Louis Pasteur Museum in Arbois I found myself transfixed by the gentle daffodil color of sulfur. So beautiful, so devilish."* Here it's clear that she is talking about elemental sulfur, but sometimes during the following pages it's very unclear whether "sulfur" refers to elemental sulfur, sulfur dioxide or other compounds containing sulfur. For example on page 44 she states, *"Sulfur needs to be handled with respect. First of all it's terribly toxic."* The reason why this lack of clarity is problematic is, that although some compounds like hydrogen sulfide (the smell of bad eggs, technical name: H₂S) are terribly toxic, others are definitely not.

Also on page 43 Feiring's states, *"Sulfur is natural, and for that matter, so is arsenic and plutonium."* Plutonium only occurs naturally in trace quantities in uranium ore, but we're talking about parts per trillion. Almost all the plutonium in the world was produced in nuclear reactors and separated from the spent fuel for nuclear weapons production, creating enormous amounts of nuclear waste on the way. I am a child of the Cold War and like untold millions of others grew up under the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. Uranium mining and ore processing, nuclear weapons production and testing killed thousands of people including many Americans. Around certain volcanoes you can pick up large chunks of elemental sulfur without any ill effect. Elemental sulfur is so

harmless that high school kids play around with it in chemistry lessons. There's an enormous difference between sulfur and plutonium and suggesting there isn't is misleading. In this case it is tendentious, maybe also disingenuous.

The truth—I fear it is a painful truth for Feiring and the "natural" wine movement—is that sulfur is an essential element without which all life is impossible. Cystine and methionine are amino acids, members of the family of "building blocks" from which proteins are made, and both of them contain sulfur. So there's a whole bunch of sulfur inside all of us. Nobody needs to dig under their skin to find the stuff though, because our skin itself also contains plenty of sulfur. Cystine is a crucial part of the protein keratin, the bond of two sulfur atoms at the center of the cystine molecule (technical name: disulfide bond) giving the outer layer of our skin its elasticity and strength. It is also an important component of our hair and Feiring has plenty of that if the photos of her on her website and the covers of her books are halfway up to date.

If she, or anyone else, is serious about avoiding sulfur in all its forms (which I don't recommend unless you have allergy issues), then they need to start by cutting out proteins, which means meat, eggs, legumes and nuts. For example egg contains nearly 3000 parts per million of cysteine and peanuts contain slightly more than that. Both also contain a similar amounts of methionine. However, the trouble only starts there, because many fruits and vegetables also contain a lot of natural sulfur compounds, none more so than cauliflower (about 2000 parts per million!) closely followed by broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, kale and kohlrabi.

All of them contain a compound called glucopinin. When we chew these vegetables an enzyme called myrosinase transforms glucopinin into sulforaphane. Recent research shows that under lab conditions sulforaphane inhibits the growth of breast cancer cells. I find that interesting because both my mother and my maternal grandmother had breast cancer. Maybe you also know someone who suffered from breast cancer? There may be other health benefits too. More research is needed to answer that question.

But we're still not ready to leave the Sulfur Zone. Many of the funky aromas which the cool "natural" / "naked" wines Feiring enjoys have are the result of compounds which are aromatic because of the sulfur they contain. The mercaptans (correct technical name: thiols) are a prime example of this. They are also responsible for the characteristic natural aroma of grapefruit and for the smell of

natural gas, which enables us to detect a gas leak (in this case the thiols are added). I enjoy grapefruit and like to cook with gas. Maybe you do too?

Now let's get down to the nuts and bolts of sulfur in Riesling and other wines. The first myth which needs debunking is that adding sulfur dioxide to wine is somehow modern, something new. Its use in German wine cellars was legalized at the Reichstag of 1497. I find it hard to imagine this could have happened without strong lobbying from the wine producers, many of who surely wanted official recognition for what was already normal practice in their cellars.

Today sulfur levels in conventional wines are lower than they were a generation ago and way lower than two or three generations ago. Despite what Feiring claims in her book (page 44), German wines are no exception to that rule. Most of the cool new generation German winemakers are very keen to achieve long living wines with the minimum of sulfur dioxide additions possible. Many of those who aren't organic regularly bottle wines which would meet the recently tightened standards for their organic colleagues. However, the difference between a wine bottled with 90 parts per million sulfur dioxide and one with 120 is not significant for the health of the vast majority of consumers. So young German winemakers don't make a big deal about it. They know that if you really wanted to kill yourself by drinking wine, then it would be the alcohol which would do the job not the sulfur dioxide!

For Riesling producers around Planet Wine sulfur dioxide is a necessary tool in the cellar both to keep their wines lively and to prevent undesirable microbes spoiling the wine (by starving them of the oxygen most of them need to grow). Not least amongst these are the acetic bacteria which turn wine into vinegar, a problem for some "natural" wines. Making great Riesling demands minimal handling of the wine, and this often means that the wines are slightly "reductive", that is the opposite of oxidized, when freshly bottled. Feiring may be a taster who mistakes the yeasty reductive aromas of these wines for sulfur dioxide. It is a surprisingly common mistake amongst professional tasters. That's just another reason to ask when Feiring and many of her colleagues are finally going to get **real about sulfur.**"

Thank you Stuart!

The other truly fatuous issue over which the *Naturalistas* are inclined to unnecessarily value judgments concerns natural versus cultured yeast fermentations. Mind you, I do agree there's a line to be drawn, but it's not the place they draw it.

I think the crux of the distinction isn't between ambient and cultured yeast, but among different types of cultured yeasts. Briefly, there are highly

neutral yeast cultures whose only purpose and function is to give a predictable fermentation, which is helpful if you want perfectly dry wine. No reasonable objection can be made to these.

The next level might be the families of yeasts cultured to ferment very cold, tempting to growers who use stainless steel and who want wines with expressive primary fruit. Very cold fermentations (in white wines) can produce amylic acid aromas (bananas), which one might argue are not inherent in the wine. This is one of those questions over which reasonable people might differ.

There are, though, a great many yeasts deliberately cultured to create spurious and short-lived aromas, and these to me are unacceptable falsifications.

As regards so-called "natural" yeast fermentations, I'm very fond of those wines, at least in the regions where I taste frequently and deeply. The Germans shorthand them as "*sponti*" (short for "Spontangärung," or spontaneous fermentation) and when I encounter such wines I'm subjectively pleased. This does not mean I am displeased by other types of wines, and it **EMPHATICALLY** does not mean that natural-yeast fermented wines represent all that is Holy And Good. It's merely an accent, one among many ways for good wines to be.

Nor do I make the common mistake of seeing yeast as a crucial aspect of terroir. This just isn't true, and even if it were true it's only true if one's definition of "terroir" is fungible and slovenly, and so dispersed and holistic it really means almost nothing any more.

The sad ferocity with which the natural-yeast argument is thrust forward seems to indicate two things, and only one of them is good. I'm glad wine drinkers are rejecting tweakings and diddlings because way too many wines are tweaked and diddled (and "spoofulated"), and I also know we often have to go *too far* in order to learn just how far we should have gone. The problem arises when I see people claiming rigid categorical positions because it makes *them* feel moral and righteous, but such tea-party evangelism is never helpful even among people one sympathizes with.

All of this may be unsatisfying if you're in a point in your life where you want to take positions and claim your values. All I can say is, the deeper the values, the less fiercely they need to be claimed. And the longer we live, the less categorical and more complex we find things to be. Then we start to consider deep values, which often appear less militant and passionate than the positions we held earlier, but which are in fact tenderer and more respectful of the true difficulties of living and trying to be good.

Nahe

The Nahe isn't really "obscure" any more, thanks in large part to the Dönnhoffs as well as the Diels and (Schaefer)-Fröhlichs, but you may not know where it is or why it's so remarkable.



You get there quickly from most other German wine regions, and yet it is really a corner, a little spot of peace. There isn't an obvious artery such as RN74 in Burgundy. All the roads are narrow and the landscape is steeply hilly and gently chaotic. Even if you're stressed when you get there, you won't be for long. You feel enclosed in a cool green peace.

The region is the center of production of semi-precious stones, which suggests its intricate geology. It's also the secret of the wines. A little village like Niederhausen—which despite its renown is dead-still and silent—has over sixty distinctly different soil types, which can change every few steps. And which, obviously, are reflected and conveyed in the wines. It is an inhospitable place for a person who denies the truth of terroir, or even the skeptic who insists there are no “minerals” to be tasted in wine.

In essence all Nahe soils are conglomerates with different points of emphasis. So if you say so-and-so vineyard is on “porphyry” it means it is predominantly thus, but may also contain slate or other primary rock. Hermannshöhle is an interesting case in point; the upper parts are visibly slatier and the lower parts visibly

more volcanic, but lower down it's all mashed together. Dönnhoff's *Brücke*, actually the bottom-slope detritus from the slate-dominated Hermannsberg, is a mélange of four or five soil types you can see with the naked eye as you stroll a hundred yards along the rows, as they change every few steps. If a wine is complex, it is because of its basis in the ground; not for any other reason.

The upper Nahe (where we find Hexamer and Schönleber) really feels like the end of the earth, it's so quiet. Soils here are mostly marls and red sandstones, but a site like the Rheingrafenberg is in fact sandy loam yet also with a pathway of weathered byproducts of Tholeyer slate, sandstone and conglomerates.

The middle Nahe—Schlossböckelheim, Niederhausen, Norheim, Traisen—is more volcanic: porphyry, melaphyr, granites, rhyolite, and produces the most bewitching wines. Hexamer has land in both sections, so you can compare.

The town of Bad Kreuznach is the border between the middle and lower Nahe, below which we find the flood-plain running eventually into the Rhine at Bingen. The vineyards occupy small lateral valleys moving towards the west, into the Hunsrück hills. One of these is the “Trollbach Tal” where we find the Diels, whose three Grand Crus occupy undulations in *one single hillside*, on three entirely different soils. As a rule there's more quartzite in these parts, as we're closer to the Rhine and to the Rüdesheim mountain, but volcanic traces and sandy slates can still be seen.

The best Nahe Rieslings seem to give us everything we could possibly ask for in white wine; brilliance, complexity, freshness and lightness, and a sense that they form a flavor hologram on our palates, that shifts and alters with each instant of thought and of time. You feel like you're eating food cooked by someone who has every spice in the world in the kitchen and knows exactly how to use them.

For me the place is entirely mystic. It's the Galapagos Islands of wine, some place where strange birds and turtles roost and peer out from heavy-lidded eyes. It casts a theta-spell and changes what we know about the world. You feel like if you stay there long enough your hair will start growing in another color. The wines can have an odd shamanic force, and in those cases it's helpful to have a person who can explicate them, both in words and in flavors.

Which is where a certain Messrs. Dönnhoff enter the picture...

Dönnhoff

Nahe // Oberhausen



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

I probably write too much about how I respond to Dönnhoff's wines. Maybe it's too I-focused. Yet I'm drawn to do it, to continue doing it, and I think it's because this interaction is at the very core of my engagement with beauty, with meaning, and with life.

I suspect I will never know why. And it probably doesn't matter. Each of us seems to hold a kind of receiver that's tuned to one slender band of frequency, and when the signal invades us we can't help but respond. Maybe it's unsettling, especially if we envision ourselves as matter-of-fact. Maybe if so we ignore it. And yet it is there.

These wines convey to me an extraordinary beauty. It's not only the *what* of the flavor, the arrangements of nouns by which it might be understood and described; it's also the verb, the how, the mode of expression, and perhaps it is this most of all. I'm at a loss to understand how a wine can be at once so numinous and also so tender. It's the most poignant mystery I'm aware of. And because it is inexplicable, I keep fussing at it, urged into the deep mist, where I try to find some paths or trails, and only get more and more lost.

I mean, one can certainly respond to extravagant beauty with extravagant feeling. A whole genre of wine literature is built on this resonance. But I feel it's too simple. Wow this is gorgeous, wow do I gush at it, wow do I whip my words into a frenzy in order to make you see how powerful this all is. No, it won't do; it feels like a sugar-high. And so I'm drawn to do the opposite, to try and get as quiet as I can, to detach from the ways that I feel and to simply receive and observe.

I question whether this thing I experience is actually irreducible, that is, in short; is it actually really there? Or do I bring it with me by the force of my own expectations? Here I can offer a clue. Because we had Cornelius Dönnhoff at our New York trade tasting last January, and he (like many others) brought cask-samples of his baby-2011s for us all to taste. It was my first encounter with the new vintage, and I hastened to taste them all, ideally

before the room got too crowded and distracting. You've been to these tastings; you know how they are. It's a kind of frenzy, and even if you're highly systematic it ends up being an aesthetic cacophony, and one does one's best to endure it, let alone find some clear way through. So I skimmed my palate over a bunch of the '11s, briefly touching down on this-and-that, and when I got to the Dönnhoff table I was in power-taster mode. *I'll show these wines who's in charge.* We've all been there.

The first Dönnhoff wine was the simple dry estate Riesling. The first thing that went through my mind was "This is different from the others." It was stiller, somehow, like the unperturbed surface of a moonlit pond. Compared to the other wines I'd tasted, nothing here seemed to be on *display*, and I was struck right away with this seemingly affectless coolness, poise, clarity. Yet it never felt like a clarity any person had had to focus, it never seemed as if human effort was engaged in making it as calmly precise as it was. It was simply a vision of reality. And of course it was keenly dissonant with the crashing *drang* of the rest of the room. But there it definitely was. And it compels me, in a way I cannot resist, to stop the noise and let this strange thing in. Or is it really so strange? Maybe these are just introverted wines, and they appeal to the introvert in me. Maybe. Or maybe they let me feel *seen*, as if the very wines understand and approve of me. That really feels true.

When I go to the estate I have the joy of seeing my friend Helmut again, a joy that burnishes more warmly as the years pass; we've known each other (and done business) for twenty six years now. And lately I've loved seeing Cornelius too, he is so much his father's son and yet also different, with his own quickness and keen-wittedness.

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.

Helmut is imaginative and loves metaphorical talk, but he's not overtly emotional, and I'd be self-conscious if I got all weepy and wild as we tasted. So that's another reason for trying to be matter-of-fact. And so all I can do is be quietly there as the quiet wines find me.

The wines find me in a place I myself am almost unaware of. It's the place I am most human, most tender, most sad, most forgiving, and most deeply sure that something matters in all this, that we are here for some purpose. You might think it was pleasurable to be roused so deeply, but it is also unnerving. It reminds me how much of my life is unreal. How I tolerate the superficial. How heedless I am of the gifts, of living at all, of the people who are with me, and the love we feel for one another. It's a kind of admonition, and I know I deserve it. But is it really fair? How in the world could one live like this all the time? The ecstasy would kill you.

I hope it's enough to know that such places are there. That each of us walks in an envelope of divinity. Anne Lamott writes that the three prayers are "Help," "Thanks" and "Wow," and yes, that's it exactly. Part of us is divine, and the world is a beauty we need to be happy in and grateful for. Each sip of a wine like this is a drawn breath of beauty, an invitation to remember, a voice from the deep leaves, it is safe to be lost, the forest will hold you, the world will hold you.

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

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 interesting things that can happen to us. We are both out of our lives yet also more deeply immersed in them than ever. Everything seems true here, yet a condition for being inside this truth is being unable to articulate it. And why should that be?

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

region in which he worked was so sufficiently obscure that he got to do his work in almost monastic purity. He was never in danger of becoming that most queasy and dreadful of creatures: a "wine celebrity." More correctly, when that danger first began to manifest, our hero was old enough to assimilate it and not allow it to disturb the basic integrity of his relationship to the work.

Great wines also arise from people who are at home – or at one – with their landscape. Helmut's been hinting that new vineyards were going to enter the picture, and when he showed me two new wines from sites in Bad Kreuznach called Kahlenberg and Krötenpfuhl (two of the top-3 in this town), I asked if he was at all curious about any upstream sites. "Not at all," came his typically unambiguous answer. I asked why not. "I want the wines I make to contain a story, and the story I can offer them is that of me at home in my landscape. I feel myself a man of the middle-Nahe, that is, the area between Oberhausen and Kreuznach. You have to be at home not only in the vineyard but also in the landscape in which it's contained. Of course, I could make a perfectly nice wine from a "foreign" vineyard, but it would only be a product; it wouldn't contain a story."

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

I asked Cornelius if he had changed or was planning to change anything about how the grapes were grown and the wine was made. He's not afraid to quarrel with his dad, and he's very much his own man. His answer surprised me. "No: nothing." He did not elaborate; nor did he need to.

Helmut will tell you Cornelius is quicker, more resolute, and in certain ways more technically competent. In my film he says the estate's current quality level would be "unthinkable" without Cornelius. Other elements also come into play, such as the trade Helmut made with Gut Hermannsberg, whereby he gave them the Kupfergrube (which their forbears had actually created from a scrubby bare hillside around eighty years ago) in exchange for Hermannshöhle. This gave Dönnhoffs a bigger holding in this stellar vineyard, which gives them more flexibility to harvest selectively, without worrying about filling a cask. Cornelius isn't voluble, at least not with me, but I am seriously stirred by his commitment to travel here in the

U.S.—he hardly *needs* to come over in order to sell the wines—and also his collegial ease with other growers. There are places where the “top” grower might put on airs, but not the Nahe, and not the Dönnhoffs. It makes sense the folks are down to earth, because the wines themselves *come down to EARTH*.

2012, which I tasted much earlier in its development

than I almost ever have, seems to have the most clamorous acids since 2008. “Seems,” because I’m sure the wines were simply in the process of consolidating their fruit.

Thanks for bearing with me and reading this lengthy text. These wines lay at the crux of who I am, and every once in a while we have to step away from our busyness and let our souls run a few laps.

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 HERMANNSHÖHLE 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 HERMANNSHÖHLE, 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 HERMANNSHÖHLE**.

2012 Estate Riesling Trocken

GDH-279

SOS : 0

This was filtered a week before I tasted it, and so it seemed stonier than the ‘11 and stonier than the sample I’d tasted in January. There’s quite a peek of mineral; one could say a *pique* of mineral, as it has a certain sharpness that isn’t abrasive, and will be subsumed when it recovers its fruit; the smoky porphyry notes are embedded and will emerge.

2012 Tonschiefer Riesling Trocken

GDH-281

SOS : 0

In effect the dry wine from (mostly) Leistenberg, which grows on sandy slate called *Tholeyer Schiefer*. Pungent naked slate aromas lead to a gentler-seeming palate that’s like a defense of a Doctoral thesis in slate; it’s a wine for mineral lovers though with a little caressing murmur in the middle.

2012 Roxheimer Höllentpfad Riesling Trocken (+)

GDH-291

SOS : -1

This is a mostly steep site on sandy loam; call it a Cru but Dönnhoffs aren’t rushing to include it among the GGs. It seemed again to be on the austere side but so assertive in its terroir it blasts through with sheer flavor, an advancing brigade of tangy sandstone and lemon-eucalyptus.

2012 Felsenberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs “Felsentürmchen,” 6/750ml (+ +)

GDH-293

2012 Felsenberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs “Felsentürmchen,” 3/1.5L (+ +)

GDH-293M

SOS : 0

A big, smoky and determinedly important wine; still very early days, but this made me think of a Grand Cru Alsace with the *fat* removed and the mineral intact. But this isn’t just mineral; it’s a swollen dialogue of stones and smoke and exotic flowers. By the way, taste *this* for an exegesis of porphyry flavor.

2012 Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml
2012 Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 3/1.5L
SOS : n/a

GDH-300
GDH-300M

I can't give you a note here, because the wine was fiercely closed-in. Historically a late developer, it's also historically a splendid Riesling, so I'll defer the specifics.

2012 Hermannshöhle Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + + (+)
2012 Hermannshöhle Grosses Gewächs, 3/1.5L + + (+)
2012 Hermannshöhle Grosses Gewächs, 1/3L + + (+)
SOS : 0

GDH-303
GDH-303M
GDH-303J

An already expressively complex fragrance and palate, and it feels like it will join the league of Gentlemen of '08 and '10, though with something of the doughy richness of '07 and '05. Even now the wine is absurdly complex.

2012 Mixed Case Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml
SOS : 0

GDH-302

These Grosses Gewächs wines will also be sold in a mixed case of six, two bottles of each.

2012 Estate Riesling +
SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-280

I recently took delivery of the 2001 Dönnhoffs I'd bought and laid away in a cellar a friend in Germany let me borrow space in. Among them were six bottles of the gutsriesling, and at first I winced; I should have brought them over sooner.

I needn't have worried. In fact, the '01 and '02 gutsrieslings are drinking like dreams right now. Remember some of the internet silliness about Dönnhoff's wines don't age? Don't make me laugh. Or rather, don't make me puke, since laughing is pleasurable.

I think these wines show a paradox analogous to the thread-count in linens: the more there are, the smoother it feels. Each of these wines has so much sheer material the result is they feel not soft but caressing.

So, as always this is from the porphyry site, Oberhäuser Felsenberg and the gravelly site Oberhäuser Kiegelburg, and so it's a mini-Grand Cru. It's another in a string of beauties, barely perceptible sweetness, literally incredible class, and in my opinion the single greatest white wine value in the world.

And if you want to, you can age it for twenty years or more.

2012 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-292

Again almost *Feinherb* styling, and the usual brown-butter chocolatey cardamom thing is clear, and the wine is deft and classy. It's in the Dellchen family of savory "dark" flavors.

2012 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett (+)
2012 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett, 3/1.5L (+)
SOS : 2

GDH-298
GDH-298M

From four parcels with an average age of 39 years, and the oldest being 55, which may be why this wine improves each year. Or seems to. In fact Leistenberg is something of a secret weapon in this cellar, but as Helmut says, "We don't want to force every vineyard into making "important" wine; something has to give us our Kabinett." And yet, in the last year I've had two insanely marvelous Leistenbergs, a '90 Kabinett last June and an '88 Spätlese a few weeks ago, each the kind of wine where you think *You can't ask much more from wine than this*. The '12 is (or was) a little brash in its mineral brilliance, and again on the dry side, but there's a drool of pear-juice near the finish that encourages me to think it will turn out gleaming and hale as always.

2012 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese +
2012 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L +
2012 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese, 1/3L +
SOS : 1

GDH-295
 GDH-295M
 GDH-295J

Dönnhoff *amateurs* tend to be very fond of this vineyard, as its wines are both full of girlish charm yet also full of class and depth. This vintage is dancing, giddy, pretty and snappy; the girl has her wits about her, and will, with impeccable charm, tear you a new one if you misbehave. Signature flavors run towards cherry blossom and lady-apples.

2012 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese “Felsentürmchen” + +
SOS : 2

GDH-299

A sirloin parcel of Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg, right below the little castle tower that Dönnhoffs renovated. I don't think I know a more exotic or amazing Riesling; this one seems cooler and greener than the ungodly-floral 2011, so the exotics are encased in a corner off to the side of the... it isn't even “mineral” anymore; it's some kind of essence, geology in the form of perfume. Warm and cool, smoke and spices, and the finish is almost peppery.

2012 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese + + (+)
2012 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L + + (+)
SOS : 2

GDH-297
 GDH-297M

It has its wisdom-smell. It's learned at last how not to waste time, and having learned, can release a deep kindness that isn't charming. The wine makes no apparent effort. It relaxes and issues a numinous pulse of solid beauty. This may not delight in its first several years, but give it the 12-15 years it needs, and then open the windows, look out at the moon, observe the inexplicable longing the wine seems to bring, or to want you to feel, and be glad: you are alive, there are people who love you, and still there's a sense that it isn't enough. Because it can't be, it isn't supposed to be. You are designed to hunger and to grieve and to yearn, and also to be amazed and connected and grateful. Who'd have thought, the reminder of what it's all for, living in a tiny sip of wine?

2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese + +
2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L + +
2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese, 1/3L + +
SOS : 2

GDH-294
 GDH-294M
 GDH-294J

Here I'll be spare: extraordinary fragrance and a taut, snappy beautiful wine. No need to say another word yet another time.

2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese “Goldkapsel,” 12/375ml + +
2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese “Goldkapsel,” 3/1.5L + +
SOS : 3

GDH-304H
 GDH-304M

In the low-botrytis vintage, this Auslese focuses the cherry in the Spät, but also the apple and the grape-hyacinth; it's a wine of repose yet it throbs with energy and with a certain strictness, and the finish is curiously, wonderfully dry.

2012 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 6/375ml + + +
SOS : 4

GDH-319H

Brücke is predestined for Eiswein, as its warm situation next to the Nahe gives ripe grapes and yet the way it sits in the valley takes the sun away early in the Fall, and what has been one of the *warmer* vineyards suddenly becomes one of the colder ones.

This wine has a fragrance that makes you want to cry, and then dance. It's pure Dönnhoff in its sanguine Buddhist peace. The prayer-flags whip in a stiff wind and the frost clings to each bit of shade, yet on the hillside the sun is shining, and getting closer. The later picking has more lavish fruit, mellower acids and more opulence. A cuvée of the two wines will be bottled.

Jakob Schneider

Nahe // Niederhausen

vineyard area // 19 hectares

annual production // 10,000 cases

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

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

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



It's been thirty five years since I first visited this estate. But that needn't concern you, the three generations I've seen, and the gradual and now accelerating modernization.



Jakob Schneider

Nahe

It's been thirty five years since I first visited this estate. But that needn't concern you, the three generations I've seen, and the gradual and now accelerating modernization. Young Jacob – who at age-30 isn't really “young” Jacob any more, simply takes his place among the new blood enlivening Germany in every region. What's important here is that this outstanding collection of Grand Cru vineyards finally has a Niederhausen vintner to do full

justice to them. And Schneider is for sure a conspicuous up & comer.

A recent improvement is a new bottling line – which Jacob shares with Georg Rumpf (at Kruger-Rumpf) and which both fellows tell me is much gentler on the wines as they are bottled. It's just those small finesse points that make the critical difference in *texture* whereby a wine becomes polished and refined and more pleasurable to drink.

Jakob Schneider at a glance // “Colorful” stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted. They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great 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.

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 earthy 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 outgrowing the insistence that only the best is good enough for moi.

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. We all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don't care what parties I'm invited to. I do care, though, about Mama Schneider throwing her arms around me when I arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

2012 Riesling "Melaphyr" Trocken

GJS-112

SOS : 0

They like to name their wines for the soil they grew in, and I think that's good. This soil is volcanic, partly a variant of porphyry (with feldspar) and partly a kind of basalt. The surface soil can look almost black. The wines are *always* exotic and deranged with terroir. This one's plummy, leafy and bouncy, slim and witty with a tic of eucalyptus. It's one of his "basic" dry Rieslings, and a serious *steal*.

2012 Hermannshöhle Riesling Trocken

GJS-113

SOS : 0

I don't know if the back-label will give a Prädikat level; it's irrelevant in any case. The wine is a fine study in the basics of this world-class vineyard. Cherry blossom and fennel aromas, Italian parsley and lemon-zest; mouthfilling, overtly mineral, a bit austere and with a somewhat diffident rectitude—**BUT**—with the addition of 3g/l of residual sugar (via a gorgeous Kabinett from the Rosenberg) the wine is sleeker and what was austere is now just angular, more piquant and salty and complex. While it's still *dry* it's no longer militant. You're welcome.

2012 Hermannshöhle Riesling Trocken "Magnus," 6/750ml + (+)

GJS-114

SOS : 0

Probably Jacob's best dry wine to date; picked at 102° Oechsle without botrytis, it recalls the fervent burnt-shoot smokiness I sometimes sniff in a Heiligenstein from Hirsch; it's a commanding alpha Riesling, a hugely expressive Grand Cru, almost the wine Raveneau would make in Niederhausen; woodruff, hyacinth, salt and smoke. Potentially a masterpiece.

2012 Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter

GJS-111L

SOS : 2

After Dönnhoff's estate Riesling, this is certainly the best value in the offering, year after year.

Why? Because it hails from Grand and Premier Cru vineyards whose wines are almost never sold at prices like this. Now we have 30% Rosenberg (porphyry), 30% Klamm (red sandstone and porphyry, and a little loamy from the bottom of the hill where this comes from) 25% Klamm (from the steep section) and 15% Kirschheck (from a high parcel, on sandy slate). The flat-site Klamm was vinified in cask; everything else in steel.

We tasted four different blends. We wanted angles and curves and not too much RS. The wine has *urgestein* smokiness and an iris-wisteria-lilac florality; the palate has snap and scratch below its esoteric terroir and rare-orchid smiling blossom; it's a wine that teases you affectionately yet pointedly. It is drier than any previous vintage.

2012 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GJS-110

(NEW) CORE-LIST WINE. And about damn time! We were busy assembling the cuvée, and this third attempt was the winner; the majority is a really old-school *sponti* to give juice and that carob-y richness; overall this is more porphyry than red-sandstone in its soil-signature, more smoke and incense, and quite a phenolic grip that might vanish with bottling. Authority and breed here, and a new seriousness that I really admire.

2012 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GJS-115

W-O-W time. Almond oil, cherry blossom; a studious girl writing a paper with a cup of verbena infusion and a little white hyacinth in a pot on her desk. A hint of cherry tobacco wafts into the room—perhaps she closes the door. Sits back down, has a sip of her chai. “Where was I...?” A line of poetry comes to her, her lover read it to her on the phone, and she smiled but also felt tears, and wasn’t sure why. “What was that?” she muses. Think of the flower, the herb, the study, the beam of attention, the dissolve of attention; a curious mélange of emotion in her quiet day. This wine tells, among other things, the tale of her moments of absorption.

2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : 1

GJS-109

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. Two components, an enthralling *sponti* and a scrupulous clear primary-fruit one. We did a 60-40 blend and *what* a wine! Jacob’s high-water mark to date; it compares to Dönnhoff as a baritone compares to an alto; it shows a gorgeous swell of carob and smoke. Lost for words—magnificent.

2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml +
SOS : 3

GJS-116

Three component lots this time: one with 100°, one with 108° and another with 125°—one with all the botrytis of the vintage and the other a semi-Eiswein. It’s a big salty genius of terroir, sweet for sure but the leading impression is this tangy esoteric glassful-of-geology; a crusty-salty marvel for cheese, not a little schnookums for afternoon tea.

2012 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Eiswein “Mitternacht,” 6/375ml + (+)
SOS : 4

GJS-117H

The “lighter” one—at a mere 160°—and the sleekest of three, at the moment it’s blanketed below generic young-Eiswein tones, but what’s here is pure, serene and hale, and something gorgeous isn’t far away.

Can You Taste The Minerals? A Brief Essay

My friend Lisa Airey wrote to me because she knows just how to press my buttons. “I’m working with a group of students that have read the latest Guild of Sommeliers paper on terroir,” she began. Evidently in the course of an online thread, a professor of geology wrote a skeptical post that was paraphrased thus: “Maltman is not a terroir denier. He does not posit that terroir has no effect on wine flavor or structure - quite the contrary. His primary objection is to the claim that specific minerals or rocks can be tasted in wine. He objects to the claim that the rocks in the vineyard, such as slate, flint, and chalk end up as detectable flavors in the wine. Proving that the presence or absence of certain trace elements in the soil affects the taste of wine is one thing. Proving that one can actually taste the slate from the vineyard is another.”

So I replied to her, saying this:

I have mixed feelings about Maltman's claim. On one hand, the whole business of “minerality” can be overstated to the point it becomes metaphysical, and I myself am not willing to insist that we can literally “taste the minerals.” However, that isn't because I assume this is impossible, but rather because we don't (yet?) know how it could indeed be possible.

Yet I also wonder whether the Professor is himself being too literal. One can put too fine a point on these things. First, we have the observable phenomenon of countless numbers of people tasting and discerning *something* in these wines that isn't “fruit” or “flowers” or “spices” and which they spontaneously describe in terms of stones, rocks or minerals. When they learn that the soils these wines grew in contain certain stone-rock-mineral

components, it is not de-facto unreasonable to infer a cause and affect. Just because we haven't discerned the mechanism by which such nuances appear in wine is no reason to insist they are figments of fantasy.

As for the literal claim of tasting slate as-such, all you need to do is go to a classic Mosel vineyard, pick up a little wafer of slate and *lick* it. Or soak it in water overnight and drink it the next morning. Then you'll be in a better position to insist that it can't be what you're tasting in the wine. While you're at it, feel free to postulate an alternate explanation! “If not slate, then *what?*” I strongly suspect by the time you're finished, your theory will be far more abstruse and improbable than the common-sense one that's evident to your simple wits and senses.

To be fair, though, I do not know and would not insist that such a phenomenon is universally true. That is, if one tastes “slate” in Mosel Riesling then one must also be tasting *caillou* in Chateauneuf, limestone in Macon or belemnite chalk in Champagne. We taste the effects these components create in wine flavors, we intuit a causal chain, and that's as far as we can go, and stay reasonable. We can take this thing too far. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't boldly take it as far as it can plausibly travel! For example, please posit a theory as to why Champagne tasters have spontaneously arrived at tasting terms that include marine images of iodine, oysters, and seafood shells that is more persuasive than the one that says it's because the vines grow in soil *made up* of agglomerated sea fossils.

The supporters of the terroir argument have infinitely repeating empirical experience on their side. What do the deniers have?

Weingut Hexamer

Nahe // Meddersheim

vineyard area // 18.5 hectares

annual production // 10,800 cases

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

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



It's an estate that won't hold still. It keeps adding vineyards because great land is available at irresistible prices. If you probe you discover there are old stocks of back-vintages you never heard about, including one that never was sold.



Even the wine style is adapting to the new terroirs, and while Harald's wines will always be on the ultraviolet side, the middle-Nahe wines are less high-strung than the (often) scintillating wines from his home-village of Meddersheim.

What is salient about Harald Hexamer's winery is first, his identity as the keeper of the Rheingrafenberg vineyard, an outstanding site of which he is by far the

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

A balance of two extremes is still a balance, but I find Harald's wines are getting deeper and moderating their

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

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

extremes into something more drinkable, and even, dare I say, more wholesome.

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 handles as little as possible. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit—below 10 degrees—back to the winery.") Yields are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight

bunches per vine"). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart." Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way.

2012 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "#1" +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GHX-086

This is exactly the kind of wine I call perfectly-dry, because it isn't legally dry. The label won't say, and you shouldn't care. Harald says: "It doesn't matter the residual sugar, only that the wine is himself."

The wine is lavish and vigorous, gleamingly pretty and dry enough for any sane person; mirabelle and curiously a hint of Reggiano; the palate just shimmers with brioche-y richness and an underlying pebbly minerality. Don't drink it ice-cold and even consider decanting. It's zingy and slinky within a succulent richness.

2012 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Feinherb "Porphy" +
SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GHX-087

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. Again a dry-ish wine, from the volcanic site (big-ass name coming up) Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen (which means "among the cliffs"). I saw it rather too early, but it was clear the balance was drier and the wine smokier and less exotic than the perfumey '11; I found the balance *ideal*, and the feeling-tone a little more introverted, but this hadn't been filtered and was awaiting its next SO2. So maybe it only *seems* demure.

2012 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" +
SOS : 1

GHX-085

CORE-LIST WINE, and boy does this have a following. It's from a special parcel in the Rheingrafenberg on almost pure quartzite, and you should know this is the *driest* the wine has been since I can remember—and I approve. It's cool apple and delicate stone and perfect balance, a lovely new profile for this fine, fascinating steady wine.

2012 Medersheimer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett
SOS : 2

GHX-088

This is now the site for the estate's Kabinett, a very steep vineyard on loamy sand. This seems plumper and more in the cherry-strawberry direction than the mirabelle-apple, though this may be the '12 vintage. Focused and engaging.

2012 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GHX-090

The micro-parcel name "Birkenfelder" may or may not appear on the label; Harald takes a while to decide things sometimes. It's the best land in the Rheingrafenberg, and here's another wine starting to relax into less sweetness; it's digitally focused and pointed as his wines are, but there's more guts now. The wines could sometimes feel ethereal, but not this; the damp foresty aromas dancing off the sweet hay dancing in turn off the apple-butter and finally issuing a little curtsy to the closing curry heat.

2012 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese “#1” (+ +)

GHX-089

SOS : 2

It had only just finished fermenting. The balance is right, the terroir is lovely and expressive, the saltiness is pronounced and the ripeness is generous though not heavy. Enormous potential.

2012 Sobernheimer Marbach Riesling BA “-6.9°C,” 12/375ml + +

GHX-091H

SOS : 4

I well know how unfashionable such wines are these days, but I also know what a genius he is at making them. Few can follow Harald when he reaches this zone; the wine was picked in late October at 120°, and though the grapes were frozen near-solid he opted for an incandescent Auslese. Because why? Because read on...

2012 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml + +

GHX-092H

SOS : 4

Perilously close to sublime. It's beatific and loving, all apples and cloves and ginger; almost a Saar quality. The acidity's in proportion, and the wine exhales a blessing of serene intensity. The guy has The Gift.

Some Old Geezers

2001 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling “Hochgewächs” +

GHX-094

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

He bottled a bunch and then never sold it! The wine is smoky and yummy, fully tertiary and whoever says “petrol” needs to have his head examined, but he'll say he smells it here.

1999 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese

GHX-095

SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Toasted brioche and chamomile, with the grainy-maizey crustiness of '99; on the dry side but a charming slightly charred finish.

2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese* +

GHX-093

SOS : n/a

A few of you will despise this on principle because you heard somewhere that the hot 2003s were “flabby.” Ohhh-Kay. Just *taste* this almost virginal, superb Riesling and then tell me. Bottled under screwcap, there's barely a tertiary note in sight, just a surmise of the beeswaxy signature of the best '03s. BUT, you do get something like adult vinosity instead of the baby-fat primary fruit of all these newborns.

Kruger-Rumpf

Nahe // Münster Sarnsheim



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

It's best when a generational transfer takes place with both generations active, at least for a while. You get the best of all worlds; institutional memory plus fresh eyes, an up and running infrastructure plus an innovative spirit. Plus the competitive energy of parent and child each with something to "prove" to the other.

This is happening now at Rumpf, and the wines have surged forward for each of the past several years.

They have primo holdings in many of the Grand Crus of the lower Nahe, and economies of scale have kept prices sensible, though that's a relative term for an estate of just 55 acres.

I do think a small tribute is in order for Rumpf's 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.



Kruger-Rumpf at a glance // Up-and-comer the past few years, making more glamorous wines than ever before. Deft, appley and minerally wines from the greatest sites of the lower Nahe. Priced quite reasonably for blue-chip quality.

how the wines taste // They're as sturdy as before but there's more flesh on the bones. There's more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you'll see the truth behind the cliché.

A Profile of the Sites

Dautenpflänzer is one the leading Grand Crus of the lower Nahe, with a typical mélange of soil types within its borders. Rumpf claims some of it is slatey and some of it is “sandy loam,” which agrees more with the standard references. It is in any case singular and immediately significant, giving a sometimes damnably complex set of aromas and flavors including coconut, violet, soursop, leaf-smoke – it is a very long list even if you’re sober. In any case it belongs with the vamping exotics of the Nahe.

Pittersberg is the other of the top Crus, and this site is more classic and less mischievous than its neighbor. Stefan refers only to “slate” and very often the wine smells just like Mosel wine – in fact just like Graacher Himmelreich. “In parts dusty loam over slate,” according to the textbook. Pittersberg is related to the Rudesheimer 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 Rudesheimer 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 mineral 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 Rudesheimer Berg just to its north over the Rhine – though on a radically different soil; a mélange of rotliegend and various volcanic derivatives (e.g., porphyry). The wines are, or can be, superb, seeming to mingle the succulence of Hipping or Pettenthal with the exotics of Felsenberg or Dautenpflänzer.

2012 Kapellenberg Riesling Trocken + SOS : 0 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GKF-183

Maybe it’s dry, maybe it isn’t but *tastes* dry, but in this case one should really just—radical notion—taste the wine and not the label. From a 40-year-old vineyard, it shows lavish apple-cellar fruit. *This* is what Riesling needs to have: not even “sweetness” as such, but serenity, joy, calm, like this beaming cinnamon-y cox-orange glass of laughter.

2012 Dautenpflänzer Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + (+) SOS : 1 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GKF-184

Tasted alongside a Pittersberg GG that struck me as just too austere, Rumpfs pointed out that Dautenpflänzer is quicker to show its charms, and while this may well be true, I think this wine is simply better, less Calvinist. A multi-faceted complexity of mineral, spice, flowers and fruits; it also brings pleasure *sensually*, and like all the best dry Rieslings it so-happens not to be sweet; it doesn’t have to scream “I’m dry, I’m really fucking DRY!” It shows a long clinging inner perfume and a savory brown-butter finish with nuances of juniper. Bravo.

2012 Dautenpflänzer Riesling Feinherb + SOS : 1

GKF-185

From the same raw material as the GG, but from a component that wouldn’t ferment dry; it’s every bit as “Grand” in a slightly different style, more exotic and Ali-Baba perfumed, tangy and salty, could even have been 5g sweeter (!)...

2012 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett + SOS : 2

GKF-179

CORE-LIST WINE. A mere 89° Oechsle, as always this is like a Berg Roseneck in smaller form; pure Fiji and pink-lady apples, the classic yellow roses, a glorious enticing fragrance of vanilla beans. When this is *on* it’s emblematic for old-school German Riesling. Taste it and tell me it’s OK for this species to die—if you can!

2012 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : 2

GKF-186

One lot from a mid-slope parcel with loess. Some *sponti*, exceptionally creamy, magnificent complexity and stature; spicy length, pear crystals and Parm crystals and candied violets. The parcel is called “Rosa” after a former owner, and is the steepest section of the vineyard. Rumpf’s wines are sometimes cheetahs, but this one is a lioness.

I want you to know about loess, so please see Weingart’s text for an explication of this remarkable soil.

2012 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GKF-182

CORE-LIST WINE. Two lots picked a month apart—the second one very late. One of the wines fermented much further and was solid and exotic in a Scheu direction. Blending produced a wine on-the-drier-side vis a vis most modern Spätlese yet still with the exotic citric-cassis and white nectarine tones of the site. A queenly sort of wine, with a certain beam and glow.

2012 Scheurebe Spätlese
SOS : 2

GKF-181

I happen to have learned these grapes are a mixture of Würzburg and Alzey clones. *There’s* a piece of otiose information with which you can bamboozle your wine friends. As often this wine’s a lot like Riesling with chef’s-special-sauce, some mix of papayas, vetiver and sage; slinky and slithery but not as id-suffused as the kinky `11.

2012 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese “Goldkapsel”, 12/375ml + +
SOS : 4

GKF-187H

You may have noticed a dearth of Auslesen in this offering. That’s partly because the vintage gave very few of them, but also because we buy very few of them. So when I offer one it’s because I fell in total slobbering love with it.

This was intended as Eiswein, picked at minus-6° Celsius but not quite frozen solid. Still, 125° Oechsle, and it shows a lovely subtle Eiswein touch from “completely impeccable grapes.” There’s mass yet delicacy; it’s concentrated yet transparent; quince paste and comice pear.

2012 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml + +
SOS : 4

GKF-188H

“The best in the history of the estate,” they said. And thinking back to `08 and `02, they have a case to make. 100% clean fruit picked December 15th; not a mega-must weight but swoony and elegant and essence-of-pear. Either I froth and spume to the bottom of the page or we leave it at: a nearly perfect Eiswein in a form you can drink *down*.

Older Vintages

They know I look for these. We tasted a slew of things, including '04, '06 and '07, all showing great. But I want to wait ten years, so you can see fine Rieslings in their *adult* form, as opposed to being merely no-longer-infantile.

So: two wines. Small quantities. *Ridiculous* prices.

2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese + + **SOS : 1**

GKF-189

Forget that word “Auslese;” this is absolutely stunning Riesling as firm and solid and as dry as today's Kabinetts. Close to as good as it gets.

2003 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese + **SOS : 1**

GKF-083

Really, what was anyone thinking slamming this vintage on some sort of principle? This wine is lively and absurdly youthful; jasmine and osmanthus, just gorgeous. I see when I first noted it I gave a drinking window—as I did in those days—of “six [to] twenty years.” Well here it is ten years later and the wine is nowhere near any sort of peak. It's just gliding against gravity, serenely upward.

Schlossgut Diel

Nahe // Burg Layen



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

A bit of context for anyone recently arrived ...



Until not very long ago, Armin Diel was what my New York friends would call a *Macher*; influential, a personage, a man of consequence. He was the author of several books and the editor of the leading German wine guide, the Gault-Millau. He is also the peer of many leading European wine estate proprietors, and is also connected to people we'd call "movers and shakers." You'd not be surprised, when tasting

one of his wines at the estate, to learn it had been served at the wedding of the daughter of the CEO of Mercedes-Benz—that sort of thing.

Armin has eased back into a more private life, and his daughter Caroline has assumed control of the estate. She is a great hero of mine, because with her connections (not mention looks and charm and smarts) she could have done

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. These are more studiously brilliant, more explicit; they're no less pure, but it's another kind of purity. I'm tempted to wonder whether Diel's are the Nahe wines Hans-Günter Schwarz might have made had he not made Pfalz wines.

any number of Dolly-girl jobs, but she chose instead to get her hands dirty working as a vintner. When you see her in my film, you'll know right away why she inspires me so.

Slowly it's easier to approach and discern the wines qua wines, without the "omigod-DIEL" star-struck-ness one may have felt before. These wines indeed have quite a lot of aristocratic polish, but so do other wines, and these are also delicious and not the least bit haughty. Ten years from now Caroline will be sailing along on a reputation for which she is primarily responsible, and so I encourage you to look ahead.

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," says Armin.

In my book I wrote 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 many 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.

2012 Rosé de Diel, 6/750ml

GSD-135

SOS : 1

Especially winsome and comely this year, as pretty as it gets. Like letting Margaine's Rosé go still; fraises de bois, dewy, a birdy cool morning.

2011 Pinot Noir "Caroline," 6/750ml +

GSD-143

SOS : n/a

"We make sure not to pick higher than 95° Oechsle because otherwise you get these marmalade flavors," says Caroline. Indeed hers is a classic Old World PN, on the *cool* side and very sophisticated. This '11 is a total sweetheart, sandalwood and soy and a delicate mélange of pink duck breast and 5-spice; sweet tannin and less new oak than before.

2012 Riesling Trocken "Nahestein," 6/750ml (+)

GSD-136

SOS : 0

The estate's basic dry Riesling is completely delicious, grains and sweet straw and rock-dust similar to the '11, but this is especially fragrant with thick, expressive fruit. As always, not too cold please. This could be rather more steely after filtration and bottling; too bad we can't sell it in kegs.

2012 Riesling Dorsheim Trocken, 6/750ml

GSD-137

SOS : 0

This village wine is the baby form of the GGs, far more mineral now and with more of Rieslings basic craggy profile. Nahestein is derived from grain and straw while this is hewn from the cliffs; it's greener also, more woodruff and osmanthus, lime zest also, and a stony finish that some tasters might find austere.

2012 Pittermännchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

GSD-147

2012 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

GSD-146

2012 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

GSD-139

SOS : n/a

Armin fusses at me that I visit too early for these "serious" wines to be properly appraised. This year he was part-right: **Pittermännchen** was really mean and phenolic and opaque, but **Burgberg** while cerebral, was ultra-violet and digital, micro-pixelated, a very dry Riesling of scruple and stature. Though it was just one of three components of the final wine. **Goldloch** has the most fruit and its few grams of RS are helpful; there's still a serious interplay of smooth stone and dried apricot, and it will be the grandest of the three.

2012 Riesling Goldloch “Tradition,” 6/750ml + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GSD-138

This wine is an “accident,” in fact one component of the GG that refused to ferment dry—or fully dry. I didn’t ask, and don’t want to know what it has for RS, because the wine is entirely perfect. Delicious, serious, spicy, with the crunch-crystals of pears and Parm. Why oh *WHY* isn’t this the prevailing style of serious German Riesling?

There was some discussion of whether it would be bottled at all, as it could prove immensely useful as a blending partner. But they let me taste it, and needn’t have.

2012 Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2

GSD-134

CORE-LIST WINE. It’s drier than the ‘11, and contains what would have been the Pittermännchen Kabinett (and shows it) whose quantity was too slight to bottle alone. The wine is so clever and wise; peach and apple, crisp and crunchy and slatey and talc-y. The suit is elegant, the shoes are shined, but the face is open and grinning and delighted to see you.

2012 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Kabinett, 6/750ml +
SOS : 2

GSD-148

Here’s a big ripe apricot wine, loaded with fruit and vanilla-bean.

2012 Scheurebe Spätlese, 6/750ml +
SOS : 2

GSD-141

The final vintage; the vineyard was small and though we could have bought the whole production, which wasn’t a lot, we didn’t because stellar as it was, the price was sufficient-to-give-pause. Still, I’m sad to see it go. This ‘12 has a delicate fragrance for Scheu, but it’s classy, more of an angular Riesling with a tic of elderflower and mango. A polite farewell, with *triste*.

2012 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese, 6/750ml + (+)
SOS : 2

GSD-140

Cooler, more complex and overtly mineral than the baroque apricotty Kabinett. There’s talc and pear here, and the salt-crystal richness of aged Comté; it was in fact picked *earlier* than the Kabinett—remember, though “Spätlese” *means* “late-picked,” in reality it’s all about the must-weight, and a Kabinett from marginal land could well be harvested later than Spät or even Auslesen from the sirloin plots. This wine’s still ample, as Goldloch always is, but with greater refinement and composure. Aristocratic, in short.

2012 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml + +
SOS : 3

GSD-142

The riper they get the cooler they seem; this has banana and Asian pear notes; it’s filigree and almost lacy, with perfectly integrated botrytis nuances. Auslese at its most serene and elegant.

2003 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese (Auction Wine), 6/750ml + + (+)
SOS : 3

GSD-144

“The best 2003s will make fools of every person who doubted this vintage,” I said. Whereupon Armin fixed me with a gestalt eye-lock and said “Exactly that.”

But I can appreciate young wine drinkers not knowing what to make of *monumental* wines, as we have only an incipient sense of what that entails. Nor is there a literature to fire our imaginations. I’ll take a teeny stab at it at the end of the catalogue, but for now... This was the auction lot of Spätlese, and it’s a great statement of ‘03 at its very best; just emerging into tertiary beeswax and chamomile, and still some sweetness to lose (It’s only ten, after all!) but it’s long as blazes and with the special ripeness of the dessicated berries. You can call it magnificent: I just did.

Rheingau

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



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

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

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau’s real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Nahe and the Mosel, but the truth is there’s no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines

are as fascinatingly different from one another’s as Rauenthal’s are from Winkel’s, as Erbach’s are from Hallgarten’s—all of them. Taste any of these as they should be, and you’ll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The “classic” wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is not: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it’s not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for “experts” who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like polished, impeccable, aristocratic sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them big scores? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he’s less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the cheapest guy in town!—that a wine content to merely make a “statement” seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I’m quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

Josef Leitz

Rheingau // Rudesheim



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

Back to basics.

When I first came here in 1991 the estate was barely five hectares and nobody had heard of Johannes Leitz. I got nostalgic for that quiet and intimacy, and so this year I arranged to visit alone, with my wife but without colleagues, just so we could taste quietly and catch up.

A lot of you know Johannes—or Yo-Zee as his pals refer to him—and you know he is quite the Personality. But I had lost a little of the basic accord that drew us together to begin with, and what made me lonesome for it was seeing Leitz in the film. The camera appeared to expose him. It certainly made him quite beautiful. Of the many surprises I received when first viewing the raw footage, none was greater than to see Leitz again, his sweet face and those boy-like eyes.

After the work was done we had a little supper, just the three of us, and again we went to the Krug. It's cozy and the wine list is an Aladdin's cave for a guy who likes old wine. Johannes had located a couple of '53s, my birth year, and I found a '64, his birth year, and it would have been terribly valedictory except that the wines were soul-shatteringly fantastic.

He'll be fifty next year. He's been in the thick of the crazy-busy life phase, and he's just now beginning to

inhale again, and I tell you because I think you can taste it in the wines. They have always been good in a rather overtly exciting way, but since the 2009 vintage they've gone deeper, they peel for longer, with resonant mystic church-bell overtones.

It's good to see him at home,

Lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-wineguy can obscure some of what gets you there—any clod can climb on a plane—and what got Johannes Leitz there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

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

Josef Leitz at a glance // Universally regarded as one of the three stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

how the wines taste // His wines are like he himself is, a mixture of serious and playful, finesse and earthiness, open and robust but also earnest and commanding. They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." And it's not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz's lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type—when it's true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes' wines taste "sweet." They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are intensely fragrant, as though they wished to convince you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don't show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn't get there with bazillions of yen or with megatechnology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.



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 red slaty soil with quartzite, like a Mosel-Rheingau marriage. ROSENECK is the fruit euphoria, with lyric and gracious aromas from quartzite with flecks of slate. ROTTLAND is lower down; the wines are massive and brooding and earnest; Riesling as Serious Business.

Above these Grand Crus lie the DRACHENSTEIN (above the Roseneck) and the recently reclaimed BERG KAISERSTEINFELS (above the Schlossberg). To their east, rising imposingly behind Rüdesheim itself, sit a range of sites on richer soils ranging from limestony loess in the MAGDALENENKREUZ to a similar soil but mixed with slate in the KLOSTERLAY. Rüdesheim is an open-air living museum of *terroir*!

The Dry Rieslings

These are uniformly delicious, which is an achievement in itself. But the greater achievement in my view is how peacefully they coexist with the *not-dry* wines, and how intuitively he knows just what each type of wine needs. It's a model for how German Riesling should be, both idioms getting love and respect, and each being used when it is *called for*, and each supporting the other to underscore how miraculously Riesling can thrive at every level of dryness or sweetness.

2012 Eins Zwei Dry Riesling “3”

GJL-209

SOS : 0 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

CORE-LIST WINE. The best everyday dry Riesling I've tasted from Germany to date. Whereas it used to come from a single-site (and Grand Cru) called Geisenheimer Rothenberg, it's now a trans-regional cuvée with Rothenberg in the majority; bright mineral aromas, less rhubarb and vetiver than before; the palate is spicy and juicy, and it's wonderfully cunning to do a fully dry Riesling at 50° N latitude and have it be *this* delicious. It remains grainy and rye-barley like with a balsamy nuance and a mélange of fruits and shade-grown herbs.

2012 Rudesheimer Riesling Trocken

GJL-210

SOS : 0

This is the “village” wine, the mid-tier to lead into the Crus, but in fact it's all Bischofsberg, and is typically smoky and herbal with a bit of mint, lovely mouth-filling length, resinous and atmospheric

The Dry Grand Crus

2012 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling “Ehrenfels,” 6/750ml +

GJL-219

2012 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling “Hinterhaus,” 6/750ml + +

GJL-218

2012 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling “Katerloch,” 6/750ml + (+)

GJL-217

2012 Rudesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling “Terrassen,” 6/750ml + + (+)

GJL-215

SOS : n/a

Each of these is a micro-parcel name that is more meaningful than the over-extended “single-sites” established by the fatuous 1971 wine law.

Ehrenfels belongs to the BERG SCHLOSSBERG, and this 2012 shows gorgeous minerality and cool apple-y fruit, a delicious and somewhat studious dry Riesling, fine-boned and chiseled; pine-woody mid-palate leads to an adamantly mineral finish. But for all its tensile energy, there a sense of something melting.

Hinterhaus is the top parcel in the BERG ROTTLAND, and the wine shows the leathery rusk-y savory aroma of a Kellerberg in the Wachau, lovely dark cooking smells; the palate is a miracle, to get this density, capaciousness and power without massive alcohol is no small thing! Nut-butter and the mousse from a flavorful bird. You can study it or just yield to its animal joy. Either way it's crazily long and the finish is a vapor of terroir, deliberate and fascinating.

Katerloch (“tomcat”) is a concave heat-trap bowl in the heart of the BERG ROSENECK. My sample had been filtered a few days before, and its aromas were a little muted, but the quartzite rocky tang was evident and the palate is tense and springy, the least evolved of the four Crus but with the potential to become almost eucalyptus-minty and stony; the finish is long and still finding its focus.

Terrassen is rapidly becoming one of Germany's very best dry Rieslings year-in year-out; it hails from the high-up BERG KAISERSTEINFELS, a vineyard reclaimed by Leitz when he intuited that it could be singular and remarkable in the climate-change era. It's his life-project, and last year alone he spent a hundred thousand Euros to rebuild the terrace walls. Perhaps it's obscure to you to contemplate someone investing to build walls that will last 600 years, where future humans will look at them and think “That guy took care of his land,” but the Europeans take a longer view than we do. In any case the wine is derangedly good, utterly euphoric fragrance; quartz, flowers and balsam, it's the stunning blue-eyed bride of the handsome Rottland groom; the girl is frisky and wicked-smart, and cool as he is he hardly can believe she's there at his side. It (or she) is beguilingly charming—for a moment there's *nothing* you'd rather be doing than drinking this very wine, you can hardly bear to put the glass down, the wine is so ludicrously delicious, interesting and long.

Wines with Sweetness (but not “sweet” wines!)

2012 “Dragonstone” Riesling +
SOS : 1

GJL-213

CORE-LIST WINE. It’s almost insane how this wine keeps improving. The usual kirsch and lime flavors are now in the finest conceivable form: barely perceptibly sweet. Pointed yet creamy, salty and minty; animated and seductive and with all the density of `12

2012 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 1

GJL-212

CORE-LIST WINE. The `12 richness and weight gives a lot of middle to a wine that’s sometimes almost constricted by its Altoid mintiness; this really is the best vintage ever, loads of lemon and eucalyptus but with a dense doughy mirabelle cream and saltiness. Vinous and rich.

2012 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese +
2012 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml +
2012 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L +
SOS : 2

GJL-220

GJL-220H

GJL-220M

CORE-LIST WINE. Our “Maggie” is a classic Rheingau wine; for all its fruit it shows a kind of serenity that can be misread as stoic but is actually just a genial repose and good posture. This `12 has high-toned green apple fragrances, a serene fruit-driven palate, as graceful as a swan; long and talc-y, and the first wine with a sweet finish. Echoes of the kirsch and mint from the Dragonstone.

2012 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese + + (+)
SOS : 2

GJL-216

Since this was Gault-Millau’s Spätlese of the year several years ago, Johannes is aware it is now iconic, and the last several vintages have been profoundly beautiful Rieslings.

I recently found and drank a 2002 from Leitz, a Schlossberg Spät that was meant to be dry and didn’t quite get there, and drinking it I was reminded that:

- A. *The guy didn’t just start making stellar wines, but has done it for years, and*
- B. *The wines were different before, more assertive and extroverted. It’s like the difference between wanting to show you are a “good writer” and so you shove a bunch of “good writing” into your prose, and being so engaged by your material that you want your writing to serve it by disappearing into it.*

Thus the Roseneck in my glass gave the impression of having arrived wholly formed and with its divinity intact. The aromas are immediately sublime. There’s a stillness like Dönnhoff’s Brücke, a breath of the unseen and unknowable. A journey from the fruit-driven entry to the quartz-dust finish; the sweetness melted seamlessly into the extract and mineral so it registers as pears and Reggiano together in your mouth; the classic repose of the Rheingau—it seems to glide almost pensively, yet it contains so much information, some of it explicit and some of it mysterious. A wine so alive that your life rises to meet it.

Spreitzer

Rheingau // Oestrich



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

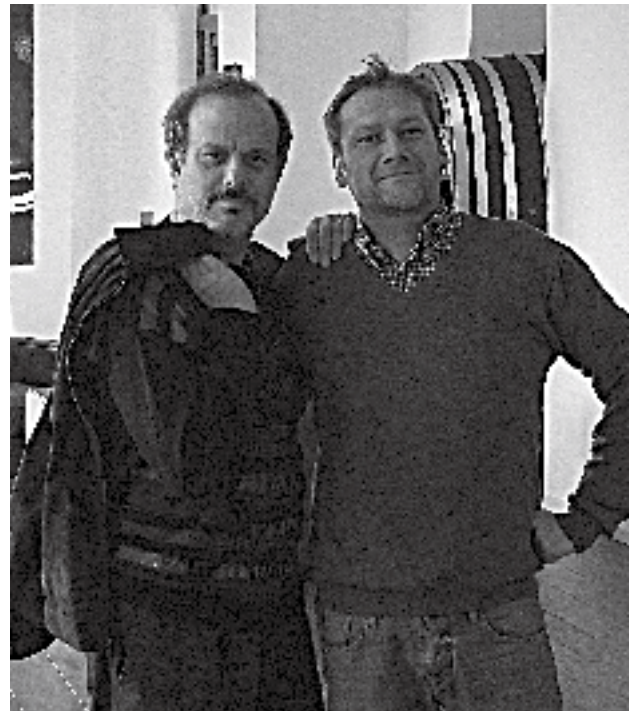
I wrote myself a note in my tasting book. “It’s getting to the point the wines are the wines – why grope for associations year after year?” The blank page glowers at you, and you feel compelled to write “apples, violets, crawdads moldering on a humid pier...” And then you see you wrote the same thing a year ago. I guess you could do the tasted twice, consistent notes trope, but that always seemed pompous to me.

I mean, this is a good thing; it shows how consistent the wines are, and in the Rheingau this is no small matter. The list of estates one can rely on is not exactly huge.

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.

The wines certainly speak in the prevailing “syntax” of the times: crystalline, refined, perfumey and polished. These are Rheingau wines as Diel might make them. Indeed it could be their diametrically opposed personalities to Leitz’s wines which allows the two to coexist so benignly, without “competition” (the close friendship between the two helps I’m sure!). Where Johannes’ wines are ruggedly individual, Andreas and Bernd’s wines are, in the best sense, fashionable,



spiffy, well turned-out. Thankfully the two of *them* are plenty unpretentious.

The wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined and they often show reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

Spreitzer at a glance // Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

how the wines taste // They’re polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

2012 Lenchen “Rosengarten” Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml

GSP-086

SOS : 0

As a rule the Rosengarten is among the least demanding and most forthcoming of Germany’s self-serious Rieslings; reliably juicy and explosive, it’s a virtual lip smacker. I tasted this `12 painfully early but even then, the aromas were compelling.

2012 Wisselbrunnen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + (+)

GSP-089

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Wisselbrunnen, a more solid and demanding wine is atypically stunning right out of the gate. It has its rusky nutty fragrance, more actual and physio sweetness, and its normally crackly texture is mitigated by the extract thickness of the vintage. A vivid, almost brash interplay of salts and grains. I suspect these two wines will draw together after bottling, but for now this one has the edge.

2012 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +

GSP-090

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Think of it as Feinherb. It’s a juicy and wonderful rendition of this superb vineyard; all of its iris and wisteria and sassafrass, and a slinky salty stern earthy minerality; a long and remarkably attractive finish.

2012 Riesling “101”

GSP-083

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. It’s in the Feinherb idiom, so no perceived sweetness but the fruit extends across the middle and lets the mineral emerge on the finish, which is very long and suave. A laudably forthright polished “basic” wine with cool apple and apple skin, a slap on the back of lusty flavor yet with big city manners.

2012 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

GSP-085

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. Follows the trend toward drier and drier Kabs, in this case correctly; you have apples instead of peaches and a raciness in place of a great gush of fruit. It’s more *Rheingau* in character now. But still a fruit-driven Riesling rather than pebbles and scree.

2012 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese + +

GSP-088

SOS : 2

This is what’s meant by a “proud” wine; it’s the most *Rheingau-y* Rheingau wine I offer. As sweet as it is, it’s subsumed almost all that fructose, and after a riotously flowery entry it swallows all of it into a massive, chewy broody body, almost stolid but the psychedelically expressive floweriness gives it a sheen. Profundity is a kind of forgotten concept now. Instead we have our “intensity” or “novelty” and I think we don’t know how to recognize or receive profundity. It isn’t entertaining or ironic. But it’s OK to be serious for a second, and look what a wine can be.

2012 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese “303,” 6/750ml +

GSP-087

SOS : 3

From a sub-parcel called *Eisenberg* (iron-hill) from which a TBA was picked in 1921 with the then-record must-weight of 303°. Though there’s often botrytis in this wine, the `12 was clean and had 99° Oechsle with a markedly high 33g/l of dry extract. It’s as it always is: spicy, lavish, ferrous, minty and on the sweet side, though it’s more pointed than luscious.

2012 Hallgartener Würzgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml + + (+)

GSP-091H

SOS : 4

Spreitzers are *geniuses* at sweet wines! They had a rapturously pretty Auslese from the 303 parcel as well as a BA from elsewhere in Lenchen, both of them cool and pure. I envy the Chinese and Japanese people who will drink them, because they’re somehow infra dig for us. But no way I could resist this Eiswein. Picked December 13th, it’s a wine of unimaginable, nearly unbearable purity; the fruit of the utter divine, liquid wisteria and almond paste; flavors play at a pitch only dogs can hear.

Mittelrhein

The Rhine valley between Bingen and Koblenz is a UNESCO World Heritage Zone, and if you're a tourist "doing" Germany you're bound to see it. Yet for all the visitors it receives, it's become rather sleepy as a wine region.



That's actually *due* to the tourism, because the taverns and steamship lines drove the prices down to the point the grower couldn't make a living in such steep land. Marginal vineyards were abandoned—and not only marginal vineyards. But there's signs it may have bottomed out, as Weingart told me the vineyard acreage had actually increased of late.

It's a wide sort of gorge the river cuts between the Taunus hills on its right bank and the Hunsrück hills

on its left. There are riverfront vineyards and others snaking off into lateral valleys heading for the hills. Soils run to slate and quartzite in general, and the wines taste like fuller-bodied Mosels. There are very few "names" here, and the ones that do exist need to charge prices commensurate with their costs, which are quite high in the perpendicular land. But I'm glad I went, because otherwise I'd never have met my hero—about whom you're about to read...

Florian Weingart

Mittelrhein // Boppard-Spay

vineyard area // 6.5 hectares

annual production // 3,300 cases

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

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

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

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



He really was the hero in the film. Or so I thought. Beard a wagging, he had the most trenchant insightful things to say, and in the last couple vintages he's been backing it up with some of the loveliest wines in this offering.

We're a couple of salmons, him and me; we never met a stream we wouldn't try to swim up, against every sensible current. Florian's little revolution takes two forms. One, he's resisting the urge to grow the estate, and wants in fact to *shrink it down* to about 4 hectares (10 acres) because then he can do much of the vineyard work himself. Not for him, the task of being "winery sales manager," schlepping hither and yon to this fair and that, hawking his wares. Nor is he eager to be an "estate administrator" giving people orders to do things he'd prefer to do himself. He is, in his unassuming way, enacting an example of the world he wants to live in. I love this.

"I'll be 40 this year," he says. "Time to become what you're going to be."

Second, he's been bucking the dry-wine trend lately, and making wines he feels to be better balanced. There's still a few Trockens in the offering—as there should be—and they take their place with wines of other styles. Not for him the "totalitarianism of taste" he wrote to me about. His assortment of wines is perfect, unconstrained by the prevailing asswad ideology, instead spreading itself neatly over an ecumenical range of styles—just what Riesling was destined to do before the Trocken Stasi put it in a choke-hold.

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.

And there's an overlay of loess in certain vineyards, giving its usual sweet-grainy charm.

If you don't know about this soil, you should; it's extremely important in northern Europe, as a soil for Riesling and in Austria saliently for Grüner Veltliner. Quoting from the helpful website *terroir-hessen*, loess is "[an] ice age dust found in vineyard soils. Storm winds winnowed the fine dust particles from gravel beds deposited by wide rivers. The dust dropped out of the wind in shielded locations accumulating to thick loess beds. Loess mostly consists of silt particles (diameter 0.02 to 0.0063 mm) and contains quartz, feldspar, mica, various clay minerals and a lot of calcium carbonate. Iron oxides give the loess its yellow brown colour."

So while Weingart's wines are steep-slope wines, from vineyards that *look* as though they should give Mosel-like bottlings, in fact they are more like a hybrid of Mosel and the northern Pfalz, as if the Pfalz wine had been hitting the gym.

And there are *no wines* in this offering that are more useful and tasty at the table. NONE!

Florian Weingart at a glance // A risen star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Still-good value for in-your-face fruity-minerally steep-slope wine.

how the wines taste // They're urgent above all; these are wines that move, that push and pull on the palate. Then tropically fruity, vanilla, papaya, mango in the ripest wines. With the 1996 vintage a new minerality came; you feel it on the sides of the palate, and it sets up a call-and-response of fruit and stone that keeps you returning to the wine just when you were done attending to it. These are smiling, cheerful wines, but now perhaps with a fundamental intelligence that makes you want to spend lots of time with them.



2012 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett Feinherb ++

GAW-113

SOS : 1 // **AN ABSURDLY PERFECT FOOD-WINE, SOMMS!**

Oh, that's a lot of words. We suggested calling it "Angel Rock" (which is what Engelstein means). You should call it that when you order it. *Because you're a fool if you don't order it.* Once again, it is completely perfect and delightful, the loess really shows, or rather it's a mosaic of slate and loess with even a limestone component and in one parcel a kind of elbow of volcanic ash; the fragrance is complex and euphoric, talc, jasmine, freesia, slate – not unlike Margaine's Champagnes. The finish is a deliberate afterglow of mineral with an echo of malt and semolina.

2011 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Spätlese Feinherb ++

GAW-110

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

How is he doing it??? One beauty after another. This one's slatier and "cooler," more malic and shade-green and green tea, more detailed and filigree, but with uncanny balance and clarity.

2012 Spay Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +

GAW-115

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

More persimmon and 5-spice here; it's riper and thus the *gestalt* is drier than the Kabinett; it's also thicker and more serious, more sheer stuff here. But sheesh: that fragrance! The whole back half of the wine is dry and more blatantly mineral; the wine is more determined, but also seductively aromatic and compellingly charged; is it gorgeous, is it stern, is it both?

2012 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett

GAW-114

SOS : 2

Bright and meyer-lemony, mirabelle too; frisky and deliscious; the sweetness is prominent but balanced; lots of melody and gaiety here.

2012 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese (+)

GAW-116

SOS : 2

Loessy aromas almost suggest Veltliner; angular papaya and tapioca fruit just blasting all over this. I'm drinking a room-temperature cloudy tank sample, but when it's slimmed by filtration and bottling, and served cold, it won't be nearly so sultry.

Mosel

Back before they built the tunnel under Bernkastel, the old road brought you to an abrupt and jaw-dropping view of the steep slopes. You descended down through the slaty woods, streams and trees and the curvy road, and then wham, it hit you: perpendicular goddamn vineyards, rows of vertical stakes in a straight line up unbelievably to the sky.

One year I drove a few colleagues to the Mosel, on a low spitty sort of gloomy November evening, and a guy who'd never indicated an emotional bone in his body couldn't stop exclaiming. *It's like a religious experience.*

This love, though, is not unclouded. The Mosel is a narrow valley with a highly cohesive culture, which sometimes isn't pretty. In a couple days we heard about a vintner who'd had a break-in in his cellar, in which a cask of precious wine was vandalized. Narrow, spiteful, vindictive, all the things that grow when the air isn't as fresh as it might be; the shadow-side of the admirable cohesion.

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.*

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.

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

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

Selbach-Oster

Mosel // Zeltingen

Mosel

Selbach-Oster



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

Please read this. It's important. I know you're busy and this is a lot of text, but it is the core of my work and my life. I think it will aid you in yours, too.

Again Johannes was in-the-zone across an entire vintage. His new vintage stands with the Great Ones, 2001, 2005 (the best of all time), 2007 and now 2012. Normally I wouldn't fuss over this—I have other vintners who manage consistent stellar performance – but this is Mosel, land of a million zillion parcels and an unwieldy range of different wines, and believe me, it isn't easy to do. And it is especially not easy to do when even your *dry* wines were outstanding, for which Selbach-Oster should receive a Nobel Prize for Improbability.

If you're new to this estate, or even this entire idiom, I will emphasize what makes Selbach-Oster unique. For they are. It can sound facile to say they make Mosel "classics," yet they do, and it isn't facile, because not many people do it. Oh sure, lots of estates make *their* types of Mosel classics, but Selbach makes the kinds of wines you'd send out into space to show folks on other planets what this kind of wine tasted like, un-impinged upon by someone's need to write their *signature* in bold script.

The wines aren't neutral; they are respectful and intelligent. They are flexible and pragmatic, they aren't burdened with any ideology but are willing to adopt whatever works in the particular circumstances of

particular wines. They are often keenly expressive yet they are always actual beverages for human beings to drink and to use in our lives, not specimens of adorableness by which "high scores" are obtained.

Three things have to be present: Intelligence, memory and desire. Intelligence to steer a sensible way through all the noise about how-wines-are-made, the incoherent dialectic in which the strongest opinions are held by the dumbest people. Memory, to hold in your soul the vision of Mosel-Riesling as a being of a special nature, a beacon of meaning toward which you steer. And desire, to get there, because even if you are already there, even if all you have to do is *get out of the way*, it never feels like you're arrived, it always feels like you're traveling.

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

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.

the fruit asks for. Tilt as needed. Flexibility and pragmatism are not excuses for lack of principle; they are principles.

What brings this to mind is my mulling over the “landscape” of Selbach’s 2011s, a lot of different wines to be sure, a lot of very *good* wines, a handful of amazing wines, but most of all, again: the Whole. Following on the hot heels of the outstandingly successful and exciting 2010s, these ‘11s are calmer, as if to say “Well that was thrilling but it’s a relief to be cruising again.”

Of course *cruising* in Selbach’s context means a steady hand over a large delightful family of perfectly wonderful, pure, helpful, interesting and delicious Mosel Rieslings. Several of them are blow-you-away wines, and most of them are like a kindly force that builds and consolidates, into something that feels like depth and even love.

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We were a group in the little parlor Selbachs still use as a tasting room. We had gotten up to the *en-bloc* trio of Anrecht, Rotlay and Schmitt, parcels I’d pointed out to Gabe and Valerie during a vineyard walk the day before. Johannes was asked where the idea had come from.

This is the spirit of what he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I spend the best part of a whole day tasting Johannes’ vintage. Not only because there are a lot of wines – and variations of many – but because I find it important to taste these with nowhere else I have to go. There is something in them that builds, which you don’t find if you’re in a hurry. They take you inexorably toward wordlessness. The more you know, the less there is to say, or that needs to be said.

Reality, after all, is simple – it's just real. There it is. It is simple, but man is it elusive. Because when we encounter it, we're often confused or even annoyed.

Often I go through the membrane into a mystic zone when tasting at Selbach. The wines consolidate into a great chord of beauty, and they do so in an especially allusive way; they crawl in your windows while you're running to get the door. Selbach's wines aren't like books of poems, where you can dip in here and there or dog-ear your favorites; they're more like novels, where you can certainly indicate passages you like especially, but where you can't just start reading any old where. Any given vintage is a whole story of which individual wines are scenes or sometimes chapters.

One morning I came in from my daily tromp and I must have been glowing. Johannes' wife Barbara met me at the door, saying "Well look at you!" and I said something about how beautiful it was up there in the vineyards, and Barbara said something sweet and memorable; when Johannes returns from his many travels he is often renewed and heartened by having such a lovely place to call home. I

have a range of producers along the Mosel, and I love all their wines, but none of them embodies a sense of home with more purity than Selbach. As much and as often as Johannes flies hither and yon selling wine, he has somehow managed to remain more profoundly anchored to Home than anyone I know. Not just to his particular dwelling, but to the holistic being of Zeltingen and the Mosel valley. Do his wines express this anchoring? Of course they do. It is why they themselves are so grounded. Can I explain how this occurs? Not really. I doubt if even Jo can.

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

A Look at the Vineyards

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

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

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

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

ZELTINGER SONNENUHR is the Premier Grand Cru. Basically All Of The Above; slate, lime, apple, butter-vanilla, rich, almost chewy earthiness, great depth. Some parcels are prized by locals as the best sites in the entire Bernkastel-Zeltingen ramp—DOKTOR notwithstanding! These wines are fullbodied. Selbachs are now the primo owners in this great site, and have inaugurated an era of selective harvesting and a quality potential such as we have never before seen.

When I reached the Mosel this year it was three days after the great European snowstorm, and I could see which were the warmest vineyards by when the snow had melted. This one was bare, except for one or two small parcels facing away from south. Most of Wehlener Sonnenuhr was bare also, as were the best (steepest) parts of Domprobst and (Graacher) Himmelreich, but Bernkastel was still white.

An Admittedly Unruly Offering, But Your Intrepid Importer Seems to Have Trouble Walking Away from Masterpieces

Note: we begin with some 2011s, one of which is being offered for the first time. Johannes opted to make more dry wines (for his domestic market) from the small-sized 2012 crop, and these beauties were still to be had.

2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “Alte Reben”

GSO-420

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This fermented for over a year, and was intended to go dry. Sometimes the wine gets to have the final word. It's crunchy and vinous and full of brothy leesy mojo, salty and incisive. Alsace flavors without Alsace burliness; manly but streamlined; pistachio and balsam and an exotic woodsy-slatey finish. If it's OK for a wine to be *interesting*, this one is.

2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

GSO-385

2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml

GSO-385H

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This might as well be Feinherb; there's no perceptible RS. It's less outsized than the wacked-out '10, but contained and wholesome and balanced on the studiously dry side.

2011 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett (+)

GSO-378

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. A still-cloudy cask-sample, but solid and rich, on the dry side, yet not overstuffed – I mean, sure we *like* them overstuffed, but it's great to have a truly plausible Kabinett, with a cool delicate syrup of balsam-y green.

2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

GSO-388

2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml

GSO-388H

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

More slate-liqueur now, a creamy-salty texture that isn't at all sweet, but speaks directly to the Mosel soul.

Note: the 2012 is in the wings, to be offered in January 2014.

2011 Zeltlinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese +

GSO-389

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. Somewhat masculine and stern this year, almost adamant; some stainless steel in the vinification. But it has the '11 slatey dissolve and the fresh sweet-straw finish, which encompasses an archly pointed minerality.

Now to the 2012s, including the most amazing series of dry wines any Mosel grower except Adam has ever shown me.

2012 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken +

GSO-421

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

A fetching, polished aroma leads to a wonderfully herbal-fruity palate and a clear long incisive finish. A beautifully balanced charming wine that happens to be dry, and an object-lesson to others: this is how to do it right.

2012 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese* Trocken +

GSO-422

SOS : 0

The wine is now more solid, with broader shoulders, more grounded in mineral and *sous-bois*, but every bit as impressive; even more herbal (balsam, woodruff) and less apple-y; more intensity, power and sternness. While I'm not convinced that every “GG” has to be Serious Business, *this* wine delivers.

2012 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken +

GSO-423

SOS : 0

What? THREE dry wines? Well chua, when they're *this* good. All barrel this time, including one new one. As Sonnenuhr does, it's more warm and buttery, more vetiver and less balsam; a bit of ginger and a really seductive glow of fruit without pandering and gushing. A drier snap on the finish here. I personally think these three wines would make a *killer* flight to pour by-the-glass, if you think you got the *cojones*.

2012 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +

GSO-411

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Much of this site isn't killing steep, and Selbachs have been farming it organically for a number of years, not to gain "cred" but because they wanted to see whether it *could* be done, and now that it can, they'll keep doing it.

This wine is also unfinned, as are all the 2012s, and Johannes plans to discontinue fining for good. "If the wines don't need it, why do it?"

This wine has started to constitute a Franchise; it's been so stellar for so many years, and this is a superb vintage of this steady classic, as minty and pointed as always, peppermint and tarragon, but a thicker, denser body and greater mid-palate length. It seems drier than the Trockens. Likely the best vintage ever for this.

2012 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb "Uralte Reben" +

GSO-424

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Extremely old vines. And a glory of ungrafted Mosel genius; cox-orange and malt and a lovely sweet-salt richness; a clean *sponti*; from a section under the rocks near the Rotlay; the empty glass is the very essence of slate Riesling.

And now to the "sweet" stuff, except that Selbach's sweet wines are almost never "sweet..." I need to EMPHASIZE this point, as there's some push-back from y'all on the category "Spätlese" because of all the pimped-up stupid-sweet ones. These are wines for food, none of them even markedly sweet, let alone over-sweet.

2012 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett + + (+)

GSO-425

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Among the great Kabinetts of the vintage, my **WINE OF THE VINTAGE**, and one of the greatest Kabinetts I've ever tasted. It's creamy yet tense, a dialogue of fruit and mint and green tea, with an amazing tension of density and clarity. This would have been a *good* Auslese in the great 70s vintages. Potentially great wine—seriously, a "mere" Kabinett and all.

2012 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese + +

GSO-426

SOS : 2

What fruit! The best Selbach wine I've ever tasted from this vineyard, almost astonishing, and it meets Schildknecht's definition of "perfect:" better than which can not at this moment be imagined. Spice and a firm lushness, ungodly celestial apple and slate-honey on the finish.

2012 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese +

GSO-430

SOS : 2

Unusually this is mostly *fuder* this year, so the vivid flint and kirsch are inherent and not emphasized by stainless steel. Salty, lush but bracing, an almost chocolatey finish, tonka bean and mirabelle; a lip-smacker.

2012 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* + + (+)

GSO-414

SOS : 2

With a slinky vein of botrytis now, yet it works deeper and with richer fruit—not exotic, only a whiff of malt or cinnamon, but infinite dreamy depth, a wine of deliberate ecstatic flow, endorphin fruit, liquid love

2012 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese* + +
SOS : 3

GSO-427

Given that “Auslese” is (wrongly) considered useless, there’s ridiculous torque and force on this, and it’s one pointed undeflected jab of site-intensity; psychedelic green, long tall 7-foot high flavors; not at all a “sweet” wine, just assertive and strong, not voluptuous.

The bloc-harvested micro-parcels, with a text from Johannes telling you a bit about them:

“The soil in all three is obviously blue Devonian slate though **Rotlay** has the rockiest, shallowest and therefore driest soil as can be seen by the massive cliffs that hang over the vineyard and partially to its side. Rotlay also benefits the most from the wide water surface of the Mosel, especially since the river is dammed some 500 [METERS? KM?] downstream from Rotlay and provides a mirror effect for the sunshine back into the slope, plus some humidity from morning dew, which helps induce botrytis during autumn.

Schmitt is almost as steep, has also perfect southern exposure, but it has a deeper subsoil of crumbly, broken slate, mixed with organic matter and loam. The vineyard is more distant from the Mosel and gets less of the effect from the wide water surface but sits smack behind the church and the warm bodies of the village houses beneath which radiate warmth back into the vineyard (a privileged situation akin to that of the Bernkasteler Doctor).

Anrecht, while equally steep and also on a perfect southern angle, has the deepest subsoil of broken slate mixed with organic matter (humus) and loam. It is further away from river and village compared to Rotlay and Schmitt, hence a tad cooler but nonetheless excellent.

What I mean to translate with a mix of organic matter and loam is the German word “Feinerde” which literally translates into “fine earth” and that is a very valuable finely crumbled soil that combines the ability to warm up quickly, lets roots penetrate quickly and has good water storage capacity. In other words, “Feinerde” is a highly desirable component of the soil structure, especially if you have rocky soils.”

2012 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling “Anrecht,” 6/750ml + +
SOS : 3

GSO-410

Fuder and *sponti* for the first time. It adds a granular salty depth to the creamy high tones of this singular and amazing wine. A tantric orgy of mint and herbs.

2012 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling “Schmitt,” 6/750ml + + +
SOS : 3

GSO-412

In steel this year; not deliberately, just logistics, what was available at which time. But this wine has everything, an herbal-aloe fundament of Schlossberg, fabulous mintiness and an absurd equipoise of richness and cut; as digital as Dönnhoff’s Hermannshöhles, it resolves into a verbena-like finish that starts sweet and gets more green-tea like as it spreads and glows.

2012 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling “Rotlay,” 6/750ml + +
SOS : 3

GSO-413

Steel again, which seems to clarify the underlying rockiness of the site, which can be obscured by a lot of *sponti* jazz; it has the alpha-command and something of the solemnity of the “GG;” if Schmitt is the Hermannshöhle this is the Brücke.

2012 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml + (+)
SOS : 4

GSO-428H

Picked 12/12 at 8-below zero Celsius; poised and articulate and as focused and clear as Selbach’s Eisweins always are; a verbena liqueur, nervy and quivering and divine.

J&H Selbach Regionals

Tasting these, I witnessed the most stirring gesture of integrity I'd seen in many years.



These are commodity wines. For coastal hipsters they mean almost nothing, but vestiges of this market persist and are important. I can prove it in two words: *Schmitt Söhne*. This firm ships more wine to the States than any other, and nearly everything they ship is bulk commodity plonk. In earlier times they'd have borne labels like "Piesporter (this) and Bernkasteler (that)" whereas now they've got some German person's idea of a colorful "contemporary" name like *Koala Nipple-Clamps* or *Skid Mark Pink*, but it's the same bulk juice just prettied up for the hep young wine purchaser.

The small negotiant firm of J&H Selbach are minor players in this market. Because they're small, they're more sensitive to blips in the cost of grapes or juice, but they're also able (and willing) to pay a hands-on attention that's otherwise unheard of. For example, nearly 100% of their grape supply is under contract with growers they know and trust, and they're making the wines with more lees contact and with spontaneous fermentation. And so I wanted to taste the wines this year with the same attention I give to the wines I take "seriously," just to be sure they wouldn't tarnish my own hipitude.

Friend, they do honor to me, to you, and to Johannes, because taking *this* kind of care over *these* kinds of wines does not win you medals. It's just the things you do that no one sees, the manifold choices you decide to make with care and integrity because it's who you are. Every single one of these wines is sophisticated and has vinosity and most important, moderate residual sugar for the genre.

Good as they all are, the firsts-among-equals are the Piesporter Michelsberg, the "Fish-Label" Kabinett and the "Incline." Which warrants a small explication.

Just know but don't be concerned with those old "generic" names that looked like actual vineyards but weren't. Thank the wise elders who wrote the 1971 wine law for this abomination. Thus a wine called "Zeller Schwarze Katz" is in effect bulk wine grown vaguely in the area of Zell. Same with "Bernkasteler" or "Piesporter." The big companies often use Müller-Thurgau for this category—Selbach uses *only* Riesling.

Because no one has a monopoly over these names, it ends up being a race to the bottom who flogs the stuff at the lowest price. (We are not, by the way, those guys.) This is why people want to create their own "Brands" and why these have proliferated. In fact when Selbach introduced their "Fish-Label" I felt a certain dismay; the whole critter label thing was getting wearisome, and I thought it was beneath their dignity. Alas, the wines are very good, and if you buy the Kabinett you'll receive a wine that's *better* than even decent-to-good estate wine.

A wine like the "Incline" is a perfect wedding-reception wine if most of the guests aren't "wine people." It's tasty, doesn't cost a lot, it's easy-drinking, and someone somewhere will probably have cause to think *This wine is unusually good; I wonder what it is*. Why should those people drink crummy plonk? Show me what you give to your least pretentious customer, and I'll show you your integrity.

J&H Selbach

2012 Saar Riesling Spätlese

GSR-412

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

The Saar Riesling Spätlese doesn't really belong among these; it's a technicality of them not being estate-bottled. But this wine is outstanding and an almost laughable bargain.

It is bought in *fuder* from a single producer, a "name" estate who doesn't want his name known. I imagine he likes the cash-flow of selling these casks in bulk right at harvest time, but I don't care *why* he does it; I just reap the rewards—as can you.

It has the typical pink-grapefruit aroma of Saar Riesling. Look, I was on the Saar today, and this is the genuine article; on the dry side, slatey and citric and tangy, full of apple and tarragon, with the stuffing and complexity of '12. Entirely stylish, bracing and charming Riesling; compare it – if you wish – to Van Volxem's "Saar Riesling." I ain't scared.

2012 Bernkasteler Kurfurstlay Riesling

GSR-112

2012 Zeller Schwarze Katz Riesling

GSR-212

2012 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling

GSR-312

2012 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett

GSR-712

2011 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese

GSR-811

Selbach

2012 Riesling "Incline"

GSZ-042

2012 Riesling Dry (Fish Label)

GSZ-044

CORE-LIST WINE

2012 Riesling Kabinett (Fish Label)

GSZ-043

CORE-LIST WINE

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!*

Meulenhof / Erben Justen Ehlen

Mosel // Erden

Mosel

Meulenhof



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

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



There've been times when I wondered whether Stefan steered his wines toward the utmost fruit and let the other questions fall where they might. When his and my opinions diverged it was always right there: I liked the firmer more structured wines even if they had less fruit – because they all had enough fruit. He wondered at my coolness toward some of his bigger wines.

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

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.

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

After suffering hail damage in 2011, this poor guy had about *half* of that year's crop in 2012. Wehlen was especially hard-hit. This is nothing that affects the flavors

of the wines, but you have to feel for the man, and to appreciate how stoic they need to be in the face of nature's vagaries. The wines themselves are markedly generous, bearing in mind I'm tasting pre-bottled wine at room temperature. Still, my sense is Justen's '12s are marked by **bold print** fruit.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett
SOS : 2

GJU-137

CORE-LIST WINE. There were two, from different sections of the vineyard. Treppchen has parcels scattered steeply among red cliffs, and these are old and ungrafted. There's also an expanse of younger vines on an even hillside by the bridge; it's all Treppchen but the cliff vineyards give lavish tangerine-y peachy wine, and the bridge vineyards give cooler, walnut and granny smith apple wine.

I took the one from the ungrafted parcel, though it was richer and more Spätlese-like. Classically Justen, in fact, very fine and smooth and orange-tangelo.

2012 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese
SOS : 2

GJU-138

CORE-LIST WINE. This had just been filtered. Relatively mute. What was there was rich and correct and long in that deliberate '12 way; markedly analogue and fruit-driven, but this isn't the whole wine.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben + (+)
SOS : 2

GJU-139

Markedly more depth and stature than a "regular" E.T. Spät; it has the gravitas of many "GGs" with considerably more fruit and better balance; there's a warm buttered-toast mood here, if you drank a glass of *pêche-de-vigne* juice with it. The wine is solid, it has a thick trunk, but with air it gets more explicitly slatey and limey. Already impressive, if bottling tightens the structure and you drink it fridge-cold it could well be brilliant.

2012 Erdener Prälat Riesling Spätlese + (+)
SOS : 2

GJU-140

Though it's Auslese-sweet it also has the juicy salty mass of 2012. Young Prälat is often translucent and riddlesome, and I like wines with more outline and relief, and yet—who can deny the baroque intricacy of fruits and flowers? It has the creamy texture of the above Sonnenuhr, but experience shows this wine finds itself only in 15-20 years.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese +
SOS : 3

GJU-141

#107, it was the most impressive among a range of five Auslesen, with a healthy malty botrytis, and it really jumps over the Späts; the wine is solid, spicy and minty with a jittery energy impressive for a wine so rich. You could almost call it cool; wintergreen-y spark and a limey tartness in the finish.

Dry German Wine

The problem isn't the wines, many of which are good, and a few of which are stellar.

The problem is that "Trocken" is a highly invasive species that wants to swallow up every other style. You'll see it immediately if you go there, and if you talk with the growers you'll come away nearly suicidally depressed, or if you're me, homicidally enraged.

There's something ominous about this. It is not a question of taste. To believe that, you'd have to believe that *every single German person* likes the same style of wine. This cannot be. They don't all like the same food, they don't all wear the same color shirt, they don't all have the same hairstyle; they don't have the same fucking *dogs* fa cryin' out loud. But: amazingly, there's only one kind of wine they like. Trocken.

Item: a grower told me of a neighbor winery who, like many German vintners, puts analytical values on his private-customer pricelist. This is so that no cowering timorous unwary wine drinker will ever have to taste something that has more sweetness or acidity than he's *decided* he will accept. Now it so happened this vintner had two dry Rieslings, one with *0.5grams/liter* of residual sugar, and the other with *0.2g/l*. These wines had less than A SINGLE GRAM of RS. It cannot be tasted. It's as dry as dust; it's a miracle the damn wine would *pour*. So guess what happened? The wine with 0.2g/l sold out immediately, and the one with 0.5 was DOA—no one would taste it! And EVERY TIME I repeated this story to another vintner they all nodded knowingly—yes, that's the way it is.

Item: Florian Weingart's father sometimes helps out their private customers when Florian's in the vineyards or the cellar. Folks show up, want some wine. What do they want to taste? TROCKEN of course! So they're taken through the dry wines,

they write their orders, and Weingart *senior* goes off to pack the boxes. But not before leaving an unlabeled bottle in the tasting room, saying "I need ten minutes or so to pack your orders; help yourselves to this while I'm gone."

He returns to clamors of enthusiasm. "What was that wine??" "Is it for sale?"

It was, of *course*, a wine with sweetness, not a "dessert" wine but just a garden-variety Feinherb or maybe even a Kabinett. And all these tasters, categorically certain they could only taste TROCKEN wine, discovered that they *spontaneously* enjoyed the not-dry wine as long as they didn't know what it was!

And again, *every single time* I repeated this story to another vintner, they all nodded. "Yes, that's how it is. You have to trick them."

So I will argue that this isn't a taste, it's a form of self-hypnosis. It isn't a clientele; it's a cult. Its effect is to do evil.

Item: while one hears a kind of grudging acceptance of the sweetness of Mosel wines, because they have such dreadful acidity up there in the frozen north they *have* to have some sweetness or your ears would bleed, in fact even the Moselans report increasing trouble selling anything but dry wines.

Item: there's an increasing and distressing tendency for a vintner to create a token sweet-wine for those extraterrestrials who inexplicably still have to have them. The younger and hipper the domaine, the more you'll see this. You'll look on a pricelist with seven searingly dry Rieslings and *one* Spatlese—with **100 grams** of residual sugar! Doesn't anyone

Riesling

realize how contemptuous this is? “Well, cupcake, if it’s sweet wine you want then *try this*, it’ll be nice and sugary, just the way you like it...” It’s also a loathsome piece of propaganda, to make the sweet wine so grotesquely over-sweet that any sensible person would conclude “sweet” wines weren’t for her.

Welcome to German wine in the 21st Century: dry wines too dry, sweet wines way too sweet, and a whole perfect zone of harmony, beauty and balance in the middle that everyone ignores, because it won’t fit into the conceptual boxes whereby “Dry should be *dry* and sweet should be *sweet*.”

I propose a NEW conceptual box. *Wine should taste good, and be kept out of conceptual boxes at all times!*

Item: look again at an estate like Leitz. There you’ll see a pure Ideal brought to life. Some of the wines are dry, and they are juicy and balanced and delicious. Some of the wines are not-dry; they contain sweetness but are not DOMINATED by it, and these wines are also balanced and delicious. They all coexist; they play-well-with-others. Many of us love both styles, and are glad to have them, each as it’s warranted by the food or the ambience or just what you want to drink right then. Sounds perfect, right? Until you remember that Leitz sells most of his wine *outside of Germany*.

The dry Rieslings themselves are still a mixed bag.

That bag contains an ever-increasing number of excellent and even stunningly good dry Rieslings, many of which are cooler and snappier than their cousins from Austria. I buy them, I sell them, they’re in my cellar and I drink them. That said, however, it has to be admitted that a majority of dry German Rieslings are still prone to shrillness, sourness, bitterness and shrieking disharmony. To build a wine culture predicated on a single prevailing style, it has to work from the *ground UP*, not from a topmost layer of extravagantly good examples. I repeat; it’s getting better overall, my dry Riesling offerings are steadily increasing, and the quality of the best ones is steadily growing.

But what’s the endgame here? If Germany joins the ranks of good dry-Riesling producers, all it’s doing is delivering something to us that we already have, another entry into an already occupied field.

Whereas the not-dry wines are singular, unique and cannot be imitated. They are also low in alcohol and more flexible at the table.

So let’s let the styles coexist, and let’s be more sensually flexible, and let’s quit making sugary caricatures of the sweet wines, and let’s stop marching in step like the North Korean Army toward a *single style* of wine, and let’s be civilized persons again.



Joh. Jos. Christoffel

Mosel // Ürzig



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

Will you understand me if I say the wines from here have been unnervingly consistent for the past ten years? One wonders by which remarkable device they have avoided the vintage-variations that swing in wider arcs at other wineries.

I don't know, won't surmise, and certainly won't remotely accuse; after all, the same thing can be said of J.J. Prüm, and it's patently absurd to criticize consistency. But I'd be perversely reassured to taste something ornery or clunky here once in a while.

Hans-Leo Christoffel's wines are vinified separately from Mönchhof's, as has been the case from the beginning of the two estates' association. They're whole-cluster pressed (hence their filigree crystalline textures), with some *sponti*, some steel and *some* fuder, fermented cold, quickly drawn off the lees, and bottled early. It's the approach you'd take if

you wanted digitally clear wines, fruit/terroir driven, as unfunky as possible. And this is what we get, and have gotten without fail for many years now.

In general the wines continue to present with polish and brilliance and digital focus. (Eymael's own Mönchhof wines are rather more baroque.) They are certainly more masterly than Merkelbach, and at many points in each vintage they are wines that raise your eyebrows and send a flush of pleasure through your senses. They're high-bred and racy, and at their best they touch upon mystical qualities.

2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett + SOS : 2

GJC-198

CORE-LIST WINE. It's aromas peek out, retreat, peek out again less shyly; then you have spiced apple and guava and a late coda of slate and a tactile saltiness; the finish is taut and carbon-slatey. A bit stingy out of the gate – maybe bottled a bit *too* early?

I'll repeat these "while supplies last," as it's good to see the wines settled down with (at least) a year in-bottle; it shows, for instance, how *super-fine* this is.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett (+) SOS : 1

GJC-203

CORE-LIST WINE. This year I tasted bottle-ready cask samples – although they had bottled a few days before. This sample was closed from filtration. Coming from Merkelbach, this shows far more polish but until it recovers it'll be hard to discern. With air, and out from under the SO₂, it becomes high-toned and stylish with fibrous apple and salty length.

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 // Dashing 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.

2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2

GJC-196

CORE-LIST WINE. If you think it's a "normal" Kabinett again, don't be shocked to learn it's over 100° Oechsle. I guess 100 is the new-normal or something, yet the wine tastes wonderful and not at all over-endowed. Feline and curvy, and the core of fruit is delicious and impressive, and sometimes it can be about *fruit*, you know?

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2

GJC-204

CORE-LIST WINE. Superb aromas lead to a minty-salty palate, slinky and swank and stiletto-precise; boxwood-y *urgestein* aromas ("urgestein" = primary rock, giving smoky charred notes), and a phosphorescent finish. Sweetness is poised perfectly.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 1

GJC-206

CORE-LIST WINE. Now *this* is explosively expressive. If I say "apple and slate" yet again, it's boring but true. It's the combo of hi-def clarity and torque, firmness and brilliance yet many-layered density, and this goose-flesh tingle threaded through it all—*that* makes it uncanny.

2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GJC-197

CORE-LIST WINE. Like the two Kabinetts, this is less taut but is actually just differently coiled; lavender and wisteria, a real séance of herbs and spices, darker flavors.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2

GJC-207

CORE-LIST WINE. As always, more stylish and complex than Treppchen; kirsch and Gravenstein apples, very long, a tall thin-leggy prettiness here.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese * "Kauen," 6/750ml + +
SOS : 2

GJC-205

CORE-LIST WINE. We're making a change in labeling. When we did stars – 1-star, 2-star, 3-star – it tended to create a false hierarchy, and led buyers to suppose they had to have the "best" one or the bullies would kick sand in their faces. So now we're going to use the actual micro-parcel name, *because the wines do in fact hail from single small pieces of land*. It's more informative, more truthful. This parcel is way up in the most forbidding terraces, and its wines have a kind of para-sensual slate expression, a sonnet of the rocks. It'll buzz your fillings, this wine.

2012 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese ** "Herzlay," 6/750ml + +
SOS : 2

GJC-209

That suffix "Lay" is local dialect for slate. This is from an old ungrafted parcel among the cliffs, and the wine has its usual swollen mass, firm richness and length. I'm glad of the relatively moderate sweetness; it thins the hugeness of fruit and makes it tinkle down the palate in snaky rivulets of salty terroir and tart apple. Also a *sponti*.

2012 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese * "Kranklay," 6/750ml + +**
SOS : 3

GJC-210

The parcel is below the sundial, and spreads to either side, lower down where the slate is more crumbled and the wines have more finesse. It isn't the greater intensity or power that asks the higher price; it's the greater *finesse* and texture, and if I didn't already love these wines, this alone would make me love them. It's a tender, delicate wine, and a celestial wild strawberry note arrives. Almost no botrytis. Masterly and bewitching.

Heribert Kerpen

Mosel // Wehlen

Mosel

Heribert Kerpen



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

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

All the wines are done the old-school way, in Fuders, as I like them best. But that is as far as I think one can go in describing them. It's as much as you can be certain of getting in every vintage. But compared to, say, Christoffel or Schaefer, whose wines are to some extent predictable –

delightfully so – with Martin you'll sometimes be surprised. You can taste everywhere else, you can reach any conclusions you like about the nature of a vintage, but you can't quite guess what Kerpen did until you're in his winery tasting.

2012 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb Alte Reben (+)

GKE-145

SOS : 1

The parcel is called *Hammerstein*, ungrafted vines between 70-80 years old; picked late October at 100° Oechsle with "only a tiny little bit" of botrytis; it has 8g/l acidity and 27g/l RS, which looks like plenty on-paper, but it isn't much with a 100-degree must.

What's good here is so good I can surmount my concerns about its final balance, not to mention you may find it perfectly balanced. Intensely slatey fragrance, lime, leaf-smoke and *urgestein* pepper; the palate shows real mass and thrust, it's incredibly salty and has a dark fruit, like wild Madagascar peppercorns. The undeflected slate invades and occupies you. Only at the last resolution is there a dubious jab of sourness – which I may be oversensitive to – because the actual finish is balanced, long and fascinating. This is important wine; you can write an essay about such a wine. Which I'm doing, I see. Shut up Terry.

2012 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett +

GKE-143

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

CORE-LIST WINE. The best vintage in years, because of its muscular salty bite of slate below the pure classic Wehlen fruit. Entirely but not seamlessly harmonious; it has angles and corners but also just ridiculous length. Less vanilla and more lime and tart-apple; finishes dry and slatey.

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.



2012 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GKE-146

Again a strikingly excellent wine, serious and deeply grounded. (It does compel the question of why dry wines are made at all in a place that can give not-dry wines like *this*. But the answer is too damn sad.) I mean, this is really a glass of perfection; the aromas are fetching and slightly diffident, lemon blossom and cox-orange apples; the palate is dramatic and massively salty, full of impact and vinous mass, and the wine is none too sweet, with a visible obsidian stream of dark slate. Absurdly long; has Martin ever made a better Spätlese?

2012 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* +
SOS : 2

GKE-147

Adds a creamy vanilla wash to the “no-star”, feinting toward Auslese but holding short; it’s still got a limey spine but “sweeter” scents and flavors. Yet the finish is nearly dry, and charged with slate.

2012 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml
SOS : 2

GKE-148H

Clear, remarkable aromas with no young-Eiswein radish and more important, no V.A.. It’s a crème-de-mirabelle, rich and salty and butterscotch, with ample but not stinging acidity; overt and corporeal, not ethereal.

Willi Schaefer

Mosel // Graach



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

The sun was out, finally, as I left Reuscher-Haart for the drive to Graach. Swans were drowsing on their lawn; it looked like it might someday be Spring again, after all the cold and snow. I had some jaunty, winsome music playing as I drove along the river, and the people I was about to see were old, old friends.

Suddenly everything I saw and heard and even just thought made me weepy- happy.

I arrived to clamorous hugs and laughter, as always. Then I saw the TV-crew, and remembered I'd agreed to have a bit of our visit filmed for a show broadcasting on German TV a week later. So we had to "stage" the greeting again. But our friendship is so seamless and jolly that we took it as a lark and brought it off again with not only the appearance of affection but with *actual* affection.

The wines were sublime, the dinner afterward was convivial, and the night was cold and starry when I left them, with a tiny crescent moon leering at me as though it were whispering some ethereal lunar joke.

The kids had been put to bed hopefully, as our table was laid for dinner, but Jakob the younger boy wasn't sleepy, and came padding out to join us. He was full of smiles. The child smiled at everyone and everything, at his parents, his grandparents, his toys; I don't know when I've ever seen a more loving little kid. It made me wonder and it made me a tiny bit sad. It could have been that way for all of us, if

we'd just been more affectionate, maybe. Maybe. Schaefer's do make it look easy, to love and be happy.

Willi and I went down to his old bottle-cellar to pick out some wines for dinner. He left me alone at one point. I thought of being there, alone, with access to anything I wanted to drink from the cellar of a universally beloved vintner and an old friend. I suddenly felt very shy. I was absurdly unworthy, yet there I was, unworthy me, threading my way through the bottles.

If you're new to all this, there's a reason these wines are so beloved. Part of it is they're so scarce; the estate is all of 4 hectares with no desire to grow. Part of it is the wines themselves; they're *silly* with deliciousness. And as crystalline as they are, as ethereally complex and limpidly clear, they have a quality of calm; they don't fuss at you how *amazing* they are. They are, dare I say, affectionate; they just sit in the glass and love you. And so we love them back. We banish all the unruly beasts of our ragged natures, and slip into the warm pool, and let ourselves, for once, be happy.

2012 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett SOS : 1

GWS-214

The aroma's a bit stern, as '12s can be at this early stage, and the palate is almost adamant, more acid-driven than '11, which is why it seems drier. But within its thickness is a mineral mosaic of incomparable detail. With air the aromas grow more genially fruity, but the palate retains a certain command and authority. I wonder what bottling will do.

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

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

2012 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett + (+)

GWS-217

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

This wine's like a bite from a vampire; it's seductively sharp and has a spell in its buzzing eyes. Has the body of a Nahe wine yet the diction and judicial clarity of a classic Mosel. The fundamental balance is absurdly fine and deft, mineral-to-fruit-to-extract-to-RS.

2012 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese +

GWS-218

SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Utmost purity of apple and slate, and the solidity and *charge* are remarkable. I don't remember Mosels like these. As dense as paperweights yet as transparent as glass.

2012 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10 + + (+)

GWS-212

2012 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10, 1/1.5L + + (+)

GWS-212M

SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

It's like the big brother to the more feminine 2011, and the first of these to taste... not "sweet" but where you're aware of sweetness. Yet it's overcome by saltiness and slate, like a liquid rock-slide coating your palate. It's almost overwhelming, and yet it floats. Taste this profound, endless finish and *then* tell me you can't taste terroir.

2012 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5 (+)

GWS-219

SOS : 2

The parcel from which Willi's and my favorite of his wines often hails, in '12 it's full of its typical pistachio and lemon-zest; the texture is milder and more open-armed than #10, but it's still salty, and perhaps the most ethereal among these.

2012 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese #4 + +

GWS-220

SOS : 2

Lissome, almost willowy for Himmelreich; the aromas are more in the mirabelle and cox-orange vein with a hint of wisteria; the palate is both hyper-animated and also wonderfully *still*—it's complex yet not busy. A bit of apple-skin, this is not at all a BA-in-miniature, as so many current Auslesen are, but rather solid and vinous; you can easily drink it with food, and should.

2012 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11 + + +

GWS-222

SOS : 2

This plants its flag on the summit for slate-grown wine. You know right away; the fragrance and palate-entry are all that's needed. The second level is now more identifiably "Auslese" though still without botrytis. Another crescendo of slate. It soars like a paraglider, but the essence, the great dark center, is earthbound. The finish is nutty and murmurs forever. Close to sublime.

2012 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese #9, 12/375ml +

GWS-221H

SOS : 3

Now it's **Auslese**, babes. With a touch of Eiswein character. Properly "sweet" but of course not just any old sweetness, and it's amazingly salty and glossy, with a piquant vein of acidity and ginger-y spice.

2012 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14, 12/375ml + +

GWS-223H

SOS : 3

Now botrytis with its smokiness and warm malt; it brings a salivary juiciness that dances with the nutty-appley fruit without obscuring it. Amazingly light-footed for a wine so intense. Back in the 70s this would have been an epochal BA. Which I know because, an hour later, I drank one.



vineyard area // 3.7 hectares
annual production // 1,250 cases
top sites & soil types // Dhroner Hofberg (weathered devonian slate with quartzite);
Piesporter Goldtröpfchen (blue slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling:

Pure blind luck. The samples were sitting on the tasting table at Selbach back in 2002. "I have no idea who this is; the samples just showed up," said Johannes. I was intrigued because I love Dhron; the first "WTF is this??" wine I ever tasted was a '71 Dhroner Roter Riesling Kabinett, and I think the Grand Cru Hofberg is among the top-10 greatest Mosel vineyards.

But Dhron was always a rather provincial village—most of the best land was owned by the big Trier estates—and though I tried I never found a reliable source. With the first sip of Adam's first sample, I knew. Just knew.

Andreas Adam was still in wine-school (Geisenheim) then, and was making wine in his weekends home, from 0.9 hectares of land his father owned. As best I recall the grapes or juice were sold off in bulk. Andreas' wines and he himself were quickly on the radar, as the wines were excellent and the young man was serious.

Then came the moment of decision. Should he get a job somewhere as a cellar master or vineyard manager, and continue to make a teeny bit of wine in his spare time? Or should he throw caution to the winds and try to make a living from his own estate? He'd have to grow it, have to get more land, have to improve the land he did manage to get, have to *invest* in the cellar. Have to invest period.

He decided to go for it. He regretted the decision many times, and gave thought to shutting it down. But slowly, deliberately, it started to gain critical mass. 2007 was a turning point. It would work.

This year Andreas' sister Barbara has herself graduated from Geisenheim and will join him, and the two will work their estate. It has grown to nearly 4 hectares and is still growing, but the end is in sight. No one on the Mosel wants to be too big. These days the problem is vandalism

based on envy and spite among some very small-minded neighbors. Andreas will outlast them.

You'll see the prices are on the high side. They need to be, just to manage cash-flow in this period of heavy spending. They also deserve to be, as the wines are in the top rank. And most remarkable, they are equally successful across the stylistic spectrum; the dry wines, the barely off-dry wines, the "sweet" wines, all of them work, and the styles coexist just as they ought to.

Lately there's been a modest expansion into Piesport, where Andreas is cooperating with his friend Julian Haart. He's peering around his environs, considering where (and if) to obtain vineyards, but over the past couple years he seems more committed to being the shaman of Dhron, the champion of this marvelous terroir.

The wines are highly expressive, whether they're old-fashioned leesy spontis or more stainless-steel primary fruit driven. They're muscular for Mosel wines, mouthfilling and complex and loaded.

For me Adam is the ultimate example of applying long-held and grounded principles into the making of *excitingly* conservative Mosel wines. He isn't reinventing an already perfect paradigm. He is reaching into the heart of its gravitas and expressing it in Rieslings that embody what great classics should be.

A.J. Adam at a glance // Tiny, grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

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



2012 Riesling Trocken (+)
SOS : 0

GAD-059

“This was the wine which fermented the longest,” Andreas said. And like everything I tasted, it was bottled three days earlier. And yet! Lemon and mirabelle aromas, a little sassafrass and slate – wow, this is an *awfully* good dry Mosel; a bit of mint, salt and ginger, and a bit of snap on the ethereal finish, but a feline texture and quiet, below the sparkler-energy of the flavors. In Dönnhoff territory with this one.

2012 Dhroner Riesling
SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAD-058

More specific and detailed minerality, slate in hi-def, and again allowing for the finishing chile-pepper jab of `12, there's a whumping *mass* of palate; heirloom apple and guava, to take you there. The acidity is 9.6g/l and the RS is just 12g/l, so this will be for people who *actually* like high-acidity and don't just say so.

2012 Piesporter Riesling “Adam & Haart” +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAD-060

Right away there's Piesport's exotic fruit, and though the RS is almost identical to the Dhroner the palate *reads* it sweeter because the site is warmer and the pH is higher. This is voodoo-sexy and offers some pretty *recherché* flavors for Mosel wine; it's not as finicky-modern as some nor as *sponti*-earthy as others; it's like Riesling grown in the soil of an asteroid.

2012 Hofberg Riesling “Grosses Gewachs” 6/750ml +
2012 Hofberg Riesling “Grosses Gewachs” 6/1.5L +
SOS : 0

GAD-061
 GAD-061M

A lot of color and a commandingly serious walnut and slate fragrance; the palate is proud, monumental and almost solemn, Riesling as Serious Business, Riesling in its fundamental mineral being. Picked “only” at 94° for elegance and drinkability (bless him!), the wine has inscrutable depth; a Doctoral thesis of slate.

2012 Goldtröpfchen Riesling “Grosses Gewachs” 6/750ml + +
SOS : 0

GAD-062

Sterner stuff than the village wine; pointed intense aromas of blueberries and white iris and candied lemon. The palate is off the hinges! Entirely harmonious, rampantly exotic and rich, it's like a Pfalz GG with more grace and less earthiness. Pink peppercorn and powder-puff, ginger and mustard-seed; stern slate on the finish after this thrill-ride of improbable elements for Riesling. The empty glass even smells a little like Savignin.

2012 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb + +
2012 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb, 6/1.5L + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAD-057

GAD-057M

These are utter miracle-aromas now, exotic and truly perfumed. It comes from a parcel called Sängerei. The vineyard and cellar work are the same as the GG but the *price* is lower, as though you deducted a Euro for every three grams of sugar. This has stingingly intense top-notes over a big swell of slate and nut oil in the middle; malt and spice are in there too, and it has sharp lines and angles and hyper-animation, but the core is a demi-glaze of fruit and slate. For me this is the signature wine for Adam.

2011 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett + +
SOS : 1

GAD-048

CORE-LIST WINE. The flowery aromas again. This is the truest “Kabinett” in several years; almost slim, certainly slatey and wintergreeny and by no means thin; it feels drier than usual, it's long and gripping, but when the dark slate fades an exquisitely delicate and juicy florality stays and haunts you.

2012 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett +
2012 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett, 6/1.5L +
SOS : 2

GAD-056

GAD-056M

CORE-LIST WINE. This year it's 100% fuder. Picked early at 84° it's lighter than earlier vintages because Andreas wants to make a “true Kabinett.” Even in cask it shows a kind of steely brilliance; empire apple and quince and ginger and *pêche-de-vignes*, salty as the dickens and a wonderful interplay of shimmer and richness.

2011 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese + + +
SOS : 2

GAD-052

MY WINE OF THE VINTAGE, and Andreas' greatest achievement to-date. It's a cuvée of a “regular” and a “1-star” Spät he decided to blend, and whew – *what* a fragrance! It's the quintessence of Hofberg, and as great a Mosel wine as you'll ever taste; shimmeringly brilliant, fantastically vivid dialogue of slate and herbs and taut but resplendently ripe fruit; long beyond any thoughts of “length,” and acutely painful to spit – but *you* don't have to, you lucky cuss.

2012 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : 2

GAD-063

Andreas' favorite among his '12s, this is a fuder Mosel classic, with the salts and mints of 2012 and the chocolatey tone from cask, plus balsam and wintergreen and apples and lemon cream. Hardly seems “sweeter” than the Kab but is richer and denser.

Reuscher-Haart

Mosel // Piesport

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



They have a very small crop due to peronospora during flowering—yet they didn't raise prices. Prices which, by the way, are a true steal for anything estate-bottled that says "Piesporter" on the label.



The estate is old-school: all *spontis* done largely in tanks. No fining, and long fine-lees contact. In certain vintages the wines can seem rococo to the point they're hardly Mosel wines any more. Yet they age astoundingly and end *up* tasting like very GOOD Mosel wines. Still,

they're Piesporters the way Justen might make them: analogue, corpulent, luscious. And in concentrated high-acid years they wriggle out from their fleshy bounds and make quite a firm case for themselves. As witness...

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!

2012 Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “ÜberSchwang”

GRH-077

SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

The name is a pun on the family's surname (Schwang) which means both “pregnant” and stoked, jazzed, over-the-moon. I loved the `11, and this one's also robust, concentrated and almost muscular; it's in that wonderful zone of no perceptible sweetness but fruit-to-the-MAX; it's clinging-long, smells of quince and woodruff and dried apricots, and it's a chunky chewy happy blob of Riesling goodies.

2012 Piesporter Riesling, 1.0 Liter

GRH-074L

SOS : 2

With the concentration of the vintage, this peachy little guy has ideas above his station. I like its candid gushing style.

2011 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett +

GRH-071

SOS : 2

What a charming vintage here! This is pure cox orange pippins, nothing sultry at all; beaming white-nectarine and an exceptionally fine caramel savor into the finish. This isn't about slatey tension, it's about fruit.

2012 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett

GRH-075

SOS : 2

Stubbornly young and it won't yield its *sponti* stink even after minutes of swirling—part of the reason I still offer the 2011—but eventually one sees another stuffed-full 2012, tasting drier than usual and seeming to be semi-solid, with almost a shiitake note, soy and bacon fat. Jury still out, but this has promise.

2012 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese +

GRH-076

SOS : 2

Sponti notes again, and another wine decidedly on the dry side—which I applaud. Even with its 70-something grams of RS the sweetness is engulfed below huge extract; The mélange of peach and 5-spice is compelling.

Carl Loewen / Schmitt-Wagner

Mosel // Leiwen

vineyard area // 12 hectares
annual production // 8,300 cases
top sites & soil types // Leiwener Laurentiuslay and Klostergarten;
Thörnicher Ritsch (grey slate); Longuicher Maximin Herrenberg (red slate)
grape varieties // 100% Riesling



This is one of the FIVE MOST INTERESTING ESTATES IN MY OFFERING, and among them it's the one you know the least about.



A couple decades ago an idealistic young couple realized there were great vineyards—not “good” or “interesting” vineyards, but truly *great* ones—along this stretch of the Mosel, and that no one knew of them because of the lack of a flagship estate. If J.J. Prüm had been a citizen of Leiwen and not of Wehlen, we’d be giving all that Sonnenuhr *luv* to Laurentiuslay and Ritsch. This is clear, and obvious.

Karl was also convinced of the old Mosel verities;

spontis in cask with no fussings or tweakings.

When the estate Schmitt-Wagner had to fold its tent, as there were no children willing to carry it on, we were all very fortunate that Loewens could buy it. Carl now has *every great site* on this section of the Mosel. These are:

Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg
Thörnicher Ritsch
Leiwener Laurentiuslay

Carl Loewen/Schmitt-Wagner at a glance // Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! “Cool” 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 slatey. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: “I don’t like ‘old-wine’ flavor and I definitely don’t like this petrol taste,” he says.

They are *every bit as important as* Graacher Domprobst, Wehlener Sonnenuhr and Zeltinger Schlossberg, only you don't know them, and therefore they **COST LESS**.

In another year or two Carl's son Christopher will have finished in Geisenheim and will join his dad full-time at the estate. He's already making his mark. He's perfect, by the way: he Gets It, he isn't hell-bent on "innovation" for its own sake, and yet his first project—offered below—is absolutely *perfect*, a re-casting of something already there, but seen with lovely new eyes.

When Carl obtained Bruno Schmitt's legendary estate, he knew full well the legacy he was carrying on. Not just in human terms, but in the monumental value of the 6,000 vines Schmitt possesses which were planted in 1896. This is possibly the largest-oldest stand of ancient ungrafted vines in Germany, perhaps in Europe. The vineyard – Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg – has various sub-sections and exposures, but it's all steep and there's a lot of red slate that gives the wines the sassafrassy garrigue we also find in Ürzig.

I don't at all mind that Carl's wines are bigger than Bruno's were – I miss that nearly extinct light style, but

times change and everyone's wines are bigger now. But you can't just pick them riper and have done with it. If the raw material is markedly more intense than every other aspect of the wines must change along. Where Bruno's wines had a delicate licorice note, Carl's have a peppery intensity.

I'm also going to make a kind of legacy offering of some back-vintages they still have at Schmitt-Wagner. Carl has mixed emotions about this. He appreciates Bruno's desire to liquidate his cellar, but is wary of being too closely associated with the close-out prices, as his current prices could appear usurious. I assured him we were all experienced enough to know close-out prices when we saw them, and Carl of *all* people doesn't need to worry about looking expensive. Just the opposite.

So, please take note: these are very likely the **single best values** for classic old-school Mosel Rieslings from great vineyards in ALL OF THE MOSEL. Not just in this offering; anywhere. And the estate is seriously on the move with its new acquisitions and the influx of passionate youthful energy from Christopher.

2012 Carl Loewen "1896" Riesling Erste Lage, 6/750ml **+** SOS : 0

GCL-076

Here's what Christopher had to say about this amazing wine:

"Our Maximin Herrenberg, which was planted in 1896, is the oldest Riesling vineyard in the world of this dimension (more than 6,000 vines).

Planted 1896. This is an incentive to us. I have asked myself over weeks: How did they produce wine in that period, in a time when Mosel Riesling was one of the most important wines of the world?

In the Maximin Herrenberg we still have the single post training system with 10.000 vines per hectare, which was common in those days. No chemical fertilizer is used, everything, even the hardest work is done by hand. Never has the Maximin Herrenberg seen a machine! The adventure started in the harvest. The handpicked grapes were being transported to the trailer with the help of a hotte (a hotte is something like a rucksack, with which you can transport about 60kg of grapes in it; it was used before tractors made the vineyard work easier). The grapes, which were collected in a basket, were being stamped by foot, which had been common then. Through that procedure the maceration starts directly in the vineyard.

On the evening of the picking day, the press process started. For the 1896 we used a very old wooden basket press, which we found in a small dusty corner at the lower section of the Mosel valley and which we restored with a lot of love. Pressing was done by brawniness, the juice is guided without any sedimentation or pumping directly into the Fuder. The fermentation, of course, is spontaneous, without any added yeast.

The result is a wine, which shows perfectly the strength of Riesling. It is a unique statement of consistency in a fast moving world.

Due to the small scaled 1896 vineyard, we are just able to do one Fuder of the 1896 Riesling."

So, we take these ancient vines and make a wine as it would have been made when they were planted. The fragrance is rather cask-y along with the site's usual spearmint. It's the palate that really convinces, a creamy wash of (very!) old-school vinosity astride the lime-leaf and wild raspberry. There's a pointed acidity at the end, but the wine is remarkable. Please, cellar-cool, not fridge-frozen.

2012 Carl Loewen Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 2

GCL-075

CORE-LIST WINE. This comes from a hilly but not punishingly steep vineyard, on a mélange of soils including slate but not only. Often I think it smells a little like Blanc de Blancs Champagne, in fact. But this one is, as always, the very perfection of gentle old-fashioned *sponti* Mosel in its most winsome form, and this one has the *salty* concentrated kick of '12, along with the enticing slinky finish.

2012 Schmitt-Wagner Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett + +
SOS : 1 // SOMMS: YOU'RE CRAZY IF YOU DON'T POUR THIS!

GSW-078

CORE-LIST WINE. Oh well, the “young” vines now; planted in 1902. 1902! LOOK at that price!

It's the site just above Maximiner Herrenberg, a little cooler, “with always clean grapes,” says Karl. Prototypical fennel and sassafras aromas. Fantastically juicy and with a cunning herbal complexity; again absurdly salty and leafy, like chewing parsley and tarragon. The restrained sweetness is perfectly judged and poised. We're buying the bejeezus out of it and so should you.

2012 Schmitt-Wagner Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : 2

GSW-076

“Sometimes it amazes me there was only one name in Longuich that anyone knew; Bruno of course. I mean, these vineyards! I'd actually have to work harder to try and make a *bad* wine from this land,” says Karl. Well, this is the best wine Karl-Josef has made from this land! *Stupid*-minty aromas, but fine, true mint, not candy-cane; true ginger, not candied ginger; wonderful salty-tangy sweetness, zip and concentration. Not to mention length and charm.

2012 Carl Loewen Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese + +
SOS : 2

GCL-077

CORE-LIST WINE, and welcome to the core list; it was overdue. The vineyard stands with the best the Mosel has to offer. “And it was a stroke of luck the flurbereinigung was voted down here because it was too expensive. So the old vineyard shows its original little terraces and walls.” Did I mention the vines are 80-plus years old and some are over 100?

We basically have massive fruit anchored to deep almost meaty structure. That fruit runs in the cox-orange direction; in some years it topples over into peach and malt, but it is *always* profoundly solid and grounded. This '12 has almost incomprehensible solidity and salty grip, and the finish flirts with the infinite.

2012 Carl Loewen Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese + + +
SOS : 2

GCL-078

Of all the great Mosel vineyards—and this is among the greatest—no other wines show the fervid *green* of these; verbena, chartreuse, wintergreen, aloe vera. It's like Zeltinger Schlossberg on *crack*.

This wine was picked *en bloc* with only a “tiny few” botrytis grapes, from a micro-parcel called “Pichtern.” It's one of the most supernal 2012s I tasted. Insanely beautiful fragrance, pointed and pure, everything noted above plus exotic heirloom apples; the palate is an insurrection of key-lime and wintergreen, and the sweetness is ground-wired in the lip-smacking citricity. If you only buy one Auslese this year, make it this one.

Older Vintages of Carl Schmitt-Wagner Wines

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese +
SOS : 1

GSW-040

Saar

The Saar valley is singular in many ways. Close as it is to Trier, it seems entirely removed. Unlike the fjord of the Mittelmosel, the Saar is more open country, and vineyards mix with forests and pasture. It is deliciously relaxing.



Quiet and verdant and birdy. In massage they talk about the cleansing breath, the exhale that sends the tension away. Coming to the Saar is like taking cleansing breaths, one after another.

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

It's the only way I know how to respond – how to be alive – by combining a strict professional appraisal with whatever arises spontaneously from within, impulses or impressions or dreams or just emotion. I can't transfer that to you, but we're both human beings and I want you to know it is there. Something is there. These wines offer an opportunity to pass through a curtain.

Hugh Johnson says that great wine demands to be talked about. I used to agree, but now I'm not so sure. Something of the miracle of great wine is amplified in the echo-chamber of conversation, among people who share this love and are fond of one another. But I am really beginning to wonder about the experience of drinking wine by oneself, alone and calm, answering to

no one, no need to produce affect or to “contribute” to a conversation. This I think is valid too. Not always, and maybe not even very often, but just as a way to sound the inner voice from time to time.

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

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's 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!

von Othegraven

Saar // Kanzem



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

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 line, making scrupulously honest terroir-drenched Saar wines of admirable depth and form. If you like Josmeyer best of all Alsace producers you'll probably like Othegraven best of all Saar producers.

The estate is 16 hectares, with 7.5 in the great Kanzemer Altenberg which looms spectacularly above the manor. It's almost comical to open the front door and have this immense mountain of vines occupy your entire field of vision. It beats the view out my front door, in any case.

The wines are *spontis*, done in tank since the

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

how the wines taste // They fall between the fruit-oriented style typified by Egon Müller and the more *recherché* antique style practiced by Van Volxem; on the dry side but explosive with terroir and with ever-unfolding depth. Kupp is the keenest and most piquant; Bockstein the most extrovertedly fruity, Altenberg the most profound.

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.

One lovely development is the acquisition of a new

site, the *Wawerner Herrenberg*, a true Grand Cru you may not have heard of, but bought from a fellow whose name you know *quite* well. The wines are (potentially) wonderful, and stylistically different from the existing vineyards in the estate's portfolio. Another development is an upward creep in prices. This always splits my brain in two. One part says "How do you expect to sell wine if all you do is raise prices?" while the other, wiser part looks at the killing-steep land, tastes the wines, and thinks "The only reason wines this good would encounter customer resistance is that everyone assumes German wines are trivial and can never be *worth* such prices." Sad but true – true but sad. Especially for wines like these, not only intrinsically remarkable, but imbued with every overtone of soul a person could ever find.

2011 Altenberg Alte Reben + +

GOG-037

SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

First offering. It's spendy, but boy does it deliver the goods. Hugely rich, *spicy* and smoky, and the bit of RS gives it a miraculous lift and complexity; the *sponti* tones are beautiful and the delicate casky touch is seductive. This is what great wine costs, because this is what great wine is.

2012 Wiltingen Kupp Riesling Kabinett +

GOG-033

SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

The daisy charmer, with dancing energy and length; salty and apple-y, with again that uncanny crunch of the divinity-crystals in the pear and the Parm. Take a sip and try, just *try* not to smile.

2012 Wawern Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage + +

GOG-034

SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

HARD-CORE LIST WINE. I think this is profoundly perfect Saar wine, and absolutely great Riesling. I may actually have wept for joy. In any case they gave us a break on the price, so maybe I should blubber more often. It shows some of the herbal notes of Selbach's Schlossbergs, heirloom apple, balsam and lime zest and wintergreen. Like a smile from a small child.

2012 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage + + (+)

GOG-031

SOS : 2

You have to grant this is even better wine *qua* wine, though I have a subjective soft-spot for Herrenberg. Still, if you remember the astounding 2008 Kabinett—my wine of the vintage that year—you'll once again see a Platonic Ideal of German Riesling in an ostensibly "modest" form. Spice and smoke, rhubarb and pink peppercorn and spearmint, all encased in a crisp jacket of slate. The *only* reason I hedge the 3rd star is to taste it again after it's bottled.

2012 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Erste Lage + +

GOG-035

SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

Even firmer and more contained—structurally. The *palate* is quite exotic, muskmelon and wintergreen and blown-out candle. Amazing wine; it grips green and tastes yellow-orange, and as always it has the genial dignity of the true classic, not the huffy poseur. The empty glass reeks of currant-leaf.

2012 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben Erste Lage + + (+)

GOG-036

SOS : 2

59-year-old vines; the wine is weighty and dense and indecently salty and so mineral we virtually swim in slate, peering up at the flowers and the leaves. So deep it's like a diver who needs time to come up, after seeing things no one ever saw.



vineyard area // 6 hectares
annual production // 4,000 cases
top sites // Ayler Kupp, Schonfels, Wiltinger Kupp, Wiltinger Braunfels,
Wiltinger Schlangengraben
soil types // weathered grey slate, red slate, quartzite
grape varieties // Riesling

These outstanding Saar wines came to Johannes Selbach's attention, who quickly wrote me about them. "You'll like them; they're not cookie-cutter wines."

Not only is he correct, he's also zeroed in on a guiding beacon for this portfolio; to the extent anyone is added, the wines can't merely be clear, modern, effective or *viable*. They need to be original in some essential way, to offer something we don't already have, and ideally, something *no-one* already has.

Enter and welcome Helmut Plunien, and his beautiful new/old estate on the Saar.

He comes from a recent background as the administrator of big "noble" estates, first in Würzburg, and more recently closer to his native Saar – in Trier, at the Bischöflichen Weingüter, which us old-timers will remember as one of the venerable Great Names in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer. Though Plunien didn't go into detail, I surmise his stint in Trier was frustrating, and I further surmise his efforts to innovate and improve quality at the now-moribund property were resisted. At the same time (and maybe to blow off steam) he founded a tiny estate in Wiltingen, and called it "Vols" after a micro-parcel name in the great Wiltinger Braunfels, better-known before the 1971 wine law wiped it (and far too many other names) off the map.

But the real breakthrough came in 2009, when he was able to buy the estate Altenhofen in Ayl. Though barely known to Americans, this was a "name" among Saar *amateurs*, both for its superb holdings in the (Ayler) Kupp but also its holdings in the partly abandoned but still fascinating Schonfels.

Plunien, a genial and unpretentious guy you like immediately, calls his cellar philosophy "concentrated doing-nothing." He'd rather not fine or filter and will avoid doing so if at all possible. The wines are *spontis*,

done partly in fuder and partly in steel. In the vineyards he's close to organic, precluded both by the steepness of the terrain and the helicopter spraying. The estate is "6-something" hectares, with plans to grow "but not beyond ten."

The wines intrigued me. They were indeed unique, they showed personality, they were fingerprinted with it; not as atavistic as Von Volxem, not as polished as (say) Zilliken, but something that was specifically theirs, including a remarkably deft sense of balance, as though they'd spontaneously found their ways to the perfect non-sweetness-sweetness – you don't see it and you also don't *miss* it.

The result is the offering you see here. And I am one excited dude, to show you these.

A year has passed and I've gotten to see how the wines "behave;" that is, how they show. To me they show wonderfully, but I'm tolerant of the *sponti* tones that some tasters write off as "sulfur" (incorrectly, as it happens). Plunien himself observes "It's the zone between 15-25g/l residual sugar where the *sponti* notes come out most," which is a new theory to me. Again I find I must observe; y'all accept all manner of dubious aromas in wines you approve of because of where they come from or what "natural" imprimatur they carry. But the first whiff of funk in a German Riesling and you assume they're trying to poison you with sulfur.

When these wines clear up in the glass—which entails maybe a minute of swirling—they are gripping, snappy and stunningly mineral Saar wines.

VOLS at a glance // Up and coming star-estate on the Saar, begun as a "hobby" project but growing to ambitious proportions.

how the wines taste // Old-school not-sweet-not-dry Saar Rieslings, *spontis* but less blatantly so than some, and also less delicate and flowery than many top Saar estates. Peter Lauer's is the style that comes closest.

2012 Ayler Kupp Riesling Trocken +
SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GVL-011

Spätlese quality, and a really expressive, successful dry Riesling; classic site aromas (slate and Fiji-apples), wonderful length and balance, and a smoky-slatey finish. Even tasted ice-cold the wine works. What dry German Riesling should be, and isn't... always.

2011 Riesling Feinherb
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GVL-001

This is studiously diligent and doesn't broadcast its prettiness, though it is pretty; sleek and flowery and with the moderate sweetness of early season corn, and a wholesome blast of slate at the end.

2011 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GVL-010

First offering. This fermented until August '12 and was bottled off the *gross lees* a month later—thus it was never racked. Effectively dry; white flowers, osmanthus, quince and comice pear plus exotica from the lees; a superbly useful food wine with its slatey snap and stealth sweetness and orchid-y florals.

2012 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!

GVL-012

Why offer both vintages? Because this wine represents one single fuder—from a parcel that normally gives three-plus—and it's a lovely lithe feminine wine; high-toned spice, lemon zest and pickled ginger; slate and talc.

2011 Ayler Kupp Riesling Kabinett +
SOS : 1

GVL-003

SAAR, baby! Barely sweet, fervidly slatey, sleek and crisp but long and suavely mineral. Delicious, interesting, refreshing, blue slate and green apple, honest and perfect, modest and tactful, but not humble! Too vivid to be humble.

It completes a circle for me, too, as one of the very earliest estates I represented, all the way back in the mid-80s, was a tiny Ayl grower named Gebrüder Kramp, whose old-school wines I loved – they were the Merkelbachs of the Saar. The old fellow passed away and the vineyards went to Lauer.

It's good to be back.

2012 Ayler Kupp Riesling Kabinett
SOS : n/a

GVL-006

(Note: to be sold when the 2011 is gone. It's a pure lovely Saar wine, the kind Merkelbachs would make if they lived here.)

2011 Ayler Kupp Riesling Spätlese +
SOS : 1

GVL-004

This has flavors the Kabinett doesn't have, not just more ripeness and sweetness. Stylish, fibrous apple-skin texture, lots of *confiture* and complexity. In its snappy-green way: perfect.

Reference



HOW GERMAN WINES AGE

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

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

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

finesse they have. Interestingly, cork absorbs 40 percent of TDN, thus screwcaps preserve more petrol aromas.”

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

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

Kabinett: peaks from 4-6 years (if it’s *true* Kabinett and not declassified Auslese) and shouldn’t fade till about age 15. It’s not an abrupt demise, but rather a deliberate twilight slide. That said, I have in mind a 1961 Kabinett I drank at Schmitt-Wagner; 42 years old and going strong.

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

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

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

TBA: I know you’ll hate to hear this, but these wines aren’t

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

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

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

GLOSSARY

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

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays remarkable ripeness for its quality level. Most of my growers are contemptuous of the lenient standards for minimum ripeness. And you need to know if, for example, I'm offering you a Kabinett with near-Auslese ripeness because you might be looking for a light wine and you won't get it. Each grower sets up his own schemata, and if the baseline level is, say, equivalent to Spätlese, then the lightest wine could be called "Kabinett," even with Spätlese-level ripeness. Better to be remembered for a superb Kabinett than to be forgotten for a run-of-the-mill Spätlese. German wine in general is riper than it was fifteen years ago (it's a globalwarming thing), even though I have stopped using aerosol deodorants personally.

GL: GL means grams-per-liter, and is the method by which most wine things are measured in Germany. We prefer to think in percents, so here's how to transpose. A

thing measuring 8.5 g.l. has .85% of whatever thing it is.

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

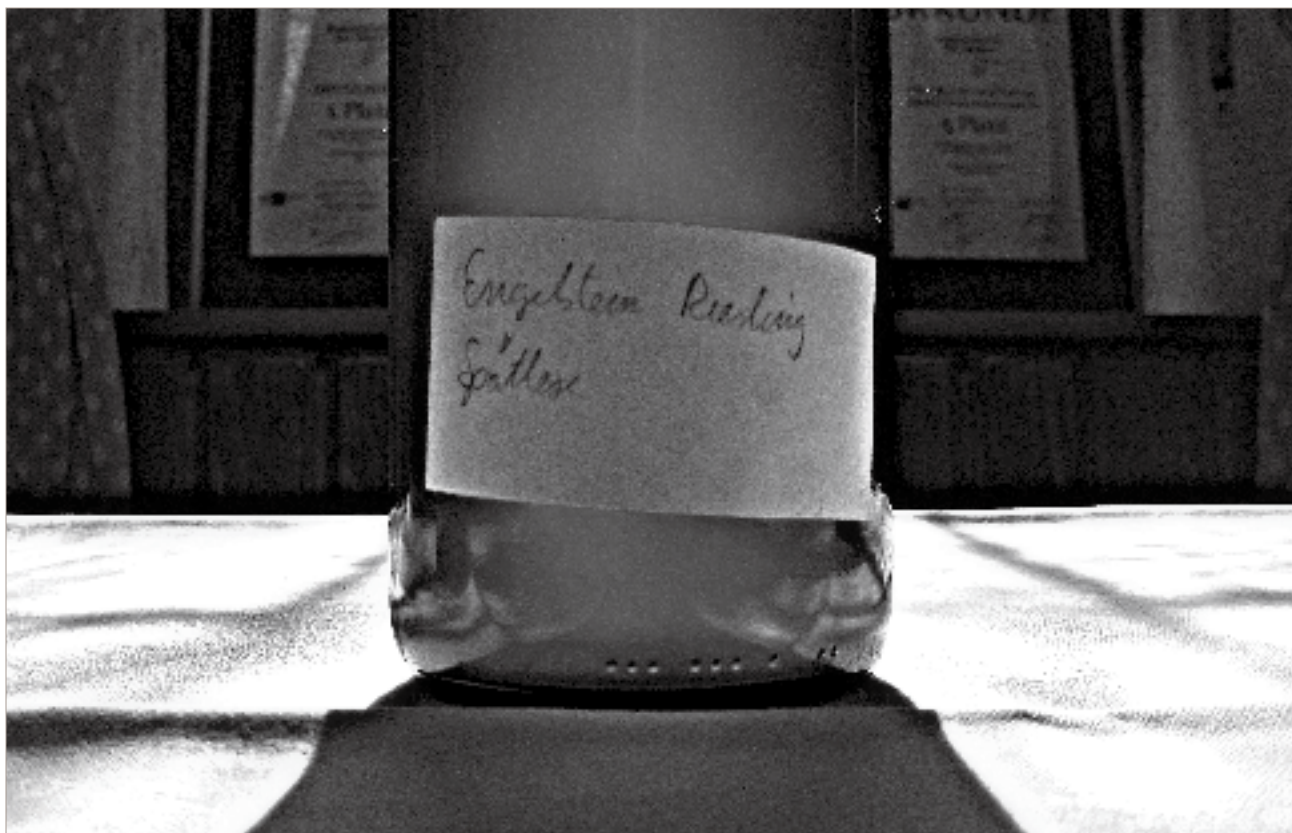
I'll bring extract to your attention if it's noteworthy. High extract corresponds with low yields, old vines, moist soils, and generally with high acidity. Can you taste extract? Not as a specific flavor, but as a largeness of flavor, especially mid-palate flavor—the second wave of taste that comes on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

Acidity: I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine, except Riesling, has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient.

The Germans have lurched backward from their 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 rapports include the mineral, wet-stone flavor from slate soil, the curranty, spectral complexities from porphyry soil, and the fiery savor from potassium-rich basalt soils. Oh, and let's not forget the unique smokiness from the red slate-sandstone mélange the Germans call Rotliegend.

Feinherb: There must have been a hole in the ozone layer when they permitted this term to be used. Because they didn't *control* it, and this is most scandalously fungible, sensible and un-Teutonic. In fact *feinherb* means whatever a grower wants it to mean. It always denotes a wine on-



the-dry-side, and in practice, as one grower told me, the local wine-inspector tolerates anything up to 30g.l. residual sugar especially if the wine tastes as if it should have 70. For some growers *feinherb* are their dryish wines above the limit for Halbtrocken. Others use it in place of Halbtrocken because (correctly) they despise “Halbtrocken”.

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

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.

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

Core List Wines

Hard Core List

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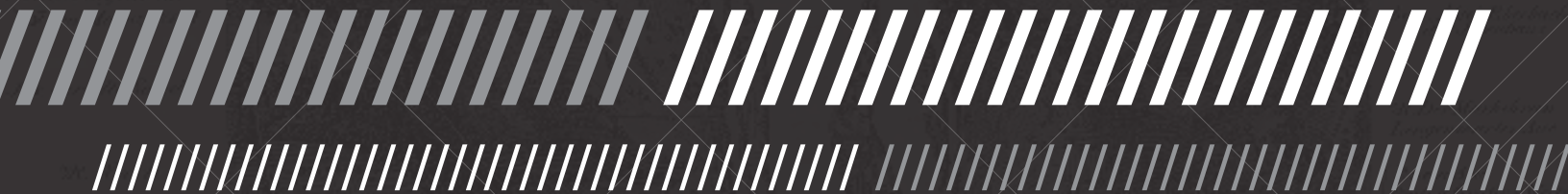
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Core List (continued)

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