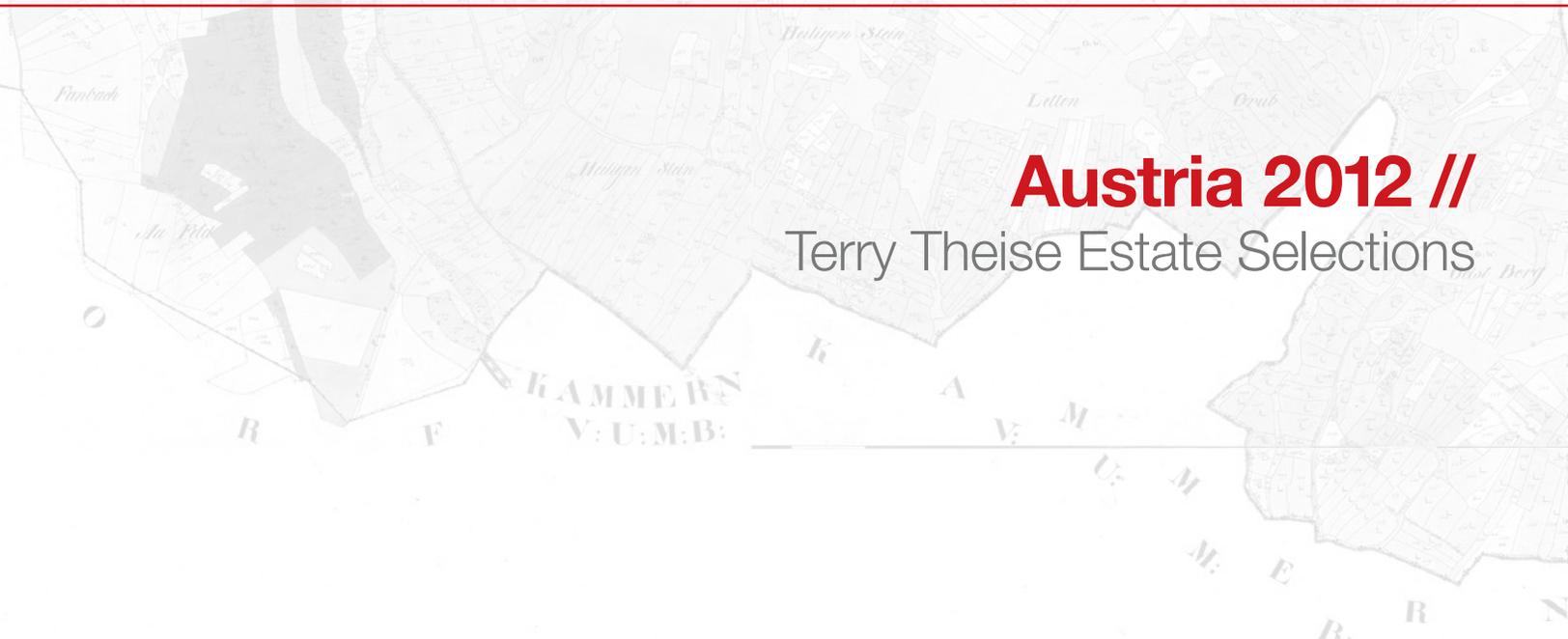




*Gemein*  
**ZOEBI**  
in  
N.Oesterreich V  
1822



**Austria 2012 //**  
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



Willi Klinger tells me we are now the leading importer of Austrian wines to the States. Willi heads up the Austrian Wine Marketing Board. I was glad to hear what he said. It's nice to be useful.

None of this would have been possible without Peter Schleimer, who helped me survive at the beginning and still helps me cope to this day. When we began, Peter was a free-lancer, but now he's the editor-in-chief of Austria's most serious fine wine magazine, *Vinaria*. Guy's a major player.

To complete the *dramatis personae*, my darling bride Karen Odessa, who basically created the farm-to-table movement in the Midwest and who won a best-chef Midwest Beard Award, came with me for some of my recent tasting trip to Austria. There was me, for what that's worth, plus Peter and his almost thirteen-year-old, and my KO, and our work was done and we wanted a celebration commensurate with our stature in the world of consequential people doing the work of the angels.

So we went bowling. I haven't bowled in at least thirty years, and that time it was twenty years since. If by chance you hold me in any regard at all, let me destroy it by admitting that I was a serious bowler from the ages of 12-16. I was in leagues, had my own ball, had my own shoes, and had a 138 average. So there. So: bowling! In Austria. Three games. Of course we all sucked at it, and of course by game-3 we all started feeling "We should be *better* at this by now, damn it." (OK, I felt that.) We did howl with laughter despite remaining sober.

That was one highlight of the last couple weeks. The other was quieter but no less memorable.

I was up in the night to pee, and when I got back to bed I heard the church bells strike 4:00. They were lovely and quiet, a few streets away, and it was reassuring to hear them. As soon as they ceased pealing I heard a blackbird begin his morning song, and was amazed. Note: it was still utter dark, not even a surmise of dawn. And still the small bird sang. I lay awake both enjoying his singing —

they are quite lyrical, these birds — and wondering what could possibly explain it. Either this little creature had some sense of the incipient light, some tiny bird hormone that tells him when it's about to be morning, or else even more wonderfully, he was awakened by the four-o'clock bell and when he wakes up, he sings. That's a really happy thought. What do you do when you wake up? Me, I grumble and issue unseemly sounds.

After my book came out I did a lot of interviews, since I am a cooperative little lamb, and I was often asked, why Austria? Well, I remember my first visit in 1992, tasting some of the greatest white wines I'd ever tasted. I was convinced of two things. One was that people would flip out when they tasted these wines, and two, even if I was wrong about thing-one, the story still needed to be told. You can't taste wines like that and just walk away.

Much has transpired since, (the somewhat odd period when Grüner Veltliner became "trendy" stands out) and Austria has taken a place of sorts among the community of accepted wine. Not enough of a place, but people remain wary of umlauts and words that sound too much like "schnitzel." This is especially true for the very best of the wines, which of course are the most expensive. They compete very easily — in fact they lay the very *SMACK* down on almost any other dry white wine at the same price — yet they aren't cherished as they should be. Perhaps in common with great German wines, they are simply *too* good.

A thing like that can sound elitist. "Too good for the likes of *you*, Bucko." So go ahead and tag me. But if you do, I'll allow myself to observe that there are hundreds of wines on retail shelves and restaurant wine lists that are *not as good* as these wines and cost as much or more. Why, if you don't mind my asking? I submit that it's because there's an unacknowledged contempt toward anything with German words on the label, an underlying assumption that such wines can never be more than trivial and certainly aren't worth anything north of fifty Dollars. If I'm right, then I'm not an elitist; I'm just a sad and puzzled idealist.

Maybe I'm wrong and it isn't contempt, but rather fear. I find it odd that people who are serenely competent in all other walks of wine, who don't mind when they mangle the French, Italian or Spanish languages, are suddenly reduced to stammering helplessness as soon as an umlaut appears. What is it about German that makes a person feel so abruptly incapable? Certainly the language isn't as euphonious as the romance languages, but that didn't stop the somm-gloom from embracing "Txakolina," and God help me, if you can say "Sauvignon Blanc" you can say "Senftenberger Piri."

A person I know in the business has a tasting group that meets to grow their knowledge together, and so they arrange themed tastings. One of them was "neutral white

wines," (which is a good idea for a tasting), but in this group they included *Grüner Veltliner*, which is many things but none of them is neutral. How could they have so misconstrued it? I'd say it was because a mere "Austrian" grape couldn't be important enough to get it right.

If you are not yet thirty, (and are actually reading something longer than a tweet — thanks!) you came of age when Austria was already a category, and you don't know why I'm seeming so combative. In fact you might think Austria's a little stale. Wasn't it trendy in the 90s? In fact the fullness of Austrian wine in all its facets, from the everyday to the middle-class to the very great, is a wave that has swollen but not yet broken. I promise you, if you approach these wines neutrally and expectantly, that you will be amazed how amazing they are, and that you could have ever thought otherwise.

One feels at-ease in Austria; the culture is more explicitly youthful, nearly everyone speaks English, and at this point the wine community has discernibly settled in. After many years of experimentation and testing out, it has assumed its true form. Austria is established now. She is a Player. But what does she bring to the game? The Austrian wine scene is no longer mint, it doesn't have that new-car smell. It's settling in to what it actually is, showing its lines and creases, and what it will sustain.

Also changing is that restless spirit of envelope pushing, and this is a very good thing. It might be fun to gun the motor and watch the rpms climb but sooner or later you have to cruise and then you want the motor to hum, not yell. The community of Austrian vintners seems to be saying *We are no longer arriving; we are HERE*. It remains a youthful wine culture, and for every grower entering his thirties there's another 20-something coming along. All the Wachau "names" have grown-up sons working at their sides. A new wave of growers is invigorating the Weinviertel. In contrast to Germany, where many things still seem (charmingly, delightfully) removed, Austria feels more connected to the international wine-fraternity. You drive through a town that's like an architectural diamond of the 17th century and arrive at a 21st-century tasting room; you meet a man who can tell you jokes in English and who just came from a tasting of twenty-three vintages of Grange- Hermitage. But when you taste his wines, you taste something quite specific and seemingly eternal. It's a little dysphasic.

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

It's quite pleasing to see more worthy growers finding American importers. I'm happy to have help

raising the tide. The market is healthy but interest is polarized, very strong on the coasts (and in urban restaurant-driven markets everywhere), and still skittish in the less, um, *alert* markets. You know, markets driven by passive retailers who wait for the “call” to create *itself* because they can’t, or won’t be bothered. So, to any stubborn holdouts, here’s the skinny:

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

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

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

- **Your fear of the German language... *Keine angst!***
- **Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.**
- **The market’s preference — abetted by lazy wine merchants and middlebrow journalists — for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can engage.**
- **The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and**

**has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.**

There’s certainly plenty to choose from, and the base-line in Austria is remarkably competent. Yet I looked at a potential add-on from the Kremstal last year, an estate that came highly recommended, and the wines were perfectly good — or “perfectly good,” the kind of wine if you’d ordered blind in a restaurant you’d be relieved. O.K., *this isn’t stellar but I can drink it*. Like that. Immediately thereafter we’d staged a blind tasting of wines I’d already selected, alongside a very famous estate who’d approached us. It makes no sense to add names just because they’re names. The wines have to fit somewhere, and so I tasted them alongside wines we already had, divided into price categories, all Grüner Veltliner. And the very first thing my colleague and I noticed was the *quality level rose markedly*. The guy whose wines we’d begun by tasting was simply outclassed. Our wines had more character, more focus, more precision, *more interest and beauty*, in a nutshell.

The rogue estate in our blind tasting “performed” extremely well, and we’ll see what the future brings. Meanwhile I imagine the other guy will find an importer, who will then claim that he’s the cutting edge especially compared to my group of lumbering dinosaurs. There seems to be an inverse relationship between certitude and perspective; the less you know the more certain you are.

In other news, there are developments sometimes positive and sometimes malign. I’ll go into the whole DAC nonsense a few pages hence, but it bears saying how much good might have been done by the energy being wasted on this little bit of redundant bureaucracy. Meanwhile, a growers association called *Traditionsweingüter*, encompassing the Kremstal, Kamptal and Wagram, has revisited and updated a vineyard classification they’d been forced to jettison when Austria joined the EU. I heard from a journalist friend who seemed certain I’d hate the idea. In fact I like it. I have always favored the idea of codifying the truth on the ground, or of the ground. And little harm can come from hailing the best sites. Indeed it is a service to the drinker, who may or may not wish to memorize them. Now they’re on the label.

It remains to be seen to what extent they’ll tie the bestowal of “First Growth” (*Erste Lage*) to the residual sugar in the wine. It’s less of an issue in Austria because nearly all the wines are dry. I pray for sanity, and hope to find it. Because if a site is great then it is great whether the wine has zero, five or fifteen grams of

sweetness, provided the label alerts the drinker by dint of words already in use, like Halbtrocken.

Speaking of sanity, since the Traditionsweingüter's classification is "unofficial," it is up to them whether outsiders would get to use it, or under what conditions. After all, they are not the sole owners of these outstanding vineyards, and in fact there are peak sites which none of them own. To be exclusive under these circumstances could appear to be claiming a monopoly on Truth. And so, wonderfully, an experiment is being conducted whereby estates outside the group can also use the "Erste Lage" designation. This signals a generous inclusiveness that is exceedingly rare in the wine world, and I find it admirable and touching.

I'd be glad of a similar flexibility on the subject of residual sugar, but there is an historical aversion to it that has its roots in the '85 wine scandal — about which I needn't bore you just now. Nearly all Austrian white wine is either very dry or else Sauternes-sweet. The in-betweens of Germany or Alsace are all but unknown, even anathema here. But in some cases they go too far. Dry means *dry*. The operating principle is don't interfere with the wine, so in vintages when fermentations go all the way the wines are very dry. Other times a few slovenly grams of sugar remain. It's as it happens.

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

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

After all, it stands to reason that if there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. There is soft-creamy dry and there's accommodating dry and there's very crisp dry and there's fierce austere dry and there's even this-could-use-some-damn-sugar dry, and it's nothing but obtuse to assume dryness *as such* is a value. It's just a way for a wine to be, one of a thousand ways. "We want our wines to be *dry*" is too often an excuse for failing to consider how *individual* wines taste, and whether their *particular* dryness is agreeable, or the best thing for that very wine. I appreciate the dryness of Austrian wines, and I suspect it's how they show their best. The issues are two: 1) degree, and 2) flexibility. Most of our palates will not discern sweetness in a typical Austrian Riesling or Grüner Veltliner below 8-10 grams-per-liter, unless we've just tasted thirty wines with zero, in which case we'll notice more *fruit* in the "sweeter" wine and wonder why. A dash of salt in your soup isn't to make it taste salty; it is to awaken flavors, to make it taste more like *itself*. A similar dash of sweetness in a wine both enhances flavor, extends fruit, provides another voice to the dialogue of nuances, reduces alcohol, and in many cases makes for a more elegant finish. To reject such things in order to be "pure" seems puritan to me.

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

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

Each time I raised these issues with growers, I saw them trying to hide their dismay behind a veil of politeness. Some were willing to agree that *Rieslings* could indeed benefit from a mini-dollop of sweetness, but not Grüner Veltliner. That should always be dry; it tastes better that way. I'm suspicious of uniform

opinions, but O.K., the world can probably do without GrüVes carrying little bits of sweetness. Or? The next-to-last GV grower at whom I tasted was Hofer, and he's really a non-interventionist, being organic and all. And one of his GrüVes had a few grams of RS—and tasted absolutely wonderful. I think a couple questions are at play here. To one's own taste one should always be faithful. If you truly hate sweetness then you shouldn't consume it. For the rest of us—the 99.8% rest of us—perhaps a little flexibility is in order. The other question has to do with pleasure. We like to repeat the bromide about wine being a “beverage of pleasure” but we don't always mean it. We're very busy obsessing and scoring and having little fun that I can see.

But this year, I sensed a gleam of hope, for the very first time. First, my new supplier, the wonderful Bernhard Ott, has been making a German-style Riesling with the consulting aid of one Johannes Leitz, since 2005. I also learned of another grower making a Riesling purposely in the (old) German style, that is, light in alcohol and with a balanced sweetness. And then our man Hiedler let a wine stop fermenting last year with around 30g.l. of RS, instead of forcing it to dryness as would have been the case twenty years ago.

I am not suggesting Austrian Rieslings should imitate that style of German Riesling. I am suggesting that curiosity and flexibility are qualities to be nurtured and prized. And I am glad that the rote aversion to anything that smacks of being similar to German wine is slowly being outgrown. It's a sign of maturity.

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

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

## \* THE 2011 VINTAGE \*

You hear a similar story from everyone about the weather. The winter was cold, the early Spring too warm, there was frost damage in early May, the early Summer was on the cool damp side, and then from about July on there was nothing but sun all through the harvest. Naturally the local newspapers declaimed a vintage of the century while the grapes were still being picked. But everyone said they could pick whenever they wanted, not when the weather permitted.

It was a larger than average but not gigantic crop, and it was an easy, clement sort of vintage. It isn't a superstar, but it shows up on time and does its work and never calls in sick.

The headlines: *It's a ripe vintage in which acidity was sometimes deficient or ripeness too high, or both*. This was mostly true for Grüner Veltliner and less true for other varieties. Though acidification was allowed, few claim to have done it. You never know what to believe, but I try to ask the question as neutrally as I can, so the grower doesn't think I'll judge his reply. The few who acknowledged having added acid did so by adding tartaric to their musts, not because of any aesthetic concern, but to lower pH to the point they didn't need to be concerned about stability. Those acids fell out as tartrates, so the wines have no sense of having been “boosted.” No one added citric acid to their wines, having been spooked away by the melancholy examples of many 2003s.

Next, *it's a vintage of homogenous ripeness especially for GV, so that there's little distance between the smallest and largest wines. This means the **Liter level is the very best it has ever been, and you are advised to go stir-crazy on this category** because such quality is very rare indeed*. It's even better than the previous-best vintage 2006. But what pushed the floor upward also pushed the ceiling upward, and a few of the top GVs went too far into a sprawling ripeness and the excessive alcohol that entails. I needed to be very selective in this echelon, and a few normal standbys were passed over this year.

Then, *2011 is a markedly better vintage for Riesling than for Grüner Veltliner*. That doesn't mean it's yucky for GrüVe; there are loads of good ones. It's just discernibly better for Riesling. And this presents a problem. Because y'all don't buy nearly as much Riesling, and I'm not sure I can persuade you to step it up this year. Can I? I'd love to be proven wrong! **2011 is a vintage to buy Riesling both because they're extremely good, and because they're good in an “easy” way**, they're not spiky or inconveniently “dry.” They are in fact always good, often fine and sometimes ravishing. Every one of my top wines was a Riesling. Some are as good as anything I have ever tasted — yes, anything. They're gushingly fragrant, full of fruit and mineral, generous and sexy. So please don't

neglect a group of wines that threads the needle between our (so-called) esoteric tastes and the taste of the (so-called!) average drinker. These wines are Riesling Jacuzzis, so step in and soak.

Also, *2011 is a ripe vintage for red wines*. In fact at this point I'd call it a ripe-ass vintage for reds, because they're almost pornographically in-your-face with heaving gurgling fruit. It will be curious to watch what they become and what bottling (next year) does to them.

*It is the best vintage for Gelber Muskateller in the last three*. No one had to worry about botrytis, and they could pick the Muscat when it was ripe. So the elderflower aromas and flavors came back, and these are needed to balance the catty sharpness of the variety. Mind you, this grape is mega-trendy right now, and there's a distressing amount of dross from growers who planted it, charged a very high price for it, and didn't give a damn about it. Even middling Muscat smells nice to them who like it — like me. But I heard tales of bitter unfinished wines, with too much skin-contact, wines better called “Mus-cash” than Muscat, as the grower sells them early, easily and expensively. Well, not my guys.

If 2011 shows a vintage characteristic, it's that of sweet warm grain. It doesn't usually taste over-fruity, or berried, or flowery. It's a sunny kind of vintage that goes toward meadow flowers, sweet hay, grilled veggie sweetness. It doesn't have a lot of forward drive — what I call “torque” in my tasting notes — but it is winning in its own way. If there are GVs that might have had more focus and dynamism, there are also cheap GVs that have really never been better. And Riesling... I mean shee-it, these are good.

It's the very antonym of 2010, and just as in Germany, tasting 2011s was unkind to 2010, which often seemed dour and grumpy alongside these giggling youngsters. Yet a few growers I spoke with observed somewhat wistfully that a tiny one or two percent of 2010 would have done a lot to tighten these '11s right up. And it's legal to do so; the law tolerates 15% of a different vintage. But A) it simply isn't done; no serious grower would ever do it, and B) even if you wanted to do it, 2010 was so small that you couldn't spare the wine. And there is a virtue in accepting these “imperfections” in the wabi-sabi sense; it is *nature* we are working with after all, and there's only so much will we can impose over her. Unless of course we are from California.

I was struck with surprise at the Burgenland whites, which I feared would be wan and overripe but which in fact were spiffy and chipper. Prielers and Heidi made some of their best-ever white wines.

Needless to say our friends at Nikolaihof sidestepped all of the vintage's problems, because their 40+ years of bio-dynamism gives grapes that are physiologically ripe about 2-3 weeks earlier than conventional vineyards and

can be picked before alcohols get out of control. Several other growers report similar results. Ott made entirely atypical 2011s, full of dynamism and grip, which he thinks may be the glad result of his composting, which kept his soils cooler than the norm. “It's the first time since we started spreading the compost that I think it may have had a tangible impact on the character of the wines,” he said.

I'm more and more encouraged by the actual results I see in the glass at both the certified organic/bio-d estates and also the ones who do it quietly and don't certify. It's a question of texture and poise. The wines are more serene in some way. The growers themselves are anything but serene, especially in transition or just past, because the work is a bear. But their eyes are on the horizon, bless them; the European is deeply identified by his ability to take the long view.

The morning after my Nikolaihof visit I sat with another grower and repeated their story. He couldn't keep from rolling his eyes, and I couldn't help but notice. Now most of you know I am adamantly not dogmatic on the whole organic/bio-d thing. The parameters are too complex, the varieties of conscience too many, and it's more helpful to encourage the steps *taken* than to condemn the steps not taken. But I was bemused by this grower's reaction, and we talked about it. I learned of a certain resentment some growers feel toward what they see as organic *piety*. Often they themselves read it in — we do resent those we perceive as more moral than we are, after all. But if the organic grower seems at all preachy, it creates a shadow-reaction from the others. “I'd never dictate to any wine grower what his ‘proper’ commitment to ecology ought to be,” I said. “Nor do I believe there is only a single pathway to heaven. I know many growers who are deeply committed to the health of their land, and who choose systems other than organic,” I continued. “Yet look: I was there, I tasted, the truth is in the glass, and unless the people are *lying* to me, there's something to this idea that bio-dynamics can give physiologically riper fruit earlier in the harvest season.” He nodded. “And in my opinion serious growers should consider this phenomenon, not for ethical or political or environmental reasons, but because it exists and is interesting.”

I wonder how some of you will feel. These aren't garrulous wines. They are in the best sense demanding, because they are also rewarding. But they are not seductive, and they don't compromise.

You'll note I'm not discussing the reds. That's not because they're shameful — far from it — but because they're usually a year behind, and it's the round roasty '09s we're seeing now. When I did taste '10s I liked them. They may not be juicy beasts of yumminess, but they're pencilly and full of dark fruits and I liked them just fine.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

This is quite a lot harder than it might seem. And there are some surprises.

### THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE

**BRÜNDLMAYER**, for wines you can actually find, and **ALZINGER** for wines we can barely supply. We're getting about 30% more wine from Alzinger this year, and I've begged for a supplement above that, but this is a small winery and we're near the back of a very old queue. But the good news is, there's an outstanding beautiful vintage from Bründlmayer, almost equally strong in GV and Riesling, and with several stellar points.

### OTHER SUPERB COLLECTIONS OF 2011s

**GOBELSBURG** (as if that were in doubt!)

**HIRSCH** (very, very strong this year.)

### WINE OF THE VINTAGE

Well hmmm... it is a superb vintage for *Heiligenstein Riesling*, no matter the source — everyone's was gorgeous. So let me say this: the two "best" wines were **Bründlmayer's Lyra** and **Gobelsburg's** "basic" Heiligenstein. The most astonishing wine was **Bründlmayer's Alte Reben**, the best edition in many years, and potentially — these wines being tardy — the best of them all. We'll see.

Attention must also be paid to **Alzinger's** sublime Loibenberg, though Leo tells me it runs neck and neck with the Steinertal and was only ahead by a nose on the day I was there. No matter; we barely get a pittance as it is.

### WINE(S) OF THE COLLECTION

As there are many older vintages being offered for the first time, I need to highlight some of the pre-2011 wines that took my breath away.

**Heidi Schröck's** meltingly beautiful **2009 Spätlese**, the best table-wine she has yet made. **Nikolaihof's** two long-cask-aged wines, impossible to choose between them, each a rending of the most secret heart, the **1998 Steinriesler**, and the **1995 Riesling Vinothek**.

### GRÜVE OF THE VINTAGE

**Ott — Rosenberg**

(Followed closely by **Gobelsburger's Lamm**)

### MUSCAT(S) OF THE VINTAGE

**Ecker!** (for slug-it-down yum-ass fun)

**Nikolaihof** (for more auspicious pleasures)

### ROSÉ OF THE VINTAGE

**Heidi Schröck's "Biscaya,"** if you like a rich, vinous wine, and **Gobelsburg's**, if you want a gauzy, silky wine.

### RED WINE OF THE COLLECTION

(As the best reds are from earlier years like '10 or '09) You have the obvious monuments such as Prieler's Blaufränkisch Goldberg and Krutzler's Blaufränkisch "Perwolff," but apart from these, there are several lovely surprises:

**Sattler St. Laurent Reserve 2010**

**Setzer Zweigelt 2010**

**Glatzer Blaufränkisch Bernreiser 2009**

### GREAT WINES WITHOUT CATEGORIES, AND OTHER SURPRISES

These again will comprise a "hard-core" list, by which I mean to direct your attention to wines that might otherwise vanish into the dark maw of the DI offering. We'll stock them so you can buy them. They'll change every year; it's meant to be fun, and to keep me the jocund fella you know me to be. I get riled up when really cool wine is ignored.

**Glatzer** Sauvignon Blanc. Yuh, I know we did it last year but he only had 42 cases last year and a lot of you wanted it and couldn't get it. This year there's more. And the wine is as fun as a baby elephant.

**Prieler** Chardonnay Ried Sinner — the best conceivable tabula rasa of pure naked Chardonnay.

**Heidi Schröck** 2009 Spätlese, for reasons indicated above.

**Hofer** Grüner Veltliner "Von Den Rieden" for its like-crazy charm.

**Ecker** Gelber Muskateller, which I dare you to resist.

**Ecker again!** Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg.

**Setzer** Grüner Veltliner "Easy To Drink." Guess why.

## CORK

I'm happy to report cork is almost a non-issue these days in Austria, as the majority of people with whom I work have moved over to screwcaps with a celerity that should give their German brethren a kick in the pants. Everyone spoke of adjusting SO<sub>2</sub> levels and otherwise monitoring the wines for any signs of distortion in the new regime. But it was such a relief to stop worrying.

### FIRST AMONG EQUALS

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

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

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

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

Here's a baseball metaphor. Any wine in this offering gets a base-hit on a line drive. A one-plus wine does so with runners on base, who are driven in. A two-plus wine is a base-clearing double in the gap that misses being a dinger by inches. A three-plus wine is a 7th game- of-the-world-series walk-off grand slam home run.

There is sentiment to the effect that using any form of highlighting is invidious, since it damns the wines without plusses as also-rans. Obviously that's not the case, but I agree there's a danger whenever one establishes a hierarchy based on scores, even in such a primitive system as mine. But there's also a pragmatic consideration at play; you can't buy every wine in this offering, and my plusses try to answer the implied question *What should I not miss no matter what?* And of course you'll still pore through the prose for my many jokes and puns, and the Masonic messages I've cannily embedded within it. I'm also aware there can be political ramifications at play, and I ask you to believe I do my best to ignore them. A grower might feel slighted if he doesn't get enough plusses. A guy who luvved me for all the plusses I gave him last year might wonder what happened if he got fewer or none this year. The pressure's on — and at the moment of tasting, I don't care. Nothing matters but the wine.

## WHEN TO DRINK THE WINES

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

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

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

### A NOTE ON MY USE OF THE WORD "URGESTEIN"

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

### A NOTE ON MY USE OF THE PHRASE *SECRET SWEETNESS*

This emphatically does not denote a wine with camouflaged residual sugar; in fact it doesn't refer to sugar as such at all. It attempts to describe a deeply embedded ripe-tasting flavor that *suggests* sweetness but which is in fact the consequence of physiological ripeness. Most of us know by now there are two things both called "ripeness": one is the actual measure of sugar in the grape (or must), which can be ostensibly "ripe" even when other markers of underripeness (e.g. bitter seeds or high malic acids) are present; the other is a fuller ripeness when both seeds and skins are sweet. Austrian whites from physiologically ripe fruit often convey a kind of sweet echo even when they contain little or no

actual sugar. I like my little phrase “secret” sweetness, because it’s a sweetness that seems to hide from you, though you’re sure it is there. But if you look straight at it, *poof*, it’s gone. Look away and there it is again. It only consents to let itself be inferred. This I just love.

## THE QUESTIONS OF ORGANICS

First, I’m not going to politicize this issue, because I don’t grow grapes or make wine for a living, and thus it would be fatuous of me to preach to people who *do*, about living up to my precious standards. What I’ll do instead is say what I see on the ground, and suggest what I hope will be useful positions.

Austria has the largest proportion of agricultural land organically farmed of any nation in the EU, and certainly more than in the U.S. Among vintners it is a larger and more frequent theme than amongst their colleagues in Germany, but this is not because Austrians are more conscientious than Germans, but rather because they receive less rain than German growers do.

The consensus among serious growers is to go as far as prudence will allow toward organic growing. Few of them use chemical fertilizers, or pesticides or herbicides, but many of them either use or *reserve the right* to use fungicides. Nearly every grower I know (or with whom I’ve discussed these issues) is mindful of the need for sustainability. Some of them just do their thing and answer only to their own conscience. Others belong to various organizations certifying and controlling what’s called “Integrated” growing, wherein the allowable spraying compounds are detailed and enforced. There are two ways to look at this. One says these growers are just lazy or risk-averse and “integrated” growing is just a green-wash for something not much better than conventional/ chemical. I doubt many people who hold that opinion have ever had to support a family as winery proprietors, but their ferocity is at least well meant. The other opinion—the one I myself hold—is that any step in the right direction is to be encouraged, and it’s very likely the world is more improved if most people are taking those steps than if only a few are, because when forced to choose between all or nothing, they choose nothing.

The truly organic or biodynamic estates can choose whether to certify by various means, and most of them do. I have one certified-organic and two biodynamic estates in this assortment. The political issues around certification can be thorny, especially if one’s a lone wolf by nature. But what’s the alternative? If you won’t certify, do you really have a right to the claim of “organic” or “biodynamic?” After all, anyone can *talk* whatever he pleases, but the ones who endure the paperwork and the politics ought to be the only ones

with rights to the power of the organic “brand.” That said, what if you simply do the work because you feel it’s worth doing, but you don’t broadcast it? Fair enough, it would seem, but how do you answer the inevitable questions?

My position is to encourage the growers with whom I work to take whatever steps they can in an organic direction. I don’t think it improves their wines in ways you can taste discretely, though conscientiousness in one thing often implies conscientiousness in all things. Most important, I don’t subject my growers to any sort of purity test with only pass/fail as options. There are reasonable approaches other than mine, and I respect them, but this one works for me.

## AUSTRIAN RED WINES

In my early days I didn’t go looking for red wines. In one case (Glatzer) they found me and I was glad. But it seemed that my then-major competitor was claiming that ground, and it made sense; his approach to Austrian wine was through Italy, whereas mine was through Germany.

But over time I encountered these winning red wines more frequently, and I found them ever-harder to resist. Prieler and then Sattler were added, and I started to study the native varieties, and also to drink the wines more often at home. Still, it was hard to refute a claim that this portfolio was overwhelmingly white-wine oriented, and the few reds available were afterthoughts.

That had to change. Because I found myself believing more and more strongly in the red wines in general, and in Blaufränkisch in particular. With this year’s offering, two new growers have been added, both masters of Blaufränkisch, and I mean to make a Statement: we yield to no one in our Austrian red wine offering. In fact I am so convinced by the wines that I’m exploring a way to do an interactive tasting with you guys, wherein you’re invited to bring along what you feel are the best available wines in a range of price-points, and we’ll taste them together — blind if you wish — with Austrian reds from this portfolio. For I am growing more secure by the day, that these new reds from this old/new culture are providing the greatest drinking pleasure available per Dollar — unless you need your socks knocked off, your blocks busted, or your whelm over-ed. If you’re willing to “settle” for beautiful, elegant mid-weight food-luvvin wines that have *all the concentration and intensity they need to do the job*, but not so much as to scream for your exclusive attention, then you and I have something to talk about.

Austrian red wine is to be taken seriously, that much is beyond dispute. There are a few that are silly, show-offy, insipid, even flawed. Trust me, we’re spitting those out and driving hastily away. What I am selecting are just what I like best, wines with poise, grace and elegance but



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

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

Indeed it is gratifying to note a growing appreciation within Austria for reds with attributes of grace instead of mere brute power. Anyone can make such wines if you grow grapes in a hot enough climate, and they all have a pall about them, something withering and obtuse. Yet this singularly prevalent idiom is becoming less attractive to many Austrian vintners, who seem to have discovered what makes their wines unique and desirable, and who've set about to nurture it. Good for them! One symptom of this growing enlightenment appears among the Sattler offering. Erich is gradually discontinuing his "super-Tuscan" wine (which

he called Cronos) and using that fruit for single-varietal bottlings of stellar-class Zweigelt and St. Laurent. I'd like to see others follow suit.

About twenty years ago, when Austria was still deciding whether it wanted to be Bordeaux, Burgundy or Tuscany, the growers planted the usual suspects, and you'll still find them here and there: Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, plus someone has Zinfandel planted somewhere. One really fine thing that's happening now is a general retreat away from Cabernet. "We have the climate to ripen it but our subsoils are too cold," one grower told me. Thus our ubiquitous friend gives rampant veggies except in the steamiest vintages. "But hey," the same grower continued; "we tried it, it didn't take, recess over, back to work!" There's a discernable and laudable return to the several indigenous varieties, of which there are three types to interest us, each unusual, and each offering something we cannot find elsewhere.

The easy one is *Zweigelt*, because it almost always tastes marvelous and it always smells seductive. You know the way certain people just seem effortlessly funny? Zweigelt seems effortlessly tasty. Only a churl could dislike it. Then comes *St. Laurent* (pronounced to rhyme with "zonked cow rent"), which is harder to grow but almost as easy to adore as Zweigelt. It's suave and earthy, and you love it if you love the funky side of Pinot.

And then there's *Blaufränkisch*, which I feel is the

master class in Austro-reds, the last taste to be acquired but the one with the most abiding fascination and offering a pleasure deeper than joy. Details are comin' right up.

**ZWEIGELT:** The last word in red wine! Rolls right off the tongue, eh? Well it rolls right off *my* tongue and down my happy throat, because at its best this is oh-so-drinkable. It's best cropped close, and ordinary Zweigelt can show more size than depth, seeming big but hollow. But even then, it smells great. It always smells great! It's a cross of St. Laurent with Blaufränkisch and its most overt fruit note is sweet cherry, but there's more to the best wines. Imagine if you could somehow skim the top notes off of really ripe Syrah, so that you had the deeply juicy fruit and could leave the animal-herbal aspects behind. That might be Zweigelt. It also does interesting things in the glass. If you like its high tones of black cherry and huckleberry you should drink it without aeration. In a carafe though, it seems to default back to its St. Laurent parentage, growing more and more "Burgundian" with oxygen. There are also some Zweigelts that offer the dusty tannin and beautiful weedyess of Blaufränkisch.

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

At first St-L was thought to be a genetic mutation of Pinot Noir, but modern ampelography has proven this to be false. Still, we really don't know *what* this grape is. Modern theories suggest it's a Burgundy grape of some kind with the other parent being either an unknown or an extinct variety.

It's the fastest-growing red grape in Austria (from a small base, of course), having nearly doubled in acreage since 1999, while remaining a distant 5th among all red grapes planted. One needs a certain religious zeal to grow it, and there's a new organization of its passionate partisans, which includes Michi Moosbrugger of Schloss Gobelsburg. Though there are 11 known clones, none of them is anything but a bitch to grow. I remain convinced that if this grape and its wines came

from *anyplace* that didn't speak German, it would be mega-trendy in our fair land.

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

In fact there seems to be a kind of awakening within Austria, whereby the Blaufränkisch is being discovered to be a fascinating and remarkable variety. David Schildknecht just published a magnificently comprehensive and scholarly piece in *Wine&Spirits* bringing us all up to speed on the general state of thinking among the grape's growers and consumers. I asked David a few questions, because I wished to consult an impartial observer before I issued some grand statement I wouldn't be able to support.

***TT: What claim does Blaufränkisch stake to uniqueness?***

*DS: Both I and those who grow this grape have trouble describing the results for novices in terms of more familiar grapes and genres, a typical answer – depending of course in part on style and terroir – being “a bit like a Northern Rhône; a bit like a Piedmontese Nebbiolo; a bit like certain Burgundian Pinots; a bit like a genuinely great cru Beaujolais...” When you find yourself reaching for such diverse and distinctively delicious points of comparison and still coming up short, then, I'd argue, you know you are in the presence of something uniquely special... [and] that's pretty exalted company to keep.*

*And speaking of terroir and style, when you find a grape as responsive to the one and adaptable to the other, that too is special.*

*I'm not sure of another cépage that enjoys the position of Blaufränkisch as regards our experience of its aging potential. Serious solo flights with this grape only began in earnest two decades ago, but it's already clear that a) you don't appreciate its full potential until you taste 10-15 year old examples and b) scarcely any of the earliest efforts by the most earnest, original, and risk-taking growers have yet faded in the bottle, so we have good reason to believe that today's top wines will age beautifully for many years and as yet virtually no reason to speculate what will be*

*their allotted span. Silvia Prieler just wrote me after reading my recent article that she places utmost importance on Blaufränkisch's ability to reveal new charms over many years as well as on the fact that we don't yet know how many. (TT: my emphasis)*

***TT: Is there a sense in which it is particularly Austrian? I have said "If Grüner Veltliner were red, it would be Blaufränkisch." Is that statement supportable?***

*DS: There is such a sense insofar as Blaufränkisch is arguably the other grape in Austria's menagerie that is capable of greatness; highly site-sensitive; stylistically malleable; and (as yet anyway) rare and unproven outside Austria. I suppose one might be able to conjure up notions of national character and varietal character and claim that one is somehow especially fitting to the other, but I suspect the variations on that game are endless, which is to say unchecked by any evidence but only by the limits of the player's cleverness. And I know not to challenge you on that field, Herr Theise!*

***TT: Given all the variety of attractive red wines in the world, what is the salient case for including Blaufränkisch in a merchant's (sommelier, retailer, wholesaler, importer) offering?***

*DS: Virtually every merchant I know has a personally felt need as well as a significant cadre of customers who are on the lookout for something "new" to set alongside the rather small canon of cépages or cépage-terroir combinations that dominate the market and wine literature. The question then is whether the newness wears off. Given the rapidity with which Blaufränkisch is being transported by growers ever-closer to sublimity (100-point Nirvana ;-); the dazzling diversity it reveals in response to terroir and human stylistic ideals; its fascinating flexibility at table; the mystery of "how will it end?" in the bottle; not to mention the colorful and outspoken cast of growers that champion it, I don't think the sense of discovery will wear off on wine lovers in any hurry.*

***TT: When Blaufränkisch fails, it's usually because...***

*DS: ...growers try to take shortcuts in order to render an inexpensive "Blaufränkisch 101." This*

*variety needs some breathing space – and, above all, time – in cask to really reveal its virtues. As I've written before, "Blaufränkisch punch" is no more interesting than "Pinot punch" and since by contrast Zweigelt, Gamay, or Grenache can be irresistibly delicious after only a short post-fermentative stay in tank, let them continue to dominate the \$10-15 retail realm (even as they of course excel also in more exalted variations). ...or because some still try to treat it as if it were Merlot or Cabernet or they were in Bordeaux ...or (perhaps in that same connection) try to compensate for vine material that gives low skin-to-juice ratio by extracting more aggressively.*

***TT: Even decent average Blaufränkisch will show you...***

*DS: Dimensions that go well beyond fruits and berries.*

***TT: Great Blaufränkisch is unique among wines in showing...***

*DS: I struggle to answer this because the styles and soil influences are so varied; the "end point" in bottle maturation a mystery; and because to pull out a few traits and imply that their conjunction is sufficient to establish a unique description is probably inherently an exercise in overreach. But there are nearly always dimensions that find one reaching for floral and mineral vocabulary; there is generally an aura of smokiness; and a combination of refreshing and invigorating primary juiciness with faintly, attractively grainy texture.*

Thanks David. I feel better now. I'd also add that the more I drink this variety the more it feels right-bank Bordeaux-ish to me, or even like Malbec as it grows in Cahors. And yet there's something that resists direct analogy to any other variety, except to observe that it isn't "sweet" like Zweigelt and it isn't "round" the way St. Laurent is. Blaufränkisch is incisive, pointed, full of herbs and spices and weeds, very seldom especially "fruity" but often like berries and smoke. As I looked around for the right supplier(s), I found myself repelled by anyone who used too much blatant new wood or whose wines were obtrusively tannic. Tannin is innate to the variety, and when it's balanced it adds an agreeable jolt of dust to the varietal juiciness. I found that if I searched for elegance, that BF's native complexity would invariably follow. I also wanted variety within the variety, and among Prieler, Wallner and Krutzler there's

no redundancy that I can see.

Having (as it were) graduated to Blaufränkisch, I find there's no turning back. It scratches an itch. I cherish its little bite. And it isn't remotely "difficult" like Tannat or Mondeuse or Trousseau can (sometimes) be; it's delicious but not *dee-lish*, if you see what I mean. I even entertain the radical thought that Summer Of Riesling could easily segue into Winter Of Blaufränkisch without missing a beat.

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

Two final pieces of happy news: there is a tangible retreat away from oak as a dominating flavor, and a concomitant appreciation of its great value as a seasoning. Growers have more confidence their wines don't need the pancake makeup of 300% new barriques. Second, there's a developing story that concerns the remarkable improvement of the red wines from regions once thought to be white-wine only. Maybe it's a climate-change thing. But after the whole French Paradox thing broke, lots of growers felt they had to make a token red wine or two, just so the customer wouldn't have to go elsewhere for them. Most of those wines were pretty anemic, and a few of them are still pretty clunky. But more and more of them are viable, attractive and very tasty beings. We don't sell them very much, because (I think) you prefer to spend your red-wine Dollar on a grower who specializes in reds. Makes sense. But you're missing out on some very tasty numbers.

Herewith a list of reds-from-white-wine growers, which I plead with you not to ignore: (*Hofer, Ecker, Schloss Gobelsburg, Berger, Setzer, Bründlmayer*).

## AUSTRIAN WINE CULTURE

For a while it seemed to mellow; Germany's economic doldrums dried up the major export market for Austrian wines, and the market relaxed. Then Germany woke up, and now it's a seller's market again. I got to Austria May 2nd and was distressed to see

wine lists already full of '11s. "But Terry, you forgot," Peter Schleimer told me, "The wines have been on lists since *January*." Sadly, this is true. One fashionable grower told me his customers start asking in *late NOVEMBER* when the new vintage will be available. Come December, he cannot sell the current one. December! Small wonder some of the growers simply can't comprehend the challenges we still face marketing this "difficult" category (difficult-by-dint-of-umlauts is how I like to put it; the same wines from any other country would be demanded like Viagra), and I try and balance the obstacles of buying AND selling the wines, and believe me my legs weren't meant to bend that way.

But there *is* a kind of steadiness that's more sustainable — and agreeable — than the overheated climate of yore. Icarus, one might say, is cruising at a sensible altitude. One delightful symptom of this is the ever-more frequent policy (especially in the Kamptal) of delaying release of the top wines for an extra 6-12 months. Rushing them into the bottle seems to clip them in some way, and many growers are willing to risk that customers will be frustrated if they can't get their icon-wines in April of the year after the vintage. Nor will the grower enjoy the cash-flow from selling his most expensive wines so early. You have to love a principled stand.

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

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

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

### What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

At its best, it tastes like an ethereal essence of the seed. It is dark, intense, viscous; a little goes a long way. In Austria it is used as a condiment; you dunk bread in it, drizzle it over salads, potatoes, eggs, mushrooms, even soups; you can use it in salad dressings (in which case you may *cut* it with extra-virgin olive oil, lest it become *too* dominant!); there are doubtless many other uses which I am too big a food clod to have gleaned. If you develop any hip ideas and don't mind sharing them —attributed of course—I'd be glad to hear from you. THE FACTS: this oil is the product of a particular kind of pumpkin, smaller than ours, and green with yellow stripes rather than orange. The main factor in the quality of the oil is, not surprisingly, the **QUALITY OF THE SEEDS THEMSELVES**. Accordingly, they are hand-scooped out of the pumpkin at harvest time; it's quite picturesque to see the women sitting in the pumpkin patches at their work—though the work is said to be arduous.

### Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

5. Relative gentleness or roughness of mashing.

The seeds are mashed as they roast, and the more tender the mashing, the more polished the final flavor.

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

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

### Storing and Handling

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

### The Assortment

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

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

### Bottle sizes

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

**OAT-003** (12/250ml)

**OAT-007** (12/500ml)

**OAT-010** (6/1.0L)

# Familie Prieler

Neusiedlersee-Hügelland // Schützen

vineyard area // 20 hectares  
annual production // 8,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Goldberg (slate); Seeberg, Sinner (limestone, mica schist); Ungerbergen (limestone with pebbles)  
grape varieties // 30% Blaufränkisch, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Pinot Noir, 10% Chardonnay, 10% Merlot, 10% Pinot Blanc, 8% St. Laurent, 3% Welschriesling



*“We picked for acidity, not for sugar in 2011,” said Silvia (and Georg) Prieler. “We had absolute zero botrytis; really picture-book grapes,” they added, stating a theme that would be echoed constantly.*

I know Prielers will never forget my visit in 2009, because I did something highly subversive even by my slovenly standards. We were all out to dinner in Eisenstadt, both Prielers, my colleague Leif and me, and Peter Schleimer. We ate food that was good. When the time came to place dessert orders I mumbled half-facetiously “Hmm. . . I actually could eat a *schnitzel* right about now. . .” whereupon Georg’s eyes lit up: “So could I, a *schnitzel* sounds real good.” Leif said “I’m game,” and of course Schleimer’s always game. Silvia looked at us as if we had taken leave of our senses, but they had Bründlmayer’s *Sekt* on the list, so there wasn’t only *schnitzel* but also the perfect wine to wash it down with.

So we ordered *schnitzels*. “Really? *Schnitzels*?” asked our server. YUP! And a bottle of *Sekt* please. “Do you want the whole portion?” we were asked. “You can hold the sides but we definitely want a full hank of *schnitzel*, my good fellow.” So off he went. He then returned to the table, saying “They wanted me to come back and make sure you weren’t joking.” Joking? HELL no: we want *schnitzels*, big ones, the best you have. Joking, hmmmph. . .why the nerve of some people...

We were out celebrating because Silvia’s gorgeousness was ALL OVER the cover of the new “Falstaff” magazine. They were Vintners Of The Year. This is a big deal; Falstaff is sort of like Food And Wine but with lots more wine coverage. Oddly enough in four out of six years it’s been one of my guys on Falstaff’s cover. I think I’ll have to send Peter Moser a shiny new unicycle or something.

I think what I love most about Silvia Prieler —

about the whole family — is their openness and good humor. They’re not hiding behind a front of omniscience. When they can’t explain something, they’ll say so. When in 2005 their grapes were physiologically ripe before they were sugar ripe, I asked Silvia how such a thing could happen. “We don’t know!” she answered.

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

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

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

First she wanted Pinot Noir, after a practicum at Domaine Dujac. Papa demurred, but it so happened he’d purchased a half-hectare parcel intended for another purpose entirely, but which was planted with 35-year old Pinot Noir vines, and which Silvia successfully convinced him to leave to her diabolical intentions.

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

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

I'd like to do more with this estate, because here is a family doing everything right. The wines appear to be evolving also, toward a greater polish and more overt fruit. I say "appear" to be because I don't really

know. Silvia says it isn't on purpose. I try to applaud it so as to be encouraging, but come on, what affect does my screwy taste have? I'm the asshole who orders schnitzel for dessert.

### 2011 Pinot Blanc Seeberg +

AEP-082

Lovely fragrance! It was the first "serious" Pinot Blanc I'd tasted — but not the last — that excelled in 2011. Ripe and golden, roasted corn and sautéed scallops and Meyer lemon and nectarines; I'm very pleasantly stoked and surprised, as I'd suspected the '11s would sprawl in this warm-weather district. 36 hours on the skins and on the *gross* lees until February; there's even some lemon-balm here; stylish, weighty but not heavy. Recalls the great 1993.

### 2011 Chardonnay Ried Sinner +

AEP-083

You know, this is the only Chardonnay I offer other than Blanc de Blancs Champagne. I'm putting it on the *hard-core list* because of something that struck me while I was there tasting; this is really naked Chard — *das ding an sich* (the thing in itself doesn't quite translate) — and as such it offers a rare glimpse into the inherent flavor of the variety — such as it is. They let it do malo and leave it on the lees, but all in steel. It shows Pouilly-Fuissé aromas; sweet straw, lemon, mineral; it has more dialogue than the Pinot Blanc; supple, graceful, clear and salty, quite possibly the best-ever vintage of this.

### 2011 Leithaberg Pinot Blanc, 6/750ml (+)

AEP-084

A group of (I think) twelve growers have come together to create a term — a Brand, if you will — for a wine made to show minerality, to grow in the limestone soils of the Leithagebirge. You will see I offer this along with a Leithaberg red from Blaufränkisch.

We tasted three optional cuvées, the idea being to indicate the greatest distance from the Seeberg Pinot Blanc — though the blend we settled on has some very late-picked *clean* Seeberg along with a lot from Haidatz; there's indeed a more limestony grip here — you might say this is oysters and the Seeberg is corn on the cob. Indeed the wine is as coppery as wild Wellfleets, with notes of juniper and woodruff and salt. My "plus" is pending tasting the finished blend in bottle, but potential, as they say, is there.

### 2010 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe +

AEP-087

### 2009 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe

AEP-074

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The '09 is on the market until November, after which the '10 will follow. They told me there were a lot of sickly reds from 2010, especially after the open and sweetly ripe '09s, yet oddly I found I preferred many of the '10s. Maybe I'm perverse ("Maybe?") or maybe the excellent '10s are the small tip of the iceberg, but I liked every single thing about them.

This one is sleek and pure blueberries; cool but elegant and fine; indeed I wonder when it has ever smelled so lovely; absolute violets, pencil and cassis, cool supple tannin; a meditative wine, a thrall of unearthly clarity. My kind of wine. The 2009 is more roasty and seductive, weedy and classic "basic" BF in its purest form; meatier and dustier than 2010, or for that matter '08. Give this cuvée to someone who's never tasted Blaufränkisch; it's the perfect pure introduction, and also it's bloody delicious.

**2010 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, 6/750ml (+)**

AEP-085

**2009 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, 6/1.5L ++**

AEP-078M

Leithaberg reds are permitted to use large barrels or used barriques, but not to the extent the flavors show detectable oak flavors. Prielers actually analyze the wines to make sure — the '09 has under 200ppb of the flavor-imparting compound. So this is Blaufränkisch in an exceptionally pure form.

Again we chose between two possible versions, but all of us tended toward the first, a neo-classically refined and upright BF, refined as the best '10s are, but diligent, scrupulous and with embedded depths; bouquet-garni, juicy, not tame but *civil* — alternate casks are gamier and more tannic. The '09 currently on the market is a show-stopper; an immensely spicy fragrance, mint and Madagascar peppers, leads to a palate with panache, depth and spiciness, resolving into an earthy bloody finish that isn't animal and stays precise and focused. Sweet and garrigue-y, almost silky and glossy.

**2010 Pinot Noir, 6/750ml (+)**

AEP-088

**2009 Pinot Noir, 6/750ml +**

AEP-079

I think that Silvia sees this wine as her fascinating, frustrating and yet amazing problem-child. The more she kvetches about it, the more I think she adores it. The 2010 has a seriously Burgundian fragrance, like Morey 1er-Cru — no lie — but the palate is still in its terrible-twos, yet the final finish is mealy and earthy and juicy. This will be bottled in November. The “sweeter” 2009 shows Vosne aromas, deep and meaty, and the finish shows classic Burgundy truffle.

I know these are expensive, but I also know some of you are looking for Every-Possible-Pinot, and I commend these excellent wines to your salivating attention.

**2009 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, 6/750ml (++)**

AEP-086

**2009 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, 6/1.5L (++)**

AEP-086M

This was about to be bottled. You'll need to take my word; this is an iconic wine in Austria, one of the few elite Blaufränkisch there is, not made when the vintage doesn't warrant it, and celebrated whenever it *is* made. It's an Occasion. And it's a magnificent wine that needs to age.

The hill is schist and therefore the wine is mineral. BF is mineral in any case, and this confluence of variety and terroir is strikingly expressive, perhaps profound. It often shows an iron that makes me think of Pomerol, deep and arterial, with embedded winter-truffle and earth and smoke, leading to a steely sort of sweetness.

To reassure themselves, Silvia and Georg opened up a bunch of Very Serious red wines with which to compare their own. One was (unbeknownst to me) a recent Bordeaux that received “100 points” from Der Man. (It was superb though I couldn't insist it was “perfect.”) When we were all done scrolling among the wines we all agreed: Goldberg *belonged*.

## Brandy

Well now!

It seems there was some Grüner Veltliner planted in Prieler's land at some point, and Engelbert refused to make wine from it. Instead he made brandy, none of which was ever bottled or sold, but each vintage was made and aged until the grapes were grubbed up. So, this is a **1990**, *bottled in April 2012*, which I guess makes it an “XO” though I don't know what they're gonna call it. It's more like a Spanish brandy than a Cognac; nougat and caramel; smooth and markedly complex. Actually I'm really gob-smacked by this. High notes of steel and mint and cherry.

# Heidi Schröck

Neusiedlersee-Hügelland // Rüst



vineyard area // 10 hectares  
annual production // 3,300 cases  
top sites // Vogelsang, Turner  
soil types // eroded primary rock, mica slate, limestone and sandy loam  
grape varieties // 25% Weissburgunder, 25% Welschriesling, 10% Blaufränkisch, 10% Furmint, 10% Grauburgunder, 10% Zweigelt, 5% Gelber Muskateller, 5% Sauvignon Blanc,

*If you've seen Heidi recently, and if you'd seen her before, you'll notice she is gradually disappearing. Any more svelte and she can dodge the raindrops. She does report that some of her girlfriends are bemused, but I myself am enjoying the metamorphosis, though at times I find myself thinking "You're really very hot, but what did you do with my friend Heidi?"*

It is an interesting year for my friend. I won't go into the personal details, but there is a palpable sense of *passage* taking place, of molting or the shedding of skin. It isn't all good, but there's a charge about it, a kind of hum and buzz. And so when Heidi greeted me by saying "Welcome to the most extraordinary vintage I have seen," it seemed to make sense. It's an extraordinary time.

I went to see Heidi in the morning of a day when I had dreamed like crazy the night before. Since I moved to Boston I've been dreaming again. I'd forgotten how it was. Where I lived before was so brutally all-consuming that sleep was a kind of oblivion I needed just to cope with being conscious. Now it's like a 24-hour show, as if the throbbing noise dissipated and let loose the night furies. I love it, but you have to be willing to carry the echo of whatever you've dreamt into the day.

When my son was about four, I saw him coming out of his room one morning, and asked him how was his sleep. *Good, Daddy.* And did he have any good dreams? *Yes Daddy, you were in one of my dreams.* Really? What was I doing? He looked puzzled and shook his head, and then answered *You know what you were doing, Daddy; you were there.* So that's it; a lifetime of Jungian study, compressed into one single sentence.

So it's good to have the dream world back. The screen isn't dark any more, and one of these nights I hope to join Steven Colbert and Keira Knightly as we tumble naked through the snow down Mt. Washington on our way to eating six dozen Nootka Sounds from the B&G Oyster Bar. But anyway, when I got to Heidi's house I was all buzzing from a chittery night's worth of visions, and I wanted to see a friend I could relax with.

A stork was scratching its head in its nest on top of a

neighboring house. Rust is full of storks. They arrive in the Spring and gorge themselves from the Stork-smorgasbord also known as Lake Neusidl. Beautiful, magical birds, with their dreamy kite-like flight and their clacketty mating calls and their silly yet beatific faces. I'd never seen one scratch its head before; he looked like he was stumped over a clue in the Times crossword puzzle. For an instant I thought I was still dreaming. And so I joined my friend Heidi, and her wines, and her life among the storks, for a few genial hours.

Of the many things I love about Heidi Schröck, one is that she's one of the few who really does what so many others only *say* they do — let her wines lead the way. No two Heidi-vintages are the same. She doesn't wrestle her fruit into a shape she has determined in advance. In 2004 when nothing wanted to ferment fully, she made an entire vintage of Halbtrocken wines, anathema in the domestic market (but delicious then as now).

It also looks very much as if one of her twins will carry on the estate. This is extremely good news, because Heidi is a good teacher and good model for intuitive viticulture. It will also mark the first time in my own career that I'll have witnessed the torch being passed *from the mother* to the child.

I'd love Heidi's wines even if I didn't love Heidi, but I love them even more *because* I love the person who makes them. I know you know what I mean. Any of you who've met Heidi will know exactly what I mean. If you haven't met her, the easiest way to sum her up is to say she's real, and you can talk with her. I mean, what can be more important about a person?

Heidi seemed to expect me to cajole her to grow the domain so we could get all the wine we could sell. Instead I did the opposite. I mean, why? She *likes* it the way it is. It's

the proper dimension to let her pay the quality of attention she enjoys and the wines need. I'm just glad to know her and be part of such a clearly successful life. I want the whole world to be like Heidi and her winery.

She makes it look easy. Much easier, in fact, than it has been for her. But that's how it is with certain people, and Heidi's one of them. Though she's as lusty and earthy as anyone I know, she doesn't seem to know how not to be graceful. She is one of those very few people who appear to have figured out how to live. She possesses an innate elegance and sweetness. I have no idea what effort this might entail—none, I suspect—but she is naturally conscientious and thoughtful without being at all self-effacing. She invites affection with no discernible effort. Because all she has to do is offer it.

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

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

### 2011 Rosé Biscaya +

AHS-126

Rich and vinuous, a rosé of the vintage!

### 2011 Weissburgunder +

AHS-125

Amazingly complex aromas; rice pudding and semolina dumplings and west coast oysters and candied lemon and dark-meat chicken and balsam; leesy and salty and with a quivering just-caught seafood sweetness. Her best-ever? I can't recall its equal.

### 2011 Gelber Muskateller

AHS-124

I just learned this wine made it into *Vinaria's* top-10 Muscats of the 2011 vintage, which is high praise. There's an almost lurid elderflower aroma, a Romanesque body (13.8% alc.) and an enveloping structure — Heidi's Muscat isn't meant to be snappy and primary — it's a potpourri of papaya, yet stern and salty below the foamy wave of exotic fruit.

### 2011 Furmint +

AHS-128

I sometimes think if I had to select just one wine from my entire portfolio that would express *why I do this and what I believe in*, it would be this one. 8.82 hectares in all of Austria — Heidi has 10% of them — reintroduced after having vanished by a small coterie of loyal idealists, difficult to grow, late-ripening and high acidity, and a subtle searching flavor that so perfectly expresses the sad sweetness of late Autumn. The stubborn fragrant quince, the little divinity-crystals in the pear, the low honey-sun, all there in these wines.

And this usually bashful wine is like a 21-gun salute in '11. A swoon of fragrance, dizzy whirling galaxies of complex sweetness; linden blossom concentrate; the palate is mint and salt and pepper, steel and stones and the vapor-echo of that sweet aroma; serpentine and somewhere beyond "expressive," out in its graceful orbit in the smooth warm ether of beauty.

### 2010 Grauburgunder +

AHS-129

Please remember: this is a *sponti*, 3 casks one of which is new, fermented in the casks and kept on the gross lees with lots of stirring, malo in cask, and when it works (as it often does) it can be one of the best oaky wines I've ever tasted. Balanced and creamy — some Chassagne are like this. The top notes of béchamel seem to justify the wood. And notice the finish; after ten seconds it resolves to pure *fruit*. I sometimes wonder if our antipathy to oaky wines is because the wrong variety is used. Chardonnay is a wuss. Pinot Gris, on the other hand...

**2009 Welschriesling Spätlese + +**

AHS-134

**First offering. *HARD-CORE LIST WINE.*** It's 100% Welschriesling, aged in large acacia casks (which are both more neutral and more porous than oak) until mid-May 2012. It is utterly astonishing, the most beautiful dry wine Heidi has made. It's completely tertiary and could fit right in to a Nikolaihof lineup; loving kindness in a glass. In literal terms it's satiny, showing super-ripe tropical fruit yet solid vinosity. But really all you want the wine to do is to cover you in hungry slobbery kisses, and it does and you are in love like *never* before. White chocolate notes appear in the evanescent, haunting length.

**2010 Beerenauslese "Selektion," 6/375ml**

AHS-130H

This is somewhat more buttery and less grainy than it sometimes has been; more grace and delicacy. It's demure if not quite "ladylike." Full of finesse, and as a "dessert" wine it's markedly easy to drink — and to afford.

**2010 Ruster Ausbruch "On The Wings Of Dawn," 6/375ml +**

AHS-132H

**2009 Ruster Ausbruch "On The Wings Of Dawn," 6/375ml + +**

AHS-131H

Both of these wines indicate a new level of finesse. "We've learned the best time to pick for the sweet wines is not later than October." This, as opposed to waiting and waiting and then getting sometimes-dubious botrytis.

The gorgeous '09 is the sweet fraternal twin of that stellar Spätlese; dried stone fruits, a nuance of pencil lead, botrytis in the form of vanilla bean and talc, and I don't remember a better vintage of this.

The 2010 shows more dark flavors, more iron; it's almost herbal; the botrytis is more botrytis-y, it's fervently salty. "Adventurous," as Heidi says. Leaves a long char and smoke finish, whereas the '09 is all about fruit.

**2010 Ruster Ausbruch "Turner," 6/375ml + +**

AHS-135H

Whereas "Wings" is a cuvée of various grapes, this one's 100% Furmint, and isn't always made. To my mind this is the high-water mark for Austrian sweet wine in the creamy-rich idiom, because it's *WINE*, not confectioned sweet goop; indeed it's a quintessence of Furmint, almost stern; solid and adamant. Three ripe quinces in a room of blown-out candles.

## The Trio of Schröck & Kracher Wines

These can now be released, though under sad circumstances, what with Alois Kracher's distressingly premature death. He and Heidi were friends, and "Luis" loved a new project, and he wondered what sort of wine he might help make on the "other" shore of the Neusiedlersee, where the soils were more complex than the sands of Illmitz. I spoke with him on Heidi's cell phone one day as she and I were driving home from dinner. She'd told me about the project, and I assured Luis I'd be glad to collaborate with Vin Divino on joint marketing and sales, assuming they felt the same. Luis said he was very relieved to hear it, and I wondered why. I didn't think it was extraordinarily gentlemanly of me... Now of course it's all changed. Alas. Luis is gone. As I write I'm not sure what's becoming of Vin Divino. Nor do I know how much wine Heidi wants to sell. I only know I want to be the only guy selling it. There are two wines, a dry one called Greiner (the name of the vineyard) and an Ausbruch. Both are now '07s.

**2007 Schröck & Kracher Greiner Welschriesling, 6/750ml**

AHS-136

**2007 Schröck & Kracher Ruster Ausbruch, 6/375ml**

AHS-123H

Whether it's the more elegant '07 vintage, or whether it's another level of know-how with the second vintage, these wines are in another league entirely from the somewhat ungainly maiden voyage, and for the first time you can taste the synergy that must have motivated the project at the beginning.

The Ausbruch is warmer and more forceful than the hotter, more assertive 2006. It's a classic example of the baroque power of the Ausbruch genre; quite bruléed and vanillin, but not really creamy. This has magma power.

**2008 Schröck & Kracher Greiner Welschriesling Halbtrocken**

AHS-133

vineyard area // 15 hectares  
annual production // 5,800 cases  
soil types // gravel with brown earth and sand  
grape varieties // 60% Zweigelt, 30% St. Laurent, 10% Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Weißburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Welschriesling



*My local distributor carries Sattler's basic St. Laurent, so I've been along while it's taken out to show to customers. Most don't know what it is, and suppose it might be all weird and umlaut-y. Until they taste it. Then I get to watch the gradual melting away of each successive layer of resistance, as the sumptuous prettiness of the wine completes its seduction. I don't even care if a customer insists on pronouncing it as if it were French — Sawhn Lawhrahn, instead of the much easier "Zonked Low (like "cow") Rent". In fact, here's the handy-dandy mnemonic — it's like "Zonked Cow-Rent" which is of course the stipend paid by a drunken Guernsey when he knocks over your fence.*

Everything about this estate is candid and getting more so all the time. There aren't many wines. He knows what he wants to do, and does it. The wines are getting less oaky as he trusts his fruit more. The Austrian wine press is also noticing, and the wines are prominent among the top performers.

When you start out you have certain wines against which you model your own. You reassure your customers (and yourself) that you can compete with viable wines in the familiar idioms. You are, in other words, guided by a certain timorousness and insecurity. If you can demonstrate your competence at the prevailing style, you comfort yourself, please your customers, and sell some wine.

A lot of growers stop there. They know the right things to say, and they can create a plausible facsimile of a serious wine estate, and the wines are often tasty. But in the end they are dull. Because they have no way to answer the crucial questions: why do you exist? What is yours to say?

Growers who are capable and curious, who actually want to develop, will often find after a few years that they can trust the essential taste of their fruit. And so they adjust their cellar work to favor things that are inherent and downplay that which is applied later. Oak goes from being a bad master to being a good servant. I think this is exactly what's happening at Erich Sattler's tidy little winery.

I have always loved clarity, in every way and every form. I can't always attain it, as these things are subject to the mitigations of talent or emotional courage, but looking outside at this *cleaned* air all I can do is exult.

It is so fine.

If you wear reading glasses; i.e., if you're a decrepit geez like me, remember when you first put them on? *I can see!* All this time squinting at menus and instructions, putting brighter bulbs in all your lamps, wondering why all of a sudden your arms weren't long enough anymore, and then *wham*, presto: vision again. If you remember that feeling, you might indulge me my love of things clear. I don't need them tidy or pat, and I positively relish them when they're ambiguous or evanescent, but without clarity I feel frustrated. Which is why I love wines like those of Erich Sattler. They show us that wines don't need size in order to contain *vista*.

Sattler is one of the few young growers I know who isn't out to get your attention but instead seeks merely to bring you pleasure. I love these kinds of wines, as you know. You take the first sip and think "Well sure, O.K., it's clean and pleasant and all, but..." and then the glass is suddenly empty and you barely know why. I could tell you why: it's because the wine *tastes* good and invites you to keep sipping.

Erich Sattler is emblematic of the new generation of Austrian vintners, a wine-school grad, 4th generation in the family, taking over as recently as 1999. "We make wine as my grandfather did," he says, "only with better machines."

## 2011 Zweigelt Rosé

AST-039

This is about as perfect as a mid-weight rosé can be; fruit and substance and the loveliest strawberry finish, like you sucked the fruit from inside the berry with a tiny straw.

## 2011 St. Laurent

AST-040

**CORE-LIST WINE.** If you know previous vintages of this wine, prepare for a radical surprise. This surging whomp of an '11 is liquid bacon fat, coppa, pancetta; look dude, just roast a whole goat and invite 30 of your closest carnivores and drink the happy fatty love out of this thyme-scented beauty. With air the iron char emerges, supporting the wine's voluptuousness. 13.3% alc., and made entirely in steel. Only steel! See just *how* much exotic stuffing-drenched exotica you can get without even a splinter of wood.

## 2011 Zweigelt (+)

AST-041

**CORE-LIST WINE.** And wow, this is beautiful, about the most lushly charming enveloping fruit you can imagine; mass yet outline, violet and blackberries. Though there's no great length it's awfully gorgeous while it lasts. Again, all steel..

## 2010 St. Laurent Reserve ++

AST-042

I had already tasted at Glatzer the day before, and was forming my theory that the best among the '10s were the kinds of red wines I absolutely loved. After the extravagances of the two *mezzo-forte* '11s above, this is more my world: finesse, purity, articulation, *fruit*. Focused and refined and almost noble; salty and sweetly smoky. Dollar for dollar I'm sure you can't find Burgundy this good. Shapely and delicious, like a veal stock with cloves and rose-hip.

## 2010 Zweigelt Reserve +

AST-043

Smells of pure delight. Tastes of near-rapture, if you prize pure fruit and solid outlines and bacony smoke and overflowing baskets of berries, but also something meaty and almost bloody. I'm convinced; this tastes about as magnetic and hypnotic as red wine can.

# Südburgenland

*A benefit to my working life is that I get to visit people and places I've grown very fond of. I wake up each morning, usually someplace I like, and think "I get to see Heidi today," or "I get to see Ludwig today," and so each morning is full of pleasant anticipation.*



This year was the 20th year I've gone to Landhaus Bacher in the Wachau, and a sweet little fuss was made. There is so much affection in my life. Even driving down old familiar roads past well-known landmarks — such as the *Schnitzel Drive-In* near Krems — makes me feel happy.

And yet as I made the entirely new drive to an entirely new place, I realized the other kind of excitement, the edgier kind, when you view a foreign place with those keen wondering eyes. What drew me to Südburgenland was of course the promise of the wines, the special Blaufränkisch that comes from those iron-rich volcanic often schisty soils. Nothing else tastes like they do. It was an added bonus that the tiny region entailed a bit of a schlep no matter where you started from. From Vienna, or from Rüst where my colleague and I started, you pass through a lovely chaos of verdant hills called the *Bucklinger Welt*, and then through another few folds of deeply wooded ridges. You can't drive fast. You curve and curve and curve some more. And then suddenly you emerge with the crazily steep Eisenberg hill in front of you, as if someone carved off a slice of the Mosel and plopped it down in a little winky corner right on the border to Hungary. It feels "like a lost world," as Giles MacDonogh wrote.

We sat in the tasting room with Reinhold Krutzler and looked across the valley. "The village you see in the foreground, that's in Austria," he said. "The one behind it is in Hungary. When we were kids we'd see the lights from the guard towers, and our parents told us not to play too close to the border because there might be land-mines." The road signs are in both languages. You feel like you could go aground there, if you wanted to hide.

Though on the day we visited, all was a clamor of people and the crash of glasses. It was open-door day, and it was sunny, and starting at noon the tasting rooms were full and people started staining their teeth with spicy red wine. There's a sort of sub-village on the hill above

the sleepy village of Deutsch Schützen, called *Weinberg*, which contains all the winery cellars and Heurigen, dotted over the gentle upward roll. Only the Eisenberg itself is dramatic; the rest of the region is gentle and pretty.

There's a local wine specialty called *Uhudler*, which is actually made from *vitis Labrusca*, but it's the remarkable Blaufränkisch that concerns us here. There are three acknowledged elite growers: Szemes, UweSchiefer, and Krutzler, and supporting them are a host of fine country wine estates, at least one of which — Wallner — is very fine indeed.

As a rule Blaufränkisch likes a heavy soil that holds water and warms slowly. In Mittelburgenland it often grows on loam and clay. Here in Südburgenland there's also loam, but also the unique configuration of iron and schist that gives the wines an almost blatant minerality and a compelling pointed spiciness. Most Blaufränkisch can be called "peppery," but these wines show an abundance of *nuanced* pepper, as though you were conducting tasting of various peppercorns from Indonesia and Sumatra and Madagascar. It's the closest red wine comes to the particular experience of tasting *white* wine, especially if you prize minerality highest among flavors. If really fervid Wachau Grüner Veltliner were red, it would be Eisenberg Blaufränkisch.

I could have fastened myself to the "top" guy and strutted my pride of association. But I wanted to also offer you something hearty and affordable so that you'd have an easier wedge into this region. Krutzler is indeed elite, but such things are appreciated best when they're predicated on a basis. Which makes us ask a new question: how good is that basis, at its best? How good can "good" be?

Thus I overcome my desire to shape this portfolio in the tidiest possible way, and rather than choose between two excellent estates, I offer them both. Ha ha; that sounds so cerebral! In fact I'm just a helpless promiscuous wine slut who can't say no to anything exciting.

# Wallner

Südburgenland // Deutsch-Schützen



vineyard area // 8 hectares  
annual production // 30.000 bottles  
top sites & soil types // **Deutsch-Schützen Weinberg** (profound, medium-weight to heavy loam over slate in deeper layers, some iron oxide); **Eisenberg** (light to medium-weight loam and sand mixed with slate and iron oxide)  
grape varieties // 70% **Blaufränkisch**, Zweigelt 7%, St. Laurent 2% as well as Cabernet Sauvignon 5% and Merlot 3% (only for the Cuvee); appr. 13% white

*His little brochure has the emblem “echt — typisch — erdig” Genuine, typical, earthy. Sums it right up.*



Gerhard Wallner assumed the estate from his father in 2002, and is up to “a good 7 hectares,” making honest yet polished wine. If you’re tempted to suppose the wines are rustic, believe me they aren’t. Nor are they rough-cut, foursquare or heavy-footed. They’re delicious, extroverted, hearty wines that also convey a lot of finesse. They show all the uniquely spicy character and clarity of the best wines of the region.

Though Wallner grows Zweigelt and St. Laurent (as well as a little Cab and Merlot), the Blaufränkisch is obviously front and center, and it’s the wine I’ll concentrate on. As is my standard practice, I drank the wines at home over a period of months before deciding

to visit the estate; I always want to see how a wine *drinks* rather than how it “performs” in a tasting situation. I know myself by now. When a wine is great I sit with my chin in my hands and stare at the air, letting its greatness soak in, saying very little. And when a wine is entirely wonderfully *good* I get up and pace the room and mutter to anyone present “Wow, this is farking delicious!” or words to that effect. (I’ll even do it when no one’s present, but you have to take my word.) Wallner will make you smile. Wallner will make you very nearly laugh out loud. But Wallner will also make you pause at times, because these wines, as happy as they are, are not *jolly* or boisterous.

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**Wallner at a glance** // Excellent supplier of juicy and varietally scrupulous wines from a “lost world” in extreme southeastern Austria.

**how the wines taste** // Luscious yet peppery, “rural” but not at all rustic, and lip-smacking drinkable.



### 2009 Blaufränkisch Eisenberg DAC

AWL-001

Perfect! Juicy basic BF, from young (15-year) vines; all weeds and herbs and spices and black peppers and iron and black salt and wild rice. Hearty yet focused and precise.

### 2008 Blaufränkisch Reserve +

AWL-002

Gerhard likes to keep his wines a few years, and so I have the luxury of waiting for the lovely 2009 and offering you a couple wines with at least a surmise of tertiary development. Besides, I *love* 2008. This one's another pure, howl-at-the-moon BF, precise and precisely my type; truffley, amazingly silky texture, Serrano-smoky, juicy, complex and nettley.

### 2007 Blaufränkisch Reserve +

AWL-003

This has really begun its second phase (partly because 2007 is quick to do so), showing aged beef and summer truffle, but also a vinous "sweetness" that shows — a little — why BF is sometimes likened to Burgundy. This is long, again, and what it gives up in precision (compared to the '08) it gains in seductiveness.

### 2009 Blaufränkisch "Namenlos" +

AWL-005

Wallner makes two *têtes de cuvée*, one of them a blend called "Kentaur" that includes "international" varieties, and this one called "Nameless" that's the very best he can do from Blaufränkisch.

It's from old vines — at least over 40 and some as old as 90 — done in 500-liter casks (more than double the size of barriques); it shows the massive smoky essence of BF; immense, capacious, radioactively spicy and peppery, like fruit baked in a kiln. Yet for all its intensity it's also supple and graceful as it smolders away. It's like a saddle of lamb cooked over a fire of vine shoots.

### 2006 Blaufränkisch "Namenlos" ++

AWL-004

Amazing to still be able to get this! And it is truly gorgeous; carob, porcini, powerful and juicy, and this is a wine that *more* than justifies its price; it's BF in the form of Brunello, bricky and beefy and electric and thick and long. The finish is like air-dried meat.

# Krutzler

Südburgenland // Deutsch-Schützen



vineyard area // 10 hectares  
annual production // 70.000 bottles  
top sites & soil types // **Deutsch-Schützen Weinberg** and **Bründlgfangen** (profound, medium-weight to heavy loam over slate in deeper layers, some ironoxide); **Eisenberg** (light to medium-weight loam and sand mixed with slate and ironoxide)  
grape varieties // **Blafränkisch 84%**, **Zweigelt 8%**, **Merlot 3%** as well as **Caberne Sauvignon 2%** (only for the Cuvee); 3 % white

*That an estate as stellar as this one was without an American importer following the troubles at Vin DiVino — a period of some six years — gives me very mixed feelings. On one hand, sure, I'm lucky. On the other hand — why? We need to care more about this remarkable grape, and if you're still not sure why, then a single taste of any of these will convince you.*



This is a bit of a stretch for me. Krutzler's in a price segment with which we normally generate only moderate numbers. But his are among Austria's very best red wines, and I feel a sense of duty to show you exactly what these wines can do.

Though they are more sophisticated than Wallner's wines, they're by no means anonymously "international."

They have more frequent-flyer miles, one might say. But they do not forget where home is.

And yet when you talk with Reinhold Krutzler about his grape growing or winemaking you find you have almost no "news" to report. Wines like this, regardless of variety or even of color, are always treated the same: grow excellent grapes, not too many of them, pick at the best possible

**Krutzler at a glance** // The "top" estate in Südburgenland is among the elite red-wine producers in all of Austria.

**how the wines taste** // Weighty and classy, with more polish and sheen than Wallner's more lusty forthright style. YET: still quintessential Blafränkisch!

time, and do very little in the winery. When you read through his brochure his priorities emerge quite clearly. “Fine minerality,” “silky texture,” “The wines exude intense minerality,” “concise, earthy, fruity, sophisticated.” He has found that his best results derive from making small-blend cuvées rather than single-site bottlings. He also identifies the unusually wide swings between day and night temperatures as major contributors to the fervent aromas he seeks.

BF is a high-acid grape in any case. Its analyses would shock you, in fact. I’m all too aware there’s a theory that

red wines shouldn’t have high acid, but it is far from the whole truth. Blaufränkisch *thrives* on its acidity; it makes the wines fresh even when they’re broodingly intense; it gives them the incisive clarity they show at their best.

Krutzler’s is a 10-hectare estate, not very big at all, with three on the Eisenberg. He sells through his wines faster than does Wallner, and most of what I had to taste were very recently bottled 2010s. Fortunately I had many months with more mature vintages at home, so I could see these brash young ‘10s with the necessary perspective.

## 2011 Blaufränkisch

AKR-001

The basic wine is from 3-15 year old vines, yielding about 58 hl/ha. It’s a typically rambunctious ‘11, sweet and glossy and stylish and classy, really not weedy at all; it has spice (wild Madagascar peppers), and morphs into allspice and nutmeg in the glass.

## 2010 Blaufränkisch Reserve (+)

AKR-002

## 2010 Blaufränkisch Reserve, 12/375ml (+)

AKR-002H

## 2010 Blaufränkisch Reserve, 6/1.5L (+)

AKR-002M

Bottle-sick (3 weeks in-bottle when I tasted) but an ‘08 tasted at its side — not dissimilar vintages — was almost sublime, focused and deep and polished, with this dark moony sweetness. The wine tends to be sumptuously mushroomy-meaty with *notes* of mint and weeds; class, basically! This was true in all five vintages I tasted regardless of their individual characteristics.

The ‘10 shows blueberry and Sarawak pepper, but the wine was tight and dense and coiled. I strongly suspect it will explode with expressiveness in a few months. 15-30 year vines, yields of 40 hl/ha.

## 2010 Blaufränkisch “Perwolff,” 6/750ml (+ +)

AKR-003

## 2010 Blaufränkisch “Perwolff,” 12/375ml (+ +)

AKR-003H

## 2010 Blaufränkisch “Perwolff,” 6/1.5L (+ +)

AKR-003M

(cask-sample) 30-50 year vines, yields of 35 hl/ha; the wine always contains a small amount of Cab-Sauv, and is among Austria’s greatest red wines. I tasted a magnificent ‘08, a lavishly sweet, stringently spicy ‘07, a richly chocolatey ‘06 and a stunningly fine ‘99, drank al fresco on a warm night unsuited for such a wine, but it overcame me with its grace and loveliness.

The ‘10 has a smoky aroma showing some wood; the palate is remarkable as the BF-ness gains strength and expressiveness; fabulously spicy and crusty and weedy; in ten minutes the oak is entirely gone and the wine is grinning like a dope and slinking through the tall hot grass.

If the price makes you quake, I have a suggestion: *pay it.*

# Walter Glatzer

Carnuntum // Göttlesbrunn



vineyard area // 54 hectares annual production // 25,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Rosenberg, Kräften (calcerous clay);  
Haidacker (gravel, loam and clay); Altenberg (gravel and clay, with high lime content);  
Schüttenberg (sandy loam and gravel); Bärenreise (sandy loam and clay)  
grape varieties // 37% Zweigelt, 17% Blaufränkisch, 12% Grüner Veltliner,  
10% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Weissburgunder, 3% Sauvignon Blanc,  
2% St. Laurent, 2% Pinot Noir, 2% Syrah, 2% other

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

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

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

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

He's installed two fermenters, one for reds and

one for whites, the second of which is kept underground in a newly-built cellar in order to keep fermentation temperatures down. He has 54 hectares of vineyards, from which he aims, like all the young lions, to grow the best possible grapes. He'll green-harvest when necessary, not only to increase dry extract but also to guarantee physiological ripeness. Glatzer does all his harvesting by hand, though he could, if wished, work much of his land by machine.

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

There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tasting notes. Yet in a sense these hardly seem necessary; to delineate the minute vintage-variations of wines which are always varietally True and scrupulous is more trouble than it's worth. And, I can now proclaim, after truly painstaking diligent research, that Blaufränkisch is better than Zweigelt with Schnitzels.

## 2011 Grüner Veltliner

AGL-154

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A cheerful bonny little guy, in a great sunny mood; seems sweet-leesy as if the 2011 lees were mixed with talc; creamy and lentilly, and almost doughy in its beaming charm.

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

**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Dornenvogel” +** AGL-155

Glatzer’s “reserve” wines are named “Thorn Bird” after the avian marauders who like to dine on his ripest grapes. This is the best vintage of this wine in many years, uniting its usual olive-oil snap to the sweet leesiness of the ‘11s, giving both substance and charm; some *sponti* notes also, but this wine has power, spice and density — if not the Nth degree of complexity. But you know, satisfaction counts for something.

**2011 Sauvignon Blanc** AGL-157

**HARD-CORE-LIST.** What, again? Yes, because the 2010 was so tiny we had to turn away a lot of orders. This wine is just delicious! The most charming side of Sauv-B yet *still* Sauv-B; juicy and flinty and delicately grassy; red-peppers, roasty and “sweet;” adorable stuff.

**2011 Weissburgunder “Classic”** AGL-158

This is so good in sunny years, giving a little corn-sweetness to the usual snap and straw; remarkably firm and solid for an ‘11.

**2011 Zweigelt “Riedencuvée” (+)** AGL-159

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Ripe, smoke and huckleberry and even a little char — these 2011 reds have some ‘tude. Less of the sweet black cherry and more of the Syrah pepper and violet; this is punching way above its weight.

**2011 Blaufränkisch (+)** AGL-161

**CORE-LIST WINE.** It starts off smelling literally like toast. Like the smell when you know the toast is done. It’s wonderfully articulate yet warm, sunlight on the weeds; veal stock over the sautéed leek and fennel, rusky and with a nuance of caraway.

**2011 Zweigelt “Rubin Carnuntum” +** AGL-160

It refers to a concept developed by a group of Carnuntum producers, to identify a ripe but not obviously oaked Zweigelt in the “bourgeois” class, yet again this ‘11 is two levels *above* the usual level; it’s hugely smoky, sweet and round; many-layered but forthrightly seductive. I have a helpless crush on it.

**2010 St. Laurent Altenberg** AGL-164

A feminine version of this grape and of this series of Glatzer bottlings; it recalls a nice village Volnay; it’s polite and graceful but with dark notes and a modest blueberry bite; as refined and supple as I recall ever; a 2010 red as good as they can be.

**2010 Blaufränkisch Reserve +** AGL-162

Everyone said what a pain in the neck 2010 reds were to make, but you have to feel a result such as this made it worthwhile. This is lovely *because* of, not in-spite-of the vintage; it finds a seam of sweetness and grace often obscured by the sheer generosity of riper years; it’s delicate and meditative but with filigree detail. A small poem, not a big symphony. I tried to get free of it — other wines were waiting — but I kept circling back; wines like this one speak to me.

**2009 Blaufränkisch “Bernreiser” + (+)** AGL-163

**First offering.** A potential ++ as a cask sample, and now in bottle since December 2011; it’s extraordinarily warm and peppery; it’s pricy but delivers the goods; ripe tannin, length and expansiveness, minty penetration but lavish fruit. Maybe I’m not the guy to ask; all I can say is I drink lots of wine at this price that doesn’t make me nearly as happy as I am now.

**2009 “Gotinsprun” +** AGL-152

A cuvée of 60% Bf, 15% Merlot, 15% St-L and 10% Syrah. I’ll say it again: if you must make an “international” wine, this is how. *Not* overripe, *not* over-alcoholic, *not* suffocated by oak, but packed full of sweet seductive fruit, iron and mint, and a power that expresses as mineral, of all things.

# Weinviertel

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



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

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

But if I’m honest there’s more to it than even that. I don’t seem to be much of a pack animal. I tend away from the crowd, even when I appreciate what that crowd is crowding toward. It’s easy to go to the established regions and find excellent wine if you have a fat wallet. It’s too easy. I find I enjoy going somewhere alone and finding diamonds in the rough. Alas, Austria is a wine culture in which one is hardly ever alone. The new man in this offering is on the local radar or I’d never have known of him. The entire Weinviertel is known, as Germany’s Rheinhessen is known — as the up and coming new region, DACs and related nonsense notwithstanding.

This started maybe 15 years ago, when the first wave of young growers applied modern methods and made far better wines than the innocuous plonk which came before. Attention was duly paid. But with repeated exposure

one began to want something the wines weren’t giving. They were certainly “contemporary” enough, all cold-fermented stainless-steel yada yada, but most of them were lacking animus and soul. With the entrance of another wave of young vintners, it began to change.

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

# Schwarzböck

Weinviertel // Hagenbrunn

vineyard area // 24 hectares  
annual production // 15,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Kirchberg, Sätzen (löss); Aichleiten (flyschgestein with löss); Hölle (flysch)  
grape varieties // 50% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Zweigelt, 10% Gelber Muskateller  
10% Riesling, 5% Merlot, 10% other



*Again Schwarzböck was my very first visit, before I had formed a notion of the vintage. I found I needed to erase all assumptions, and so the offering has wines you haven't seen before, and is missing some things you might remember. 2011 favors cooler soils and microclimates. Luckily Rudi and Anita have a range of sites, and such wines could be made. The big ones above 14% alc. will be for those who prize them, a club to which I don't belong.*

I don't automatically exclude wines above 14%, mind you. I'm wary of them, but a few of them make it through. It depends on a quality that happens to annoy me, that I call *sore*. Of course some high-alcohol wines taste medicinal and others have a jalapeño heat on the finish, but those facets alone don't bother me as much as the sense that a wine is scorched, bellowing, and when that happens I feel something like a piece of skin that's been rubbed too long — sore.

To continue the digression, I *drink* very few wines over 14%, but I'll make a few available to you here and there, because there's a difference between my subjective Terry-the-private-citizen palate and my Terry-the-wine-merchant palate. There has to be. Even though they overlap 99% of the time, I recognize there are wines I happen to not like because of some silly subjectivity, and to respect both you and the grower, I'll put them in the offering with a candid tasting note. That said, disagreeable wines almost never make it in, and if they do I'll tell you why.

It's easy for me or anyone else to come along and tut-tut over a couple wines that may have gotten away, but you try managing a 23-hectare property with more than 50 different parcels, tough guy.

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

If I don't go into detail about vineyard or cellar

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

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

But *how* to describe the wines? Theirs is a silky substance not unlike Gobelsburg, in fact. They're not as creamy as Berger or Setzer; theirs is a more up-front palate dance. They make a quick and delightful impression. Oh just taste them. The wines are all arch and modern but not *only* arch and modern; there's an earthy substance to them also, and boy are they good value.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0L

ASB-035L

The first among a simply great series of cheap simple wine that's anything *but* simple and tastes more expensive. This one is round, lentil-y, nubby and much riper than last year's; in fact it's quite tasty and up to the '06 in quality; a forthright GV with marked length.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Vier Gärten

ASB-037

It means (literally) "four gardens" because sometimes garden is used to mean vineyard, which I think is a lovely metaphor. Usually this is the first among the "serious" GVs yet still very light with about 11.5% alc., but here it has 12.1%, and it combines nettle and lentil in a soft and winsome way.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Ried Schachern +

ASB-039

This comes from a vineyard quite some ways away, in the far-northern Weinviertel; there's more limestone in the soil, and much cooler nights — whereas Hagenbrunn is influenced by its proximity to Vienna and the heat-island effect of the big city.

I *really* like this wine; it's utter boxwood, nettle, mizuna and mineral GrüVe, with a bright lively shimmer. Atypical for '11, and all the better for it.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Sätzen-Fürstenberg

ASB-038

I usually don't offer this, preferring to jump up to the big guys Kirchberg and Hölle. Plus the name is long. (It's the two sites from which it hails.) This '11 is GV ore to the max. "Use it if the big wines stumble?" I wrote in my notebook. It was the best among the final three, with the greatest complexity, finest texture; body, spiciness, tatsoi and comet's tail peppercorns.

### 2011 Gelber Muskateller +

ASB-042

Rudi's a wizard at Muscat! The elderflowers are back, and the wine is perfect; salty, wonderful volleys of green and yellow, spice and ravishing flower; the saltiness makes it especially winsome. This wine is like an excellent kisser.

### 2011 Riesling vom Bisamberg

ASB-040

Another wine I usually pass over, as it's often rather mute and *cool*, but 2011 is a perfect vintage for this sometimes diffident and sometimes botrytis-y fellow. No botrytis here! Smoky aromas of the *Flysch* soils from which it comes (sandstone and marl, basically), with juniper and plum. This is a *tabula rasa* for Austrian Riesling.

### 2011 Riesling Aichleiten

ASB-041

Much riper now. This is all about sweet wet straw and hay, pink peppercorn; the palate is juicy but with a jolt of green and sweet-veggie; spearmint and pea-pod and spring-onion; a sexy mojo-filled critter less purist than the Bisamberg, more a crowd pleaser.

# H.u.M. Hofer

Weinviertel // Auersthal

vineyard area // 20 hectares  
annual production // 16,600 cases  
certification // Bio-Ernte Certified Organic  
top sites & soil types // Freiberg (löss with loam); Kirchlissen (löss with clay)  
grape varieties // 53% Grüner Veltliner, 13% Zweigelt, 9% Riesling,  
8% Welschriesling, 4% St. Laurent, 3% Weissburgunder,  
2% Gelber Muskateller, 8% other



*I arrived happy. My wife had landed and we were together. It was a nice day, and for the first time I found a moment to sniff some lilacs and irises. My colleagues were off at Reisetbauer's party celebrating his new distillery opening, so it was just me.*



We tasted outside. Wines always taste better in fresh air, I think, so I had to allow for it, i.e., resist being seduced by the wines "showing" better. It was hard, what with all those twittering birds in the vicinity. A perfect Spring day, flowers and birds and Karen Odessa and GrüVe and Riesling.

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

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

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

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

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

**2011 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0L +**

AHF-048L

I think this is the first time I've written a "plus" for a liter bottling, and though I know we've sold out of our year's allocation, you may still have some and so I imagine you're throbbing with anticipation to read my note. Oh, OK. The wine is dramatically the very best it's ever been. Hugely, euphorically fragrant, and the palate is as rich as some vintages of Freiberg.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Von den Rieden**

AHF-050

Again the '11 upgrade to a richer riper wine; all yellow iris and oleander; pretty, sylvan and verdant, and charm like crazy.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg**

AHF-044

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg +**

AHF-051

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The '10 will take us through the Summer, and the 2011 will arrive with the DI orders in the Fall. I really like the '10 in its cressy white-pepper and meadow-sweet notes. But the '11 completely surprised me.

I expected it would sprawl and be ungainly. No sir. It's remarkable for its elegance and graceful dispersal of weight. It's like Hiedler's Thal minus the smokiness; almost pitted-fruit and certainly vetiver and flowering-fields. As lovely as ripe GV can be. The '10 is more solid and intricate in its gravelly tightness.

**2010 Riesling**

AHF-045

The price reflects the melancholy scarcity. It's almost a mini Hollerin (see Alzinger), with a small touch of malo but almost luridly white-peachy and especially the purest apricot you ever tasted that wasn't an actual apricot; a slim stony note below a veritable gelée of fruit, and an apricot-y finish.

**2010 Zweigelt, 1.0L**

AHF-052L

Here is the slightly unripe side of '10, showing as an herbal note rather than the roasty sweetness of an '09; still plenty of fruit but interestingly dusty and tobacco-y.

**2007 St. Laurent +**

AHF-040

A year later this beauty is only more beautiful, and it's criminal how we've failed to attract your attention. Yes this is a big offering, but still. Someone buy some! I'll give you a lawn-gnome.

Another wine I usually pass over, as it's often rather mute and *cool*, but 2011 is a perfect vintage for this sometimes diffident and sometimes botrytis-y fellow. No botrytis here! Smoky aromas of the *Flysch* soils from which it comes (sandstone and marl, basically), with juniper and plum. This is a *tabula rasa* for Austrian Riesling.

**2008 St. Laurent**

AHF-053

It's actually riper than the '07, yet far more straight-laced and compact; forthright, textbook SL without frills or flourishes; round, plummy, juicy and direct.

vineyard area // 30 hectares  
annual production // 16,700 cases  
top sites & soil types // Laa, Eichholz (löss over alluvial gravel and limestone)  
grape varieties // 50% Grüner Veltliner, 30% Roter Veltliner, with 20% Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Zweigelt and Merlot



*Hohenwarth is so high in elevation that Setzer's 2011s enjoyed normal levels of acidity and no outsized alcohols.*

Every portfolio has a sleeper, and this is the sleeper in mine. It has to do with how busy we all are. For wines like these, you need to be able to slow down enough to notice how lovely they taste. Because their strengths aren't (often) overt; they're less about volume and more about tone, less about force and more about charm. They're often wistful and dreamy, like bossa nova, but you won't get them if you can't pause. Big tastings don't flatter them. And big tastings are all that most of us have, to form an impression.

But here is a place I am as happy as I can ever be.

Thirsty, delighted and happy. These are my kinda wines, and my kinda folks.

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

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

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15

minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the summit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure löss terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram. Yet I feel the wines are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his "competitor," bless him) called Vinovative.

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

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

In my book I spend a lot of time talking about charm, which is an aesthetic component in which I take a special delight. I owe a great debt to Setzer for helping me learn this. I don't actually know if he sets out to make "charming" wines; for all I know it's a corollary benefit of his soils, micro-climates or what have you. Yet these are the wines he lives with, and I think it's both civilizing and healing to drink such delicious wines all the time. It's got to release some special pleasure hormones, you know. I like wines that make me grin spontaneously, as these wines do.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0L

ASZ-050L

<yawn...> the best ever, yet again, yes I know I'm saying the same thing about all the Liters, but damn it it's true. The wine is simply delicious. Beaming and giggly, sweet-natured. Really insane quality; please do not expect this every year!

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner "Easy To Drink"

ASZ-051

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** Grown from east-facing vineyards, thus giving a wine with higher acidity, and because there's higher acidity there's also a few measly grams of RS — still well below the allowable amount to be called *Trocken*. The aromas are all roasted red peppers and the palate is *tay-see!* Lentilly and mineral and pepper, dispersed into almost creamy streams, a marked mineral length that coats the end-palate, and the finish is cucumber-y and gently smoky.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner "Ausstich" DAC +

ASZ-052

Quite robust and dense for this category, though its alcohol is normal. Firm structure, a positive hale energy; classic tatsoi, sencha, lentilly density, marjoram; the wine is in-control but not domineering; a tight little ball of weight.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner "Die Lage" +

ASZ-053

"Die Lage" (the vineyard-site) in this case is called Eichholz (meaning oak-wood) but Setzer prefers not to use it for fear customers would expect an oaky wine.

When this is good it's *really* good, and this has quite some aroma, a bisque of roasted yellow pepper with shrimp dumplings; a flourishingly ripe and electrically powerful wine; spicy vetiver and flowering fields; outstanding power-GV, with a pointed spice redeemed by its creamy texture.

<psssssst!>... *we have access to a few bottles of a wonderful Roter Veltliner from the vintage 1987. If you're a lover of mature wine, do please inquire. The price is silly for such a rarity.*

### 2010 Zweigelt +

ASZ-054

He has das touch with this variety, and this one is my own personal favorite. I can't sell you a better one at this price, and perhaps not at any price. Elegant, civilized, gorgeous fruit but not innocent or virginal; violets and Serrano and currants; not without tannin but that mélange of cool fruit and the warm silky avuncular atmosphere makes for a really yummy glass of wine.

# Wagram

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



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

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

Can you taste it? I can't, at any rate. I am certain I couldn't identify any flavor markers for "Wagram" per se. The wines resemble Kremstal wines to me, at least those nearer the Danube and also grown on löss. Still, they had to call it something, and "Wagram" does sound like one of the bad-guys from Lord Of The Rings.



vineyard area // 20 hectares  
 annual production // 11,600 cases  
 top sites & soil types // **Steinberg** (weathered primary rock);  
**Schloßberg, Im Wasn, Mitterberg** (löss); **Mordthal** (löss with high lime content)  
 grape varieties // 50% **Grüner Veltliner**, 15% **Zweigelt**, 12% **Roter Veltliner**,  
 5% **Riesling**, 5% **St. Laurent**, 5% **Weißburgunder**, 4% **Sauvignon Blanc**,  
 4% **Gelber Muskateller**

*You may recall the blind tasting we did to audition a potential new producer, so as to see how he stacked up alongside wines we already have. It had the added benefit of giving us a different view of our wines, which we usually taste grower by grower. I took no notes to speak of (just a couple words here and there) but did compile rankings by flight, and the flights were price-determined.*

The class of the first flight was an Ecker wine. In the third flight Ecker came in 2nd by half a hair. He had no wines in the 3rd and 4th flights because none of his wines are that expensive!

This is “modern” wine at its very best. And I’m willing to understand feeling defensive about deploying a word like “modern,” because I agree we should be wary; too many times modern wines are simply denuded and clinical. Yet we should also be wary of being too precious about what we’d call “traditional” wines. It takes a degree of discernment to distinguish their true virtues from the ones we ourselves *like* to make out of their flaws.

I like every single wine I taste here. I liked their exceptional clarity, their incisive detail, their high-definition obsessive nuance, their fresh vitality, and most of all I love their charm and deliciousness. It’s not the same sort of charm we see in Setzer, whose wines are more cashmere-textured, but it is something of great good humor that elevates the wines from mere correctness. I don’t want all wines to be modern as these are, but I want all *MODERN* wines to have the animation and soul I taste here.

“Soul” may seem like an odd word to use to talk about cultured-yeast cold-fermented stainless-steel wines, especially if you’re into “natural” wines where you’ve come to equate soul with something else. But soul is more complex than that. And it lives where it lives, not where we assume it lives.

I sat tasting the 2011s, suffused with pleasure, and found myself wondering “Who would reject these wines out of hand, on what principle, and to what end?” I felt acutely sad that a person would exclude himself from this form of happiness. There is no dichotomy between wines like these and the special syntax of “natural” wines unless

we insist there is. And if we do, we’re excluding another valid species of beauty for reasons I don’t think stand up. Either that, or I’m greedy and I don’t *want* to have to choose. I want them both.

I find soul in these wines because something in them ignites something in me. I taste plenty of modern, competent wine that does the “job” and leaves nothing behind. Not these. Delight lives in these. Clarity I think is a positive value. Clear pure fruit and mineral density and thirst-inducing fragrance are all positive values. There’s nothing contrived or plausible about such wines, and even the phrase “such wines” is misleading because there are *very* few such wines.

I think it boils down to this: it’s not smart to think that only tertiary, vinous wines can ever be “natural” or have animus. They breathe their particular breath, those wines, and I love them just as you do. But I also love the primary, because I think it takes a special kind of passion to want the drinker to see virginal fruit and terroir so brilliantly. Apart from which, soul is a thing that opens and dilates, and if we ourselves insist that wines like Ecker’s are clinical, then we’re closing off an avenue of bliss, and our souls are wounded.

Who said we have to take sides? We get to have both, we get to appreciate both, we get to have manifold streams of joy, different wines for different days, different parts of ourselves, pensive times and thirsty times, dreamy times and giddy times... all kinds of wines for all kinds of times, and every single version of the many versions of us all.

Don’t be misled by the paucity of plusses. Every single one of these wines will offer you such delight as you rarely taste, at astonishingly gentle prices, and they are honest gleaming thirsty-for-more wines, the kind you can’t believe the bottle is empty *already*.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0L**

AEC-050L

It's sleek and juicy and drinkably perfect and perfectly drinkable, as winsome as peas — and don't forget the dill and cream. This is even better than the best-so-far 2006.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg +**

AEC-052

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** A paragon of Wagram loess and the plus is for its sheer charm and sheer substance; rich, transparent and complete; sorrel, lentils and fava beans; plus it's insanely delicious and leaves a nubby dough and pepper finish. I truly don't know how a person couldn't love it!

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Mordthal +**

AEC-053

Old vines (over 50) from one of the Grand Crus of the Wagram, and this one sees a portion of steamed acacia casks. More deliberate and solid than Schlossberg; classic redcurrant and rhubarb and caraway; dense, chewy and mouth-filling and by far the most graceful north-of-14% alc. wine I've ever tasted.

**2011 Roter Veltliner Wagram**

AEC-051

Salty! Sea salt over roasted yellow peppers; almost brashly expressive, this guy. Doughy and lentilly, but it's roasted flavor here, whereas the GrüVes are *sous vide*.

**2011 Gelber Muskateller +**

AEC-055

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** How does one improve on this? Elderflower and ripe green, lemon balm and key lime; has grip and almost a Riesling minerality and pitted fruit.

**2011 Riesling Im Wasn**

AEC-054

13.7% alc. with 6g/l RS, picked the end of October at 32° F. Pure apricot! Magnificently expressive Riesling, salty and extroverted and warm-hearted, and then all the focused green leafiness on the finish. A wine of delight.

**2011 Zweigelt, 1.0L**

AEC-056L

I keep wanting to write "perfect." It is, though. An entirely friendly tasty red wine.

**2011 Zweigelt "Brillant"**

AEC-057

Black cherry in a warm generous body, a tap on the shoulder of sweet tannin, and an almost minty finish. A party you're *glad* you were invited to.

**2009 St. Laurent**

AEC-059

This is purely and simply delicious! Silky, generous and easy-going; blueberry on top and roast beef *jus* on the bottom.

**2011 Zweigelt "Tradition" (+)**

AEC-058

(cask) Explosive, like a fireworks of blackberries, to the point you almost hope bottling will contain it. You get three mouths-full for every sip. Can't wait to taste it in bottle.



vineyard area // 28 hectares  
 annual production // 25,000 cases  
 top sites // Feuersbrunner Spiegel, Feuresbrunner Rosenberg, Engabrunner Stein  
 soil types // loess, Gföhler gneiss, sand, chalk, and red gravel  
 grape varieties // 90% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Riesling

Bernhard Ott and I have so many friends in common it's a wonder we haven't worked together till now.

Many of you know the estate through the various importers with whom they used to work, and in one instance (Valley View in California) still do. Certainly the label is instantly recognizable, as well as being graphically brilliant. And certainly the wines are outstanding.

But how outstanding? As our respective orbits drew closer and closer, and as I had a space open up in the portfolio when we parted from Salomon, I needed to know that it would be important and sustainable to get started. And so I created a blind tasting of Ott's wines, divided into price segments, alongside wines we already worked with. Just having *more good wine* wouldn't be enough. To do it at all, the wines had to stand out both qualitatively and stylistically.

They did.

But this took place during a time of consecutive short crops, and Bernhard didn't have enough wine to start with a new importer. He's also a man who lays admirable emphasis on doing the Right Thing, and he wanted time to consider it all, and to part from his existing importers in a decent and gentlemanly way. Besides, though it felt like we knew each other based on our many common friends, we'd actually never met. And we needed to see if we were simpatico.

With Ott you can't possibly divest the person and the wines from each other. You represent him as much as you do them. And I needed to feel sure I'd make him happy. So we arranged a visit a year ago in May, a first visit to taste and talk.

This is no small property: 32 hectares plus another 6 ha he buys from another organic grower. Ott, as you know, is organic, and he also does certain bio-dynamic practices though not under the Demeter auspices. A

number of growers (including Hannes Hirsch) all started transit to bio-d at the same time — safety in numbers — but for various reasons they ended up creating a group of their own, called “RESPEKT.”

That first visit was a long one, to my great delight. I like a person who lets a thing take the time it takes. And no way was I rushing through these wines. We tasted the entire 2010 vintage, as well as verticals of most of the Veltliners back to 2005. Oh yes, we'd be returning.

I think my single favorite moment of this year's tasting trip was when Bernhard's little Rosalie toddled in after her busy morning doing what toddlers do, and whose ringing joyous cry of “PAPI!” sounded out as soon as she saw him across the room. She spent the next ten minutes in her daddy's arms, as happy as a girl can be, while we tasted and schmoozed. Her Papi is a youthful guy himself; his first vintage was 1993, at the age of 21, but the estate he inherited was already in the green vanguard, having stopped chemical fertilizers as early as 1971.

Ott is most renowned for their Veltliners, correctly, but there's also a little Sauvignon Blanc and two Rieslings, one traditionally dry and another made in the German idiom as a lower-alcohol wine with some residual sugar. Johannes Leitz has a consulting hand in it. There's also an amphora wine, about which my emotions are mixed — but we'll go into that when the wine's offered below.

One final, grateful word is in order. I had some concern that by taking Ott on, I might be creating instability in my existing portfolio due to internal competition. So I asked the potentially affected growers to tell me how they felt. To a man, they all gave their blessings. “He's a friend, we know him, it'd be good for you both, we think it's lovely...” I was, and remain, very moved by this.

And so we begin.

**Ott at a glance** // Enormously consequential estate, especially as a Lama of Grüner Veltliner.

**how the wines taste** // Not heavy, but weighty. Not fat, but corpulent. Not creamy, but substantive. Imagine the polar opposite of, say, Nigl. These are analogue and warm-feeling, even when they're lithe and structured. Quite particular in site delineation, and highly redolent of not only “terroir” but also of landscape.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Am Berg**  
**2011 Grüner Veltliner Am Berg, 6/1.5L**

AOT-010  
AOT-010M

**CORE LIST WINE.** This is the lead-in, the “Steinfeder” of the range, one might say, often with just 11.5% alc. Immediately it seemed different from other 2011s; more focused, more solidly structured, *cooler*. Lentilly and red pepper aromas; the brightest freshest GV I’d yet tasted; lima-beany and fennel-frond; it’s whole-cluster pressed and has a refreshing not-entirely-ripe thing that makes it perfect for Summertime sloshing.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Fass 4”**  
**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Fass 4,” 6/1.5L**

AOT-011  
AOT-011M

Bernhard’s intent is that the “Am Berg” is drunk simply with food, but this step up is riper and interesting in and of itself. It’s three vineyard sites vinified separately and then combined, mostly loess; it shows riper aromas of textbook GrüVe, with marked grip and acidity and a snappiness that seems (but isn’t) phenolic.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Der Ott” +**  
**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Der Ott,” 6/1.5L +**

AOT-012  
AOT-012M

This one’s from younger vines in the top sites. It’s bracingly fresh all the way through; markedly more minerality now; really sprightly given its 13.5% alc.; mint and macha, fibrous and insinuatingly long; smoky roasted-pepper finish.

Here was when we started talking about the spreading of compost, because these were existentially different from any other ‘11 GVs I’d tasted. As I’ve written in the vintage report, Bernhard feels this was the first vintage where the compost has a discernible impact on the actual shape and structure of the wine. By now I was entirely willing to believe!

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel 1er Lage +**  
**2011 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel 1er Lage, 6/1.5L +**

AOT-013  
AOT-013M

The first of three Cru wines; this is the highest-altitude (350 meters) of them and thus the coolest and breeziest; it’s gravel over conglomerates, and shows aromas of white flowers, verbena and X-treme mineral; crazily juicy, sea-salty with a hint of dill; subtle *battelage* aromas and a fetching physio-sweetness; white tea and Asian pear. GV for people who love Riesling.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Stein 1er Lage ++**  
**2011 Grüner Veltliner Stein 1er Lage, 6/1.5L ++**

AOT-014  
AOT-014M

This site is actually in the Kamptal. The subsoil is the so-called Gföhler gneiss (such as is in the Gaisberg, for example) with a sandy-loessy topsoil. Bernhard leased the vineyard in 2006, as part of a growth phase. The owner watched him working in the vineyard, and was so impressed by the way he cared for the soil, she offered to sell it to him for “any price you want to pay.” I heard that story and felt a flash of tears. Here is all the utter vinosity, the *food* of GV; rhubarb and woodruff; we’re getting sexy now; a warm juicy mid-palate with seductive smokiness and mineral. Seriously delicious wine.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Rosenberg 1er Lage ++**  
**2011 Grüner Veltliner Rosenberg 1er Lage, 6/1.5L ++**

AOT-015  
AOT-015M

Bernhard’s monument and my GV of the 2011 vintage. It’s a full-bodied wine, a *thick* wine, sometimes showing aromas like a Cotat Sancerre. The ‘11 is green-ripe and dusk-dark, mysteriously luminous and serious; it’s the last green song before the apotheosis, entirely unlike the Stein, more deeply lined and carved, more profound; a borealis of mineral flashes away — and yet still, a grip and focus unlike most ‘11s.

**2011 Riesling “von Rotem Schotter” +**

AOT-016

A masterly wine, grown on red gravel at an altitude of 340-370 meters, highest among all Wagram vineyards. The fragrance is peachy but not *sweet*-peachy; notes of verbena and Gyokuro and Osmanthus; the palate is electrically bright and the mineral reverberates in an endless pulsing echo; lavish and juicy.

**2011 Rheinriesling**

AOT-017

This has been made since 2005 now, with ‘05 and ‘09 the high-water marks to date. The ‘11 is most like a good healthy Rheinhessen Riesling, peachy and robust and smoky-bacony, mouthfilling and generous and charming. It’s more than just a novelty in the dry-at-all-costs Austrian culture; it’s a valid RS-Riesling in its own right.

# Kremstal & Kamptal

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

Austria's best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals. This doesn't mean the cheapest wines; it means the lowest available prices for *stellar* wines. Austria is often paradoxical in that the more you pay the better the value, e.g., the top Kremstal/Kamptal Grüner Veltliners seem to provide more quality than *any* other white wine the same money would buy. This may be partly due to the giant shadow cast by the neighboring Wachau, and the determination of the best Kampers and Kremser to strut their stuff. For the price of really middling Federspiel from a "name" estate in the Wachau you can get nearly stellar quality in Kammern or Langenlois, and the absolute best from a Nigl or a Gobelsburg is substantially less expensive than their Wachau counterparts. And, every single bit as good. Other than the profound individuality of certain sites (Heiligenstein comes first to mind) there's little of regional "style" to distinguish these wines from Wachau wines. In fact Willi Bründlmayer told me all three regions were once one big region called WACHAU. Ludwig Hiedler points out Langenlois is warmer than anywhere in the Wachau, and he believes his wines need even more time than theirs do.

I had a rather subversive conversation with a Kremstal grower one year, as part of our mutual lamenting of the "DAC" silliness. He said "I'm not really all that sure why we need all these *regions* at all; Kremstal, Kamptal, Traisental, Wagram... are they really so different?" Well wow. I don't often hear growers speaking so blasphemously. It sort of made my mind reel. *You know*, I said, *even the Kremstal is senseless as a single region; the valley itself is one thing but it's very different from the löss terraces along the Danube in terms of exposure and microclimate*, to which he agreed. You can make a case for the Wachau between Dürnstein and Spitz, i.e., the gorge, because that area has singular characteristics. But I'm not entirely sure how the consumer benefits from having so many different regions whose wines aren't that different from one another. I rather think these things are done by bureaucrats and marketing folks, because they get a kick out of categorizing. Yet a *true* breakdown of these places based on soil, exposure and microclimate would look very different than the currently demarcated regions.

## NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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

vineyard area // 18 hectares  
annual production // 20,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Gebling** (löss and gravelly löss); **Steingraben** (clay-marl-löss rock); **Leithen** (löss and rock); **Haid** (deep brown earth)  
grape varieties // 70% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Zweigelt, 9% Riesling, 5% Chardonnay, Malvasier, Cabernet Franc and Welschriesling, 1% Gelber Muskateller



*Berger's GrüVe liter is the wine we sell the most of, and at this point it could almost coast. Almost. But the crucial tiny membrane between almost and never is something I never need to worry about. Erich won't forget it. It isn't in his makeup. I can see each year how serious he is to ensure this wine is still performing for me. I mean, it's a modest wine he can't make more than pennies on, yet he cares about it because he's made of caring. I'm moved by the humble decency of taking care that this little wine is still good, is always still good. It takes just as much caring as it does to ensure a great wine is indeed great. But the difference is that everyone notices the great wines; you get trophies and awards and 'tout le monde' wants to buy you a beer. Here your caring goes un-remarked upon.*

I suddenly remembered a thing I hadn't thought of in years. Once I was at a carwash that did some detailing of the outsides and insides, and as I was waiting for my decidedly cheap-ass car, I observed all the very nice expensive cars the guys were working on. But they took the *same* care with my funky beat up Accord hatchback as they did with the Caddies and BMWs, and I was extremely impressed. "Thanks for respecting even *my* crappy car," I said. "Just doin' it right," they said.

That's it: just doin' it right.

So while I am very proud and happy to offer and sell this Liter wine, I have to wonder why so few of its customers are curious to see what else Erich can do. "If this wine is *this* good then how must the better wines be? They don't cost all that much more..."

I wrote in some detail about Erich in my book, because his choices fascinate me. In short, I'm sure we'd agree that ambition is what drives the quality-minded vintner. He wants to make exciting wines that get attention. But what drives the vintner who just wants to make delicious wines that make people happy? That's what I don't understand.

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

I liked these new wines and told him so, but lamented the passing of another proponent of *charm*;

there are never enough of these.

But the last few vintages have seemed to *compelled* Erich back to the old style. He couldn't help make creamy charming wines from that material. Look, I am a man with greying temples. I'm in the wine-biz and drink wine very often. For those reasons and possibly others of which I'm unaware, I'm starting to place my highest premium on *drinkability* and *beauty* when I select wines, not just for you but also for my personal sloppin' down. A few years ago I began to see the occasional dichotomy between what I offered to you as Great Wine and what I actually bought for the private stash; what I need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

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

**2011 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0L**

ABG-119L

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Really almost gorgeous aromas; again, '11 is the best-ever vintage for these liters; salty lovely dimpled chubby fruit, and a deliberate charming finish.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Lössterrassen**

ABG-125

It's seriously peppery for a loess wine; lots of opal basil and even a nettle-y snap; classy, with an angular charm. The finish is a little fleeting, but this isn't a wine one studies. Drink away!

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Gebling**

ABG-121

This is best in vintages where it has to push its way to ripeness, whereas an already-ripe year can shove it into overstatement. This one's big, spicy and granite-like, stern and salty. It carries its 14% alc. moderately well, until the jalapeño finish.

**2011 Gelber Muskateller**

ABG-124

Markedly salty and on the catty side, but full of *ripe* green, aloe, balsam, wintergreen and verbena; an almost elegant critter even with its kitten-claws.

**2011 Riesling Spiegel**

ABG-122

In the topsy-turvy world of 2011, the usually "small" Riesling, the one that's polite but relatively mute, comes blasting out with 13.5% alc. and a ripe stern fragrance. But the palate's a big surprise; super expressive, thickly vinous, like an unopened peony; it runs to herbs, green tea, jasmine; a big happy thump of flavor.

**2011 Riesling Steingraben +**

ABG-123

A bacchanale of apricots in a full-throttle juice-bomb fleshpot of a Riesling; not at all subtle! But despite its high alcohol it's so voluptuous it seems to work; a huge, cunningly balanced wine that finally overcomes you with its sheer extravagant gaiety.

**2010 Blauer Zweigelt, 1.0L**

ABG-112L

A plummy cool Dolcetto, basically. Which of course you can't actually get from Dolcetto anymore. A shade-cool, berried interlude between the meaty-roasty '09 and '11. It has all the single-vineyard wines (Haid and Leithen) this year, so it's an overachiever and a bargain.

**2009 Blauer Zweigelt Haid**

ABG-118

Boy that '08 as such a dead-ringer for an 80s Zin, back when you could drink them, back when they gave some odd archaic thing called "pleasure." He still has 40 cases of it, if you want it. This '09 is rounder and shows more mid-palate tobacco and stock, rounder contours and fewer angles, less briar than the '08; easier to "get" if you respond to warmth per se. But they're both happy-tongue puppies, with the '08 more mischievous and the '09 more sedate

**2006 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen +**

ABG-095

2nd and 3rd-use barriques here, but the wine isn't markedly oaky; indeed an almost Burgundian aroma, complex and almost overwhelmingly fruity; the palate is a whipcrack of spice but also deep juicy texture that begs to be swallowed; this is a sexy wine in the modern idiom but it isn't overwrought or pornographic; it's true body, true fruit, real flavor you can use.

# Familie Nigl

Kremstal // Priel

vineyard area // 25 hectares  
annual production // 25,000 - 30,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Senftenberger Pellingen, Hochäcker (mica slate, slate)  
grape varieties // 40% Grüner Veltliner, 40% Riesling, 5% Sauvignon Blanc,  
5% Gelber Muskateller, 10% other varieties



*You'd expect these wines to come from a bespeckled gentleman with finely chiseled features, who speaks deliberately and cultivates a side study of medieval jurisprudence. That, or some sort of monk-savant. But no, these almost eerily searching wines hail from a hearty unpretentious country fella. When you meet Ludwig Hiedler you feel a total unity between human and wine, but with Nigl all you can feel is perplexity.*

It is tempting to see Nigl's wines as objects to be examined, because they are so digitally precise that attending to them in minute detail seems like the most appropriate response. People who enjoy High-Def explicit complexity are made ecstatic with these pixilated and eerily expressive wines. As am I.

But lately I have been making myself *drink* them just as though they were ordinary beverages, because I want to see what kinds of *lives* they live when they're not wine-specimens we examine delightedly. And I've discovered that what they need is time, ambience, and food. Not because they are imbalanced (the usual bromide for crummy wine is "Oh it needs food," to which the only proper response is "No, it needs to be better wine.") but because they exist in the sensual world, and they are more useful than we think.

A '97 Riesling Privat I drank a few weeks ago was both breathtaking and superb with the greeny-salady dish on the table. At Nigl's own restaurant — very good these days, by the way — I have not once felt the wines were too refined, at least not for *my* schnitzel. I do think they favor fine food, as they themselves are cut fine and not robust. I do think they tend to run cerebral, and are best suited to occasions where they can receive your absorbed attention. I do like them best in warmer weather, because their ultraviolet coolness is refreshing.

Theirs is a penumbral or spectral sort of beauty, around the edges of which is something invisible, like radio waves, the vinous equivalent of molecular cuisine;

you feel neural pathways firing as you taste them. But in his own establishment the food is what I'd call country-traditional with unusual respect for ingredients and everything from scratch. It was dysphasic drinking these keen ultraviolet wines with a big ol' plate of noodles with morels and sweetbreads, but it showed me something. As otherworldly as they sometimes can appear, with food they snuggle right up as all good wines do.

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

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

Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are

**Nigl at a glance** // No one would deny this estate's inclusion among the absolute elite in Austria, and many observers wonder if there's anyone finer. Extraordinarily transparent, filigree, crystalline, mineral-drenched wines of mind-boggling clarity. Prices remarkably sane for world-class great Rieslings (compare to the best in Alsace!)



racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I once saw—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles are wines with a high, keening brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate, as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there.

I found Martin’s ‘11s perplexing in many cases. Some of the low-end wines had a grassiness that could hardly have been underripeness in such a clement vintage. Mind you, this isn’t inherently objectionable unless one detests grassy flavors. But it struck me. And some of the top wines seemed overstated, as Nigl’s wines have sometimes been in very ripe years.

**2009 Nigl Brut de Brut Rosé (Sekt), 6/750ml**

AFN-200

Disgorged in April, 2012 (though the label doesn’t say); it’s again mostly Zweigelt (95%) and PN, and it’s a fruit-forward, rhubarb fizz, sleek and clear. He uses Eiswein for the dosage. And he does it himself except for riddling and disgorging, which is contracted out. I’ll miss the white Sekt, but this is singular if not unique, and awfully silky and tasty.

**2011 Zweigelt Rosé**

AFN-197

Racy, almost Sauvignon-ish, yet for its cut and lightness it’s markedly long and zippy.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Freiheit**

AFN-195

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Oh bless him; even in 2011 this still has just 11.5% alc. And it’s really a perfect vintage for Freiheit, with sushi-knife cut yet fluffy fruit. The grassy high note is agreeable in this context.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri**

AFN-202

Quite stern and dark. I’m surprised. Char and ore and mizuna and lovage; a demanding wine that’s not as winsome as usual. Also shows a frisée kind of bitterness. I wonder if its bottle sick.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben**

AFN-203

Direct, pointed and powerful. This is bottle-sick after just two weeks. With air the mid-palate density comes on, but there's also something that feels overcooked — so judgment deferred.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen, 1er Lage, 6/750ml +**

AFN-204

**2011 Grüner Veltliner "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen, 1er Lage, 12/375ml +**

AFN-204H

**2011 Grüner Veltliner "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen, 1er Lage, 3/1.5L +**

AFN-204M

You grill a veggie. Yum! The flesh is sweet but the skin is charred. You like it that way. Will you accept it here? Iris in its funky form, and here (at last) is the lavish vinosity to mitigate the (over)ripeness; great big length, seriously impressive if not profound; the finish is exotic, full of funky flowering field, and a hint of jalapeño.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "Herzstück vom Kirchenberg," 6/750ml + +**

AFN-185

Normally this goes into the Piri, but it was so spectacular in 2010 that Martin vinified it separately. It's the lowest five terraces below the church. Compared to the "Privat" this is a shimmering powerhouse, seriously green, the morning sun shining on a balsam forest; gorgeous spreading rivulets of juiciness on the palate. This has it all; astounding complexity and irresistible deliciousness, into a massively fruity finish.

**2011 Riesling Dornleiten**

AFN-201

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Another grassy critter. It does evolve into lime and woodruff, and as I said I don't mind the flavor, but you should know what you're getting, and that it's like a Riesling-Reuilly hybrid.

**2011 Riesling Senftenberger Piri +**

AFN-205

A beautifully textured Riesling; raw silk; dark and dark-green flavors but with a redeeming grace and secret-sweetness; angular, slinky and resinous, herbal, yellow-iris; intricate minerality; it's the first of these '11s one could call *lovely*.

**2011 Riesling Hochäcker 1er Lage, 6/750ml**

AFN-206

Explosive, exotic, sexy-pie Riesling — with a whole lot of alc. Most of you won't mind, and some drinkers won't even notice. The wine offers a lot of thrills, a neon buzz of intensity; exotic and spearminty.

**2011 Riesling "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 6/750ml + +**

AFN-207

**2011 Riesling "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 12/375ml + +**

AFN-207H

**2011 Riesling "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 3/1.5L + +**

AFN-207M

Though holding its cards close, here we do find elegance, weight and grace along with a magnificent spiciness; a superb and typically great *Privat*, a potion of spices and flowers and herbs. Sarawak, marjoram, wisteria — one of the world's most singular great Rieslings; nothing else is quite like it.

**2011 Gelber Muskateller**

AFN-208

Completely without compromise: the cats are horny and not at all patient!

# Bründlmayer

Kamptal // Langenlois



vineyard area // 80 hectares    annual production // 33,000 cases  
certification // ISO 22000 Sustainable  
top sites & soil types // Berg Vogelsang, Loiser Berg, Steinmassel (primary rock);  
Käferberg (marine sediments on primary rock); Heiligenstein (Permian rock);  
Lamm (Loam on Permian rock)  
grape varieties // 38% Grüner Veltliner, 19% Riesling,  
43% Pinot Noir, St. Laurent, Chardonnay and other varieties.

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

I'm also impressed by Willi's decision to hold his biggest wines back from release until he feels they're more ready, a principled choice with financial consequences, that only a market "leader" could make. But our thoughtful and charming friend is deceptively mild in his social persona. Beneath the surface lies courage and a bedrock integrity.

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

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

Bründlmayer's is a large domain yet his range of wines is kept within sensible limits. Soils are rocky and dry in the hills, fertile and calcareous in the lower areas. That's according to

**Bründlmayer at a glance** // Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range. Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 80 hectares) winery. I'll confess it's gotten harder, not easier, to sum this up over the 16 years I've been visiting here. In each of the last two vintages the texture of Willi's wines has changed. Lately they're showing the calm zen demeanor of Alzinger's wines. Perhaps less explicitly articulate, yet somehow more kind. I don't think it's on purpose, or at least, it may be a collateral effect of something else he set out to do. For an estate this large, Willi is remarkably willing to let the wines control their own destinies. In many vintages, one or another of them will escape, such as the insanely peppery '09 Vogelsang GrüVe. I can hear him say "We don't seek to shape it; the wine follows its own preferences." Willi refers to me as a "classicist," because he notices how I wince at certain extremes, of alcohol perhaps, or botrytis. He in turn is admirably willing to love a wine even if it's what I might call ornery. His sparkling wine is the nearest thing to Champagne of anything that isn't Champagne, yet it doesn't imitate Champagne and only tastes a little like it. His reds are strikingly fragrant, but he seems to prefer them cool, sometimes to a point I perceive as stiff. But this is how he wishes them, lean and stretchy and sinewy. It is very good of him to tolerate my being selective among them. Now and again there's a weird rogue crazy-ass amazing wine. It might be a Rosé one year and a Muscat another, but it is often something you never expected. I'd call Willi's wines sophisticated and civilized, as long as you know these aren't euphemisms for diffidence. They are rarely touchy-feely but often affectionate. The best ones taste as though they were fond of you.

**how the wines taste** // The wines are quite unlike any wines I know, not in their actual flavors, but rather the way flavors are presented to the palate. They are, it might be said, the Stradivarius of wines, distinguishable (and made precious) by the beauty of their tones. Indeed, I always seem to think in sonorous terms for Willi's wines: "THE ACOUSTICS of the fruit are perfect," I wrote at one point. You taste class immediately.

Willi's estate brochure, from which I'll quote a little.

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

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

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

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

It was certainly plenty interesting in the 2011 vintage, a year when I'd have expected Willi's wines to be overripe and overstated, but where they were in fact about as sublime as they have ever been. Among the Rieslings one goes all the way back to 1997 to see their equal. For an estate this size to have sidestepped nearly every issue in 2011? Fantastic, amazing. My "winery of the vintage" is barely high enough praise.

There are a lot of wines, but there are a lot of *back-vintages*, which is exceedingly rare in Austria, and I join Willi in our quixotically doomed attempt to wean buyers away from latest-vintage mania.

#### **2004 Cabernet Franc "Cuvée Vincent," 6/750ml**

ABY-269

I was *seriously* impressed with this, perhaps more than any previously tasted Willi-red. Unexpectedly ripe and gracious with a fetching aroma and a sweet-natured palate. And can you get Chinon with 12.5% alc. that doesn't have a bell-peppery stink? This is like a fine Chinon of the 70s or 80s.

#### **2011 Zweigelt, 1L**

ABY-270L

A pure fruit explosion; you should wear a bib when you drink it. It's mega-ripe (13.5%) for a Liter, fabulously sappy and addictively pretty wine, all violets and huckleberries.

#### **2008 Sekt Brut, 6/750ml +**

ABY-257

A delicious edition of this; "sweet" and straw and hay and pheasant breast and orange zest and Chinese 5-spice and freesia and mirabelle. Just a little more brioche and it could pass for Champagne.

#### **Sekt Extra-Brut, N.V., 6/750ml +**

ABY-272

"In principle this is 2007-based," says Willi, and honestly it's *so* Marne-Valley it could almost be Chiquet. There's more Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir in the blend to plump it up; it's bright, open, a roll in the hay, the sweet hay. Very few Champagnes so easily manage this degree of dryness.

#### **Sekt Rosé Brut, N.V., 6/750ml**

ABY-273

Based on '08, as always PN-Zweigelt and St-L — boy is this pretty! Silky, careful, exquisite fruit. A stylish and delicious rosé.

## Grüner Veltliners

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner “Kamptaler Terrassen”

ABY-258

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This has attitude in 2011; herbs and even a hint of lees; the palate is cool and minty, with a firm peppery finish. More of a textbook GrüVe than either the glowy 2009 or the burly ‘10.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml

ABY-254H

As smoky as if it had botrytis, which of course it doesn't. Boxwood and ore and shoot-smoke; juicy and pointedly spicy; Vogelsang at its most adamant and masculine, with an herbal mid-palate.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner “Alte Reben” 6/750ml +

ABY-260

### 2007 Grüner Veltliner “Alte Reben” 6/750ml ++

ABY-259

When this is good it's *really* good, and the 2011 has wonderful grip and elegance for “big” wines from this warm year; classic rusk and dried porcini aromas; salty and tatsoi and really good Pho; stern yet juicy, serious yet sensual.

The 2007 gets better and better, now sweet-natured and warm. There's also an '08 in the wings, but bless him: *we have the luxury of waiting for it.*

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel 1er Lage, 6/750ml ++

ABY-264

I only know this vineyard from Hiedler, who uses it to make lighter wines from Pinot Blanc. This wine belongs to Willi's son Vincent, in fact, who bought the site from his father, planted with 45-50 year old GrüVe vines that used to go into the *Alte Reben*. It's a really stony GV; fennely and powerful; a wintergreeny sweetness below this megalith of steel and stone. Way to go Junior: an amazing maiden-voyage! One of the best GVs I tasted in 2011.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 6/750ml ++

ABY-263

### 2008 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 6/750ml +++

ABY-213

The word *iconic* gets thrown around too often, but here it applies: This is one of perhaps a half-dozen truly iconic Grüner Veltliners. The 1990 remains the single greatest one I've ever tasted.

The 2008, which I've offered the past two years, is a masterpiece, just barely starting to show tertiary and woody tones. Built for the long haul. I always like this wine from the vintages where it struggles to be ripe.

And so I held out only moderate hope for the '11. And was delightedly surprised, for it already shows powerfully swollen vinous-meaty aromas, quite open for a young Lamm. A whiplash of woody-barley richness on the tertiary finish; it's like a big truffley veal chop right now, but there's a lot of exquisiteness in store.

## Rieslings

### 2011 Riesling “Kamptaler Terrassen”

ABY-252

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Well aren't you a chipper guy! The wine is almost preppy. Snap to it, lad. Out in the sun in its dress whites. Crisp and starched. Ten-hut!

### 2011 Riesling Steinmassel 1er Lage +

ABY-265

### 2011 Riesling Steinmassel 1er Lage, 12/375ml +

ABY-265H

Here began a fantastically encouraging series of '11 Rieslings, such as I have not experienced here for a good 12-14 years. This is the best Steinmassel for quite some time, capturing its fervent rocky minerality— it's a high-up vineyard on gneiss, amphibolite and mica-schist — while being entirely juicy and approachable; redcurrant and herbal-leafiness, and if you *like* dry Riesling, then yummy.

### 2011 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage + (+)

ABY-266

### 2011 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 12/375ml + (+)

ABY-266H

Into its yellow exotic aromas, and with a *very* sexy palate; perfect mélange of steel and fruit and citrus and spice; textbook Heiligenstein — complex and delicious.

### 2011 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein “Alte Reben” 1er Lage, 6/750ml + (+)

ABY-268

I'd come to approach this wine warily, as it's been over-endowed alcoholically for many of the past vintages. But this insane masterpiece just undid me. The alc. is below 13.5%, and this is every single thing this cuvée can be at its very best. Talmudic minerality, and to call its smoldering depth “chewy” implies you *could* chew it. I think you'd have to drill through this baby! Massive fruit, profound in every way. A wine for the ages, and (yet) another example that no wine at all comes anywhere *near* to Riesling.

### 2011 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage “Lyra,” 6/750ml + + +

ABY-267

Named for the Y-shaped trellising system that increases leaf canopy, thus shading the grapes *and* giving more photosynthesis. It also “looks like the vine is throwing its arms up toward the sun,” says Willi (poetically!), who adds, “And it shows that you don't need old vines to give great Riesling.”

I quite lost it here. The wine is rapturous. It's a quintessence of all the fruits and exotica of Riesling; utter pagan orgy of Riesling. The Alte Reben is religious, but this one is orgastic.

# Schloss Gobelsburg

Kamptal // Gobelsburg



vineyard area // 49 hectares    annual production // 20,000 cases  
certification // ISO 22000 Sustainable  
top sites & soil types // **Steinsetz** (alpine gravel and löss);  
**Gaisberg, Renner** (primary rock with mica slate); **Grub** (löss); **Lamm** (calcareous loam);  
**Heiligenstein** (gneiss desert sandstone with volcanic particles)  
grape varieties // 55% **Grüner Veltliner**, 25% **Riesling**, 7% **Pinot Noir**, 7% **St. Laurent**,  
7% **Zweigelt**, 2% **Merlot**

*Peter Schleimer and I were having dinner one night, and we ordered Gobelsburg's 2005 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition," and it was lovely, and got us talking.*

Peter loves it too, as do many of his colleagues at VINARIA (the excellent wine magazine he heads up), and so we wondered why the idea hadn't seemed to spread to other estates. A few days later Johannes Hirsch was thinking out loud, wondering what it might be like to return to the old cellar instead of the brand-new one he built a few years ago, and there's a general sense somewhere between curiosity and yearning about the old ways—or the Old Ways—but best I can tell Michael (or "Michi" as he's known) Moosbrugger's the only man to actually make a wine along those lines. (Except of course for Nikolaihof, all of whose wines are this way.)

It's important to say the *Tradition* bottling is neither a pastiche nor even really a tribute. It arises from a wish to enter the spirit of the vintners of 100 years ago, before the possibilities of technology created choices they couldn't have imagined. What was their relationship to their land, to their grapes? And how did they conceive of wine?

"The prime motivator for these thoughts arose during the tasting of the old wines in the estate's cellar," Michi begins. Though this was done in order to determine what these old wines might be worth, the experience set a range of thoughts in motion. "Afterward I grew curious about the winemaking practices of the '50s and '60s, and spoke with Father Bertrand as well as the cellarmaster of those days. I felt that to understand those practices would help me better to understand what we're doing today." "I began to form the theory that, as more technological possibilities existed and were used, the wines became more uniform. The opposite possibility was also to be considered; less technology meant more variable wines. But these were just my starting-out hypotheses, and I'm not at all certain absolute answers are to be found. I think in order to begin to understand the wines of the pre-technological era, you have to try and understand the ideas behind them.

"The purpose in those days was to "school" the wines, what the French still call *elevage*, to raise the wines, or

bring them up. It thus followed that for each wine there was an Ideal, and the job of the cellarmaster was to realize these Ideals in the pure Platonic sense. Only when the Ideal is reached is the wine ready to be appreciated and sold. Naturally there was no recipe, but there was a sense of finding the proper moment in time and in the wine's natural oxidation, and these things were determined empirically and by feel. It's a highly dynamic system, with differences from cask to cask, vintage to vintage, grape to grape. Those people presumed that wine had to develop and expand in oxygen, entirely contrary to what we think today, that we have to protect it from oxygen at all costs."

But what is this Ideal? And is it something a *priori*, or is it of necessity limited by the contingencies of possibility? In order to go deeper into these questions, Michi set about to make a wine as it would have been made between the end of the Franco-Prussian war and the start of World War 1. The results are offered below.

In 2010 we flew a northern route back, to avoid the latest ash-cloud, and our path took us directly over Greenland. My god, what a sight; you've never seen such jagged mountains and then so much ice and desolation; it was like flying over the moon. "This is still the world, our world," I thought as I gaped out my window. And then sitting at my table a few nights later, drinking Michi's '06 Tradition, I had a similar feeling, like peering down and seeing something you didn't know was there. It's quite different from drinking the normal GrüVe Renner — the Tradition comes from that vineyard. I adore the Renner; it's one of my favorite GrüVes, but in its modern way it seems to stride right at you, outstretched hand, big smile, saying "I'm having a great day; let me tell you why!"

But drinking the Tradition is like walking in your front door, and your beloved is listening to music, and she looks at you and you see she's been crying. She doesn't have to say a word. But something has happened, and it saturates the room, and then her, and then you.



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

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

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

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

Gradually, one step at a time, Moosbrugger has added new categories of excellence to his roster, until it seems everything he touches blazes into brilliance. His sparkling wine is fabulous. His *reds*, from a region not known for

great reds, are sensible and lovely. This doesn’t result from any sort of alchemy, you know. It looks easy when you’re sitting in the tasting room and the wines are so good you start taking their excellence for granted. But in fact it involves gradual and painstaking work you do when no one is watching. Choices of vine material and replanting when necessary. Re-design in the cellar — including an innovation so brilliant you can’t believe no one thought of it before. Knowing that large cellars such as Gobelsburg’s have varying temperature zones, and wanting to move wines among different zones without having to pump them, Michi invented a system of casks-on-wheeled-platforms, so that entire casks can be wheeled hither and yon.

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

Feeling awed yet? That’s not my intent. Michi’s a rather quiet guy (as guys go) but he and Eva are actually Just Folks, and my visits here are warm and relaxed. In fact I’ve left a couple soul-prints at Schloss Gobelsburg. I was there with colleagues and customers on 9/11/01. And in a piece of eerie synchronicity, I was there last year on the very day we heard the news that Bin Laden had been killed.

**Brut Reserve, N.V.**  
**Brut Reserve, N.V., 6/1.5L**

AZZ-070  
AZZ-070M

Still mostly GrüVe, and continues to be silky and classy. The current lot (“L04/12”) will be the last one *without* a disgorgement date on the label; it’s based on 2009 with 20% reserve wine in the quasi-solera style many Champagne growers also deploy; this one has an exotic fruit note along with its complex herbal tones. Next disgorgement scheduled for July or September depending on need.

## Red Wines

### 2010 Gobelsburger Zweigelt

AZZ-179

Again the improbable Zweigelt. At this price you’d expect something fruity and basic, but instead you get a dusty, tobacco-y and grainy and rusky sort of wine, with a *cool* northern kind of generosity; quite stylish and expressive for ‘10, and salty and loveable. I’m still drinking ‘07 at home, so don’t think this “little” wine has a limited shelf life.

### 2010 Pinot Noir Alte Haide

AZZ-187

Ever-further into the fruit-driven less oaked vein; very *Cent Vigne* (a Beaune 1er Cru), roasted veggies; juicy and polite, careful and honest and long. Albeit with a cool-vintage delicacy.

### 2010 St. Laurent Ried Haidegrund

AZZ-188

Lots-o-juice now! Dark-meat flavors; a little char but just a little; a burning-shoot sweet-smoke and wonderfully spurt-y vinosity, like the jus from a roasting ox. Seductive. Beaune-o-philes will appreciate, if the above is *Cent Vignes*, this is *Teurons* or *Bressandes*.

## Grüner Veltliners

### 2011 Gobelsburger Grüner Veltliner

AZZ-178

Following the astonishing 2010 won’t be easy. But this is true to type, i.e., boxwood and nettle, polished and silky, irises all over the place; lovely, amazingly classy and even complex for its price. It’s no exaggeration to call this one of the *world’s* best wine values.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz +

AZZ-180

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz, 12/375ml +

AZZ-180H

**CORE-LIST WINE.** For many years this showed the most esoterically spicy side of GrüVe, as if it were fined with glacier dust and scree and stirred with a peppermint stick. The 2010 was markedly juicier, but I ascribed it to the vintage.

This ‘11 continues the new pattern — if it *is* a pattern, because I asked Michi if the “accent” of the wine was being changed on purpose, and he said no, suggesting that perhaps the older vines were creating another kind of wine. Mind you, this ‘11 is plenty spicy, minty and eucalyptus-y, *but* unlike the pre-2010 vintages it isn’t obdurately firm and nippy. Vetiver, flowering fields and juiciness coat the bones; barky and pine-resiny. A completely original white wine!

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Renner 1er Lage + (+)

AZZ-181

The site lies at the foot of the Gaisberg, and contains eroded gneiss with a high proportion of paragneiss, mica and amphibolite. A perfect condition for wines of minerality and generosity — just what this is. And it is also, and always *the best value in this portfolio*, because it costs about 25% less than its peers. This ‘11 has toast, almost brioche riding over a high ridge of spiciness and a dramatic pepperiness; lavish and keen and focused. A little bottle-sickness tamps down the mid-palate, but a mineral snap on the back goes into a minty finish.

## Grüner Veltliners (continued)

<b>2011 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 6/750ml</b> ++	AZZ-182
<b>2011 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 12/375ml</b> ++	AZZ-182H
<b>2011 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 6/1.5L</b> ++	AZZ-182M

Another genius-vintage of this new icon; the clear structure dispersed into salty rivulets; not so much “fruit” as a rusky, oatmealywineyness; silk and spice don’t often combine! Elegant and articulate and deliriously pretty; the scent of white iris coats the empty glass.

<b>2010 Grüner Veltliner “Tradition,” 6/750ml</b> ++	AZZ-183
<b>2010 Grüner Veltliner “Tradition,” 6/1.5L</b> ++	AZZ-183M

I really wondered what it would be like, the high-acid high-extract vintage made in the old school. The color is a lovely saturated greeny-straw — ‘10s had color to start with. The fragrance of a deep forest — if you’re wearing an amulet of bouquet-garni. This is a gravelly beast, not affectionate but fiercely complex and uncompromisingly stern; it will take time for the tertiary sweetness to emerge. It’s a manly man’s wine at the moment, incipiently explosive and hauntingly long.

## Rieslings

<b>2011 Gobelsburger Riesling</b>	AZZ-176
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**CORE LIST WINE.** *Absurdly* good in its (or any) class; an almost daunting complexity of grasses and herbs, seriously bright and phenolically crisp; tarragon and aloe vera and Gyokuro.

<b>2011 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage</b> + (+)	AZZ-184
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Classic site-aromas are both calm and mentholatedly penetrating; the palate has a silvery moon-sweetness, berries in the form of jewels; a power-pack of mineral, and an iridescent cool brilliance.

<b>2011 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 6/750ml</b> +++	AZZ-185
<b>2011 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 12/375ml</b> +++	AZZ-185H
<b>2011 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 6/1.5L</b> +++	AZZ-185M

Utterly enthralling aromas.

Dark-bright. Incense-herbs. Grasses-minerals. And all rendered by a gushingly generous singing juicy texture; a true quintessence of Austrian Riesling — of *Riesling*. It has the mineral mass of great vintages of Ried Klaus. Waving grasses, golden sun, singing birds. <whew!>

## Rieslings (continued)

**2010 Riesling “Tradition,” 6/750ml** + + (+)

AZZ-186

**2010 Riesling “Tradition,” 6/1.5L** + + (+)

AZZ-186M

Though Karen Odessa was with me, she often takes a walk outside as we begin the tasting — sensible girl that she is. There’s always a lot to explore. She comes back in an hour or so, and tastes along with us, usually wherever in the sequence we happen to be, unless there was an earlier wine I know she’ll like.

So this time we had the Rieslings on the table, and I suggested she start with Gaisberg. I was sniffing my way into the *Tradition*, and watched her out of the corner of my eye. She exclaimed over the Heiligenstein as I knew she would. That wine is an utter lyric rapture.

I tasted the wine in my glass. As I was flooded, almost overcome with its beauty, I heard her gasp and saw her eyes fill with tears. Wine will do that, the sudden invasion, the being *occupied* by an ecstatic silence. “My God,” she exclaimed. All I could do was look at the face of my beloved, and nod.

It smells like Gaisberg (from which it is made). It’s almost unbelievably salty and long and soulful in its rich cream and mossy green and chicken-breast umami, but really what it is, is a psalm of Riesling. To drink such a thing is to feel carried to some other place, as though you were present at the moment of its birth — Riesling, come into the world from out of the great silent mystery.

## A Small Pink Coda...

**2011 Gobelsburger Rosé** + + (+)

AZZ-177

Pretty and vinous and giving and laughing and witty and irresistible.

# Ludwig Hiedler

Kamptal // Langenlois

vineyard area // 28 hectares

annual production // 16,500 cases

top sites & soil types // Thal (sandy löss and loam); Kittmannsberg, Spiegel (löss); Steinhaus (gneiss with amphibolite); Heiligenstein, Gaisberg (sandy weathered soils)  
grape varieties // 63% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Riesling, 6% Chardonnay, 6% Weissburgunder / Pinot Blanc, 2% Sauvignon Blanc, 8% Zweigelt / Blauburgunder / St. Laurent / Sangiovese



*My Karen Odessa is a traveling girl, and since I travel also and a lot, we're always coming and going. We've evolved a tradition for when we reunite of making "fish and rice" as a kind of homey homecoming supper. Last night we had some coho and brown basmati and an arugula salad, and we drank Hiedler's 2008 GrüVe Thal, which was both perfect and moderate (12.5%) in alcohol. Then I dreamt of Ludwig, though I don't recall the details. The man is haunting my very dreams.*

At some point with his wine in my glass I had a flickering thought that this was precisely the kind of wine I most loved to drink, and that most people ought to love to drink; vivid and forthright, frisky and yet with substance, solid and strong yet still drinkable. And not so digitally detailed that you feel you have to study its every nuance with each and every sip. There is something incredibly *hale* about Hiedler's wines. They seem to glow with health and vitality.

Things are astir at Weingut Hiedler, and in the loveliest possible way: They are slowing down.

The first organic experiments are happening, in the sites Thal and Kittmannsberg. And for the past several years now Ludwig has done only spontaneous fermentations without enzymes or even SO<sub>2</sub>, and without temperature control. Part of this is Ludwig's innate restlessness, and another part is his desire to eschew the established orthodoxies. I'd like to hope it is also a signal that Austrian vintners in general are retreating from internationalism. When they arrived on the world stage they were, naturally, eager to join the prevailing currents; they spoke with colleagues from all over and returned home full of notions and ideas. This of course is harmless, and has its good side. But not as good

as stepping away from the prevailing norms from any-old-where in order to learn what is uniquely one's own.

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

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

"That's perfect! *Schmalz*," said Hiedler when I told him this story. "Yes, I *want* my wines to have this *schmalz*; that is the extract!" So, if you're looking for a more approachable kind of Austrian wine (one with *schmalz*!) with a big thick comforter of fruit and vinosity, you'll like these and they won't wreck your budget.

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

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

In a vintage like 2011 there's always a chance Hiedler's wines can seem too boisterous, as if they can't contain their joy. He himself likes such vintages; they have the "bright" flavors he seems to prefer to the "dark" flavors of a vintage like 2010. In fact I think Ludwig did especially well in 2011, making an extroverted set of wines that mostly managed to pivot away from overstatement.

His son Ludwig Jr. sat with us, which I enjoyed. It's

a kind of dance, to honor the advent of the youth (in this case 18 years old) while not effacing the parent, made easier in this case because Ludwig *senior* is about the most youthful guy I know. I represent him as much as I do his wines. You know the cliché about wines being "like members of the family?" In Hiedler's case it runs even deeper than that; these wines seem hewed from the fabric of his very soul, his essence is poured into them.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner "Löss"

AHL-175

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Ripe sweet aromas, acacia blossom and vetiver; as rich as a Weinviertel DAC. With lovely grip, toasted corn, mortadella; size and scope and the best among the intro-quality GrüVes in this offering, especially if its sheer generosity of fruit you prefer.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Thal 1er Lage +

AHL-176

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Loess and red sand here, and this wine is made from old vines of 60+ years. For me it's the calling-card wine of this estate, embodying Ludwig's spirit perfectly. The '11 is a lovely superripe GV; flowering fields and vetiver and smoky paprika, yet there's still a braised fennel or leek-y greenness in the middle, all surging toward a creamy spicy finish, with a note of the crisp skin of a perfectly cooked fish.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Kittmannsberg "November" 1er Lage

AHL-177

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Kittmannsberg "November" 1er Lage, 6/1.5L

AHL-177M

From the Kittmannsberg, on deep loess; it was originally given its name to denote an extra layer of ripeness by dint of very late picking, but in fact it's become the neo-classical GV among a group of fleshpots. This shows a stronger more sinewy power, less creamy and more baked. More alcohol also. It's really like tortillas, with sour cream and chilis and a chili-hot finish.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum," 6/750ml

AHL-166

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum," 3/1.5L

AHL-166M

This '11 is as sexy as veggies can be! Spearminty power, no deflection at all — pure green force. The 14% alc. is surprising. The Viognier/Sauv-B cognate is vivid here. That said, it is an '11, and could have a slightly less bellowing voice, but that's my particular quirk; I like quieter wines.

### 2006 Grüner Veltliner "Familienreserve," 6/750ml

AHL-184

Well *this* is new and interesting: the first release of what I hope will become a new series. It's the 2006 "Maximum" stored in 1700-liter acacia casks on its gross lees (which are stirred every two months), neither fined nor filtered *ever*, and bottled in February 2012. The aromas are subdued at first. The palate of course has lots of secondary grainy flavors, crackery and with a hint of nettle. Palates attuned to its alcoholic weight will like it more than I do — little me has issues in the 14+ zone, as you know. But this is a hugely encouraging idea, and I can't wait to see what the '07 and '08 will be like.

### 2011 Riesling "Urgestein" +

AHL-178

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Again the 2011 vintage gives the 2-class upgrade with its ostensibly "simple" wines, for this guy has grip and freshness and mineral and spicy greens (key lime and wintergreen); complex, playful and charming, with a solid stony finish showing high-toned mentholated herbal length. Amazingly deft for 13.3% alc. It comes largely from the 1er-Lage *Loiserberg*.

**2011 Riesling Steinhaus 1er Lage +**

AHL-179

A steep site of myriad little terraces, amphibolite and gneiss higher up and loess lower down. It gives the most exotic of Ludwig's Rieslings, with much of the complex herbals of Sauv-B. But this '11 has a fragrance more along GrüVe lines, with all the vetiver and meadow-flower; the Riesling shows as a balsamy greenness and digital focus; exotic and minty at once. This isn't classic or brilliant — it is *exciting*.

**2011 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 6/750ml + (+)**

AHL-180

**2011 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 3/1.5L + (+)**

AHL-180M

The wine is utterly superb, and I am furious. Why? Because even though it has less than 9 grams/liter of residual sugar, it has 2 grams more RS than grams/liter of acid, so it's technically a Halbtrocken, even though the wine tastes dry. Because of the silly DAC rules, this wine can't be labeled "Kamptal" and must be declassified to "Niederösterreich" (the state of Lower Austria). It also shouldn't have the designation "ErsteLage," but Ludwig labeled it 1er Cru anyway, probably unaware that he shouldn't, because a great site is a great site regardless of the ratio of grams per liter acid and sugar.

For a high alcohol wine (14.3%) it's immense and smoky but neither tiring nor ungainly, it's so exotic and tropical and sweet-green.

**2010 Weissburgunder "Maximum," 6/750ml**

AHL-181

In the early 90s when I began here, these wines were so amazing I wrote they were the best Pinot Blancs in the world. Tasting them again now, in the form of a sublime 1993 Ludwig was kind enough to open and share, I would make that statement again.

Vintages of the last decade have gotten over-endowed. Maybe it's climate-change, or later picking or lower yields or all of those things, but these days I'm tasting monuments to admire instead of wines to actually use. Ludwig and I have talked about it, and he seems to agree in theory. But how does he obtain the ripe flavors he desires *and* keep the wine below 14%?

One way is to hope that every vintage would be like 2010! For this is the best vintage of this wine in at least ten years, and a masterpiece by any reckoning. You can drink and drink and *drink* it; it recalls the great 1993 and 1999; smoky, green and grippy and pumpernickel-y; it sits on a rich thick trunk of density, with a suede texture and stunning ringent spice, really out of the gravitational orbit of Pinot Blanc at all; a huge chewy limestone rockiness — the wine *eats* you.

**2008 Weissburgunder Eiswein, 12/375ml**

AHL-182H

"Really pretty ripe Eiswein aromas, I.e., not spiky or horseradishy; mirabelle, wintergreen, cox-orange; palate is on the 'drier' side, explicitly salty and all too easy to drink; sauteed apples in brown butter with cinnamon. Perfect BTG sweet wine."

**1994 Weissburgunder Schenkenbichel, 6/750ml**

AHL-183

*<pssssssst!>... come close... I have something that is gonna make a few lucky people very happy. It's 120 bottles of a 1994 Weissburgunder Schenkenbichel, and those who love tertiary complexity and the Nth degree of verbena and green tea and estery slinky old-wine sweetness will adore it — especially if they decant it 30 minutes out. It's not at all expensive. Ask us about it!*

# Josef Hirsch

Kamptal // Kammern



vineyard area // 31 hectares  
annual production // 12,500 cases  
top sites // Kammerner Lamm, Zöbinger Gaisberg, Zöbinger Heiligenstein  
soil types // löss, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock  
with desert sands and volcanic particles  
grape varieties // 65% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling

*I have a strong personal affinity with Johannes Hirsch. Actually, I love the man. I love his wit, I love his lone-wolf streak (because I share it), I love his seriousness, I love his collaborativeness — we have never had a problem we couldn't solve promptly and with no lingering static — and I love the simple ease of his trimmed down portfolio. I consider him a friend. But when I taste his wines, I taste only his wines. Sentiment waits in the next room.*

I happened to speak with Hirsch during the most gruesome days of 2008's summer, when all it did was rain and the vineyards were struggling to stay healthy. "So Mister Bio-dynamic; great timing, dude!" I said — I'm such a sensitive guy — and Hannes replied "You know, if this had been the first year of transition I don't think I'd have gone through with it, because it's so difficult..." but when we had the bottles lined up nine months later he echoed something I've heard before: "Now when I taste the wines I really forget what we went through to make them. I know it was difficult but I don't physically remember it, you know?"

I saw Johannes' father for the first time in a while. I'd forgotten how hale he looks, like someone who'd just come down from soloing Nanga Parbat without oxygen. "Boy, I'm not very healthy compared to him," went through my mind. It was good to see the two men, good to remember Johannes is his father's son.

It's been actually something of a bitch the past years. First the disastrous floods before the harvest in 2002. Then the birth of the twins, who needed surgeries which required several 7-hour road trips to the other end of Austria. Then the bio-d conversion. Even after the hard growing season of '08, I had the sense Hirsch had somehow *ascended*, arrived, Gotten There. Both '07 and

'08 were so stellar and so singular — no other Austrian wines are quite like them — it feels like the whole thing is tuned and humming.

You often hear how the wine "makes itself," but here it actually does. The '07 and '08 Rieslings had RS, and the '09s had either much less or nearly none. That's how those grapes fermented. Johannes is fearless this way; he expects his customers will understand that wine isn't identical each year. Those "sweet" Rieslings were so delicious they offer an implied rebuke to the Puritanism of other Rieslings in Austria, which seem to grasp at dryness as an absolute value. Hannes seems to *get* that there are few if any absolute values in flavor; he works his vines and sprays his valerian drops and nettle teas and picks his grapes when they're ripe and lets them be and if they stop fermenting with RS then so be it. It's not a lot of RS, they're not (eek) "German wines," and he barely seems to attend to whatever Critical-Opinion they may engender.

With regard to the bio-d thing, Johannes is there now, the transition is done, but typically for him, he had some issues with the politics of the matter, and now "wishes I hadn't said anything, and just done it." I have a principle of not identifying as organic or bio-d anyone who doesn't certify, because it prevents people from green-washing their way to the organic "Brand." I am

**Hirsch at a glance** // Zoom! Went this agency, from out-of-nowhere to the top. Stellar-quality wines from a star-quality vintner at reasonable prices. AND AVAILABILITY IS GOOD.

**how the wines taste** // For such great wines these are comparatively "easy" to understand: they're juicy and spicy and their flavors are candid and animated. Specific nuances are, as always, determined by the vineyard.

contradicting myself here because it can't be helped — you already knew (because I already told you) that Hirsch was among a group who were all converting to bio-d together. So there's no point in being coy about it now. He's doing it but isn't willing to certify. No Demeter on the label. Don't sell the wines as "organic." Just be glad they are. And this is how Johannes wants it.

We tend to like to party with Johannes, 'cause he's crazily witty and likes to have fun, but when the party's over he's a man with an active and probing mind. And he seems to have no fear. He was the first in Austria to go 100% Stelvin, the first to delay bottling and releasing his Grand Crus, and now that the politics of the biodynamic conversion are apparent, I have little doubt he'll find some novel way through.

Sometimes when you have your kids they lead you back to your soul, and the Johannes Hirsch I know now is rather different from the one I met ten years ago, still fun and witty, but entirely more probing and

curious, even restless. He seems to want to go back and rethink choices that seemed simple when he made them the first time. He seems to want to decelerate in general. His wines, always exciting, are becoming profound.

An offering of Hirsch these days consists of whichever of the current vintage is ready to offer, plus anything still available and showing well from previous years. I like that it's not confined to "the latest vintage!" and that the wines have a chance to inhale and exhale. It respects them, and us.

And Johannes recent wines have usually needed the time; he doesn't force them into "showing" well in the first nine months. Except when they do — as did the 2011s. An ancillary benefit of the uncomplicated nature of the vintage is this lovely group of beautiful, complex and yet easy-going wines. It is easy to see how very good they are. And easy to be tempted by the hypothesis that organic/bio-d viticulture was decisive in 2011s, for these are crisper and more mineral than many other growers' wines.



**2011 Grüner Veltliner “veltliner #1”**

AWH-092

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Valerie Masten asked what went into this wine. Johannes is using less and less purchased fruit, and wants eventually to use none at all. Meanwhile, “Not even God knows what’s in there,” he observed. I coulda swore I tasted some Hunter Valley Semillon or maybe some South Downs Reichensteiner from the U.K.

In fact this is a markedly tasty and successful 2011; surprisingly dark aromas lead into a fresh silvery palate mingling flowering fields and nettle; it’s spicy yet calm and poised, even lapidary. And blissfully light (11.5%).

**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Heiligenstein” +**

AWH-093

**2011 Grüner Veltliner “Heiligenstein,” 12/375ml +**

AWH-093H

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Serious, dark smoky aromas, more like 2010 than ‘11; in fact it is very unlike ‘11, more structured, denser and more solid; earnestly serious; only the fleeting finish says 2011.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage + (+)**

AWH-097

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage + (+)**

AWH-087

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 6/1.5L + (+)**

AWH-087M

The ‘11 is back-lit by its extreme youth, but there’s a shimmering brilliance that’s really compelling; it’s back-palate now, but silvery rather than meaty withal it’s as massive as Lamm always is; it’s salty not stocky, like a slice of cucumber between two arugula leaves with a few grains of *selgris*. Again singular in the context of 2011.

The ‘10 is just stunning. My first true taste of this masterpiece. A brooding, mysterious, dark wine, almost opaquely dense — decant for two hours at least — doughy and determinedly taciturn — the antonym to Gobelsburg’s Lamm. This one has a pachyderm grace.

**2011 Riesling Zöbing**

AWH-094

**2009 Riesling Zöbing +**

AWH-079

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The ‘11 has moony delicate Gaisberg aromas, like blueberries that ripened under moonlight; the palate is fervidly spicy, markedly long, full of character and a powdery minerality.

**2011 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage + +**

AWH-095

This is a bit sunnier than Gobelsburg’s, though high notes still prevail; mints and white flowers; lavish perfume, a slinky writhing body — the girl (or the boy) has the moves, with hopelessly seductive juiciness, yet also with neurosurgical detail.

**2011 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage**

AWH-096

Mineral! A true Grand Cru in all its swollen gorgeous entirety; the exotics come on with air, and then really yowl at you; mind-expandingly expressive. There is no wine on earth that combines steel and rock and smoke and fruit and spice as these wines do. None — not one.

# Wachau

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

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

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

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

A subversive thought came to me. Since the

problem with most Federspiels are that they're too flaccid and taste incomplete, and the concomitant problem with many Smaragds is that they're annoyingly overripe and brutishly heavy, *why separate them into two unsatisfactory categories*, but instead, why not just make **one** wine of say 13% alc instead of one with 12% and the other with 14.5%? You could average the price, and if you absolutely had to, you could make a few body-builder types just to appease your throbbing manhood. I say this semi-facetiously, but it's actually not a bad idea. Perhaps it could be applied only to the top Crus, and the lesser sites can go on making the lesser wines they're making now.

Not that any of this could ever happen, but I'm just the idiot to propose it! We can attack it just as soon as we've rid the world of "DAC."

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

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

# Leo Alzinger

Wachau // Unterloiben



vineyard area // 10 hectares  
annual production // 6,250 cases  
top sites & soil types // Mühlpoint (clay mixed with gneiss);  
Liebenberg (mica schist); Hollerin (gneiss mixed with löss and loam);  
Loibenberg, Steinertal (weathered gneiss)  
grape varieties // 55% Grüner Veltliner, 45% Riesling

*This was the final visit, on a quiet Friday morning, just Valerie and Joel and me. I'd heard good things about the wines, but when I sit down to taste I forget whatever I've heard and try to just let the wines come to me.*

I was in the loo as we moved into the Riesling Smaragds, and there was the most delicate little spider, with silvery green legs and a body the size of a fennel seed. You wouldn't be afraid if she crawled on your face. I wanted to give her a name. What would such a silky little being be named? Just as I was admiring her there was an especially lusty little blackbird trilling away outside. I mean, this bird was *loud*. I had to chuckle at the juxtaposition of metaphors, the little slender spider in her repose, the yapping bird with its helpless melodies. I often find these totems are all around us if we know how to look.

Peter and I drank a bottle of F.X. Pichler's 2002 Steinertal Riesling one night, and it was as marvelous as we expected it to be. I've long admired the glossy power of those wines at their best. Yet when I looked at the words I was using to discuss it—it was showing well, it *performed* beautifully—I realize I felt like I was an *audience* for the wine, that I was separate from it in some crucial way. Perhaps this has everything to do with me, and it's by no means a slam on a highly laudable wine, but when I drink Alzinger's wine I have no such feeling. With them I feel included, roused, affectionate; I feel a thing akin to love.

Alzinger's wines are no more forceful than any of the other Wachau greats. They aren't longer, or riper. What they do is take the serenity with which they're endowed and pass it upward through a kind of apotheosis, beyond which they are beatific and glowing. You wouldn't

be surprised if the cellar master were the Dalai Lama. Alzinger's wines almost never push and assert; they are instead amazingly sanguine and calmly lovely. Their force is a force of kindness. They take you in. They do not strut. Yet if you are tempted to think I'm offering an elegant rationale for less-than-stellar wine, you'd be wrong. The magazine *VINUM* recently published the results of a 10-year retrospective tasting of most of the Wachau's GrüVe monuments, FX Pichler Kellerberg, Knoll Schütt, Hirtzberger Honivogl — that crowd. You'll be interested to know Alzinger had the 2nd-highest composite score (90.7) which was .8 below the top.

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

Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The beauty of his 2009s came as no surprise, but their purity of tone grows more striking with each passing year. It hurts how little wine we get, hardly enough for one *restaurant*, let alone an entire fire-belching behemoth of a **country**. But, but... patience. Others were there first. I must humbly wait. Existing clients have their rights too. Rat-bastards.

The two top sites are among the greatest Grand Crus

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

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



of the Wachau, and they are polar opposites in style. The **LOIBENBERG** is as mighty in the glass as it looks on the huge terraced hillside, and yet for a powerwine it isn't at all brutish. The wines, whether Riesling or GrüVe, are tropical and exotic, yet they manage an uncanny light-footedness and refinement. I suspect a synestheseic would taste yellows and oranges in the wines. Loibenberg is a summer day with peaches ripening on the tree, but it's breezy and fresh, not sultry and thick.

**STEINERTAL** is the coolest among the Loiben Crus, both actually and metaphorically. It's small and hidden back — 5.5 hectares, divided in three sections, with only four proprietors I know of (one of whom has Muskateller

planted; someone get me *that* to taste), of whom Alzinger owns the largest share. It's more or less the first terraces you see if you're driving in from the east and the Kremstal; indeed it's sheltered by the craggy cliff of the Pfaffenberg. Steinertal makes *mark-ed* wine, "green" flavors, as estoteric as Loibenberg but in another register of nuances; green teas, herbs, limes, heirloom apples, often a naked minerality. It seems predestined for Riesling, and even Alzinger's splendid GrüVe can be mistaken for Riesling (at least until you taste the actual Riesling alongside). You could construct a fanciful vision of Steinertal taking a trip to the Saar and returning with the thought "I want to make wines like those wines."

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel

ALA-120

This is the hillside below the Steinertal, where the slope moderates and you don't need terraces. The soil changes also, but whereas the wines used to be overtly green-beany, recent vintages have shown more minerality and a cooler profile, which Leo ascribes to the vines' aging, and "to the roots reaching their water source as they go deeper into the soil."

For sure this 2011 was unusually sleek and herbal, less green bean and more marjoram. It's also quite sedate, pure and moderate. It's a chill dude, basically. The finish mixes cress and almond and a surprisingly dense minerality.

### 2011 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd, 6/750ml +

ALA-121

This one *does* show the green bean but mixed with a surprisingly adamant nettle, boxwood and cress; no wine I know has improved as much as this one over the last fifteen years. Today it's intricately textured, like a salad of 25 edible plants and herbs; lovage, savory, dandelion greens.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml + (+)**

ALA-122

(cask) Lovely fragrance and a superbly firm and mineral palate. Though alcohol is a factor. As exotic as Heiligenstein would be if it were grown there, yet with the feline calm of these wines. Complex, smoky finish. Bottling should contain some of its extravagance and accentuate the mineral.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd, 6/750ml + +**

ALA-113

Almost *garrigue*-y, it's so sunny and generous. The palate is splendidly complex and serpentine; really green tea (actually like a Chinese green called *Tai Ping*); addictively juicy and spearminty; extravagantly delicious yet not at all seductive.

**2011 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel +**

ALA-114

This begins a gorgeous and superb group of Rieslings, as aglow as a person in love.

It's tender and dear and affectionate; salty and with a chervil-y greenness, into a markedly long mineral finish. There's an underlying tension in its second half, as if the calm were deceptive.

**2011 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml + +**

ALA-115

This is another wine which has undergone dramatic improvement the past couple years. The '11 has its customary radish-y profile, with jasmine and mint, and the palate is sensational, physio-sweet, fruity but *coolly* so, like quince and ginger; really juicy and hard as hell to spit; gorgeously spicy finish. Leo again thinks the vines — at 12 years old — have found their aquifer and can settle into transmitting traces from the sub-soils.

**2011 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd, 6/750ml + +**

ALA-116

As always, the apricots. Just a magnificent dry Riesling, 50-year vines now, and the swell of mineral is just scintillating below the rampant pitted-fruit. It's one of those pagan dances of yellow (nectarines) and green (herbs) and grey (stones, baby!) that just has you shaking your head. No need to "interpret" here!

**2011 Riesling Höhereck Smaragd, 6/750ml + +**

ALA-117

Last year we got a few bottles, and this year we'll get a few plus a few. The total production is around 70 cases — the *total* production. "Um, Leo," I said, "Wouldn't it make sense, since the production is so tiny, to sell it all to one customer? Someone, for example, such as, perhaps, me?" Ha haha; yes, that would be funny.

Now don't be mad if you can't get any. Even if I were to beg pathetically I couldn't eke more than 10 cases from them. I wish it were otherwise, because in some vintages I think this is the best Riesling of all. There's authority here, solid power, and an astonishing conciliation of Hollerin's fruit with Loibenberg's exotics with Steinertal's minerality.

This 2011 is incomprehensible; all herbs and spices, some white flower notes, but really it's an exegesis of terroir; incense, roasted peppers, Uva-smoke; it just could be too complex for the human mind. (Or at any rate, mine.) Endless spices and mineral finish.

**2011 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml + + +**

ALA-118

Refined spice; complex, graceful, regal and supple; the palate is otherworldly, I can't bear to spit it; it has a beatific gleam, an inviting glow of beauty. All you can do is be grateful. Not *impressed* or *blown away* or even *amazed*. Just, please — grateful.

**2011 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd, 6/750ml + +**

ALA-119

This was my subjective favorite, but the Loibenberg was more divine-seeming. Leo told me the Steinertal had been showing better until the previous week, when the Loibenberg came on. That's how they are, we agreed. This has all its gorgeous stinging green vigor in a whip—crack sharp relief, as racy and rippling as a high-strung colt.

# Nikolaihof-Wachau

Wachau // Mautern

vineyard area // 22 hectares    annual production // 8,300 cases  
certification // Demeter Certified Biodynamic  
top sites // Steiner Hund, Klausberg, Im Weingebirge, Vom Stein, Süßenberg  
soil types // primary rock topped with humus or gravel,  
and eroded primary rock  
grape varieties // 55% Riesling, 35% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Neuburger,  
Gelber Muskateller, Gewürztraminer, Frühroter Veltliner, Chardonnay



*We were sitting in a schmoozy kind of way with “Nikky” Saahs, and he was talking about the old days. Someone may have asked why the estate decided to go bio-d so long before anyone else did. Nikky told us that in the 60s his father didn’t use the prevailing chemical treatments because times weren’t good and he couldn’t afford them. So he did without, and his vineyards did without, and after a few years both man and vine alike learned how to do without.*

Some of you have seen the proud great linden that occupies the courtyard; it has become something of an emblem itself, that tree, yet at heart it’s also a kindly giver of shade and shelter from the rain, not to mention a home to a lot of birds. One can’t imagine Nikolaihof without that tree, yet one also can’t quite explain why it makes such sense. It seems to coalesce a lot of love into its nexus, that huge green being. The birds love it, the buzzing pollinators love it, any human being who gets near it loves it, and I think the tree also loves its life and being lovely and useful. In a sense it stands for our relationship to nature itself. There was a moment where their little wire-haired dachshund, charmingly known as “Lumpy,” was up on his tiny hind legs peering intently into the tree and barking, and Nikki explained “Sometimes when we throw his ball to him it gets caught up in the branches and eventually falls back down, and Lumpy thinks the tree is also playing with him.” Well *that* explains everything.

Maybe it’s because we know one another longer now, but I find myself wanting to remind you, as much as Nikolaihof is a Bastion-Of-The-Biodynamic, and as meaningful and stirring as the people and their wines are to me, as I draw closer I enjoy that these are really just people leading a particularly fine life.

Christine’s book is out. It’s a cookbook with recipes and philosophies from Nikolaihof’s restaurant. It’s in German of course, but you’d suss it pretty well, and it helps if you want to understand this family in depth. I confess I find them wonderful. That’s partly because they are never solemn, just committed. Nikki gives every appearance of being a cosmopolitan fellow, he speaks excellent English, knows the patter, and is

certainly much better on the computer than I am. Yet we were sitting eating dinner when he appeared with a big *haunch* in his hand, its furry hoof still on, from a wild boar he’d shot the evening before. And if you harbored any expectation the young generation would somehow “modernize” Nikolaihof, it was Nikky who insisted on reviving the use of the ginormous 18th-century wooden press, which had become a museum piece.

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

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

Since everything is unified within these walls (and outside them also) it is very clear to me that Nikolaihof’s wines also embody that enlightenment. “Cheerful and useful” would be a perfect way to describe them. Even at their most profound, and they

attain such profundity quite regularly, theirs is never an intimidating or haughty Greatness, but rather a sapid companionability that's almost affectionate. The wines talk not only to your senses, they talk to your life.

It's typical for Saahs to integrate their lives within a matrix of principles; they hardly seem to consider their wine as an abstract object but rather as an ingredient among many which grow in nature and transmit a life-energy of their own. This can be confusing to a certain kind of wine-freak who obsesses on the wine-object as such, but in the end I am comforted by the desire to integrate wine into all the things that emerge from creation and give us pleasure.

Saahs' preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn't seem to hail from a concern we'd call "environmental" in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall approach to sharing life with other forms of life, and also from their sense of time.

Nikolaihof is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first Demeter-certified wine in the world. They have farmed and made wines organically for 40 years; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible.

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

Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of 50 years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the secrets, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: "The secret of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology — which in any case barely exists — as in the special care of the vines." He quotes Saahs as saying, "You shouldn't shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself." Fermentation (natural yeasts,) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time — up to 4 months — on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that wine is a foodstuff. "I like to drink wine, not study it," he says. "We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don't

wait for overripeness." His wife inserts; "There's nothing charming about harvesting in November."

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

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

Some of these wines are as still as silent ponds, and each nuance of flavor is like a small pebble dropped in the silvery water, and you watch the tiny silent ripples flow slowly toward shore. They seem utterly without affect, but instead serenely themselves. They are numinous in their very lack of thrusting and pushing. They are candid and modest. These wines don't so much meet you halfway as show you a third place that's neither You nor Them, but somewhere you meet in truth only by dissolving your respective walls. The wines have done it; now it's your turn. I cannot tell you how these wines stir such a calmness of spirit. Other wines are perhaps more poignant, or more exciting. But I have never tasted wines more settling than these. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.

It's a shame that words like "sublime" can lose their music and force through squandering, and I know I'm part of the problem. But the quality of sublimity in Nikolaihof's wines has to do with their basic characters; hale, trustworthy, unaffected, substantive but never tiring, explicitly *connected* and charged with a gentle force. It isn't about making you love *them*; it's about what they can do to ease your way, by whispering their tender steady reminder of the sweet secrets of the world we share.

One year Nikki took my colleague Leif on a tour of the place, and later Leif told me how often Nikki

had praised his father and how grateful he was to inherit an estate in such superb condition. Since Nikki's arrival the wines have become more consistent. I don't know whether he's strictly speaking responsible; I rather envision a kind of dream-come-true of father and son working together, with both of them grateful, and it finds its way into the wines. The old rap on Nikolaihof was inconsistency, but the last 6-7 vintages have been wonderfully steady and searchingly expressive.

Christine is passionate. Some listeners find themselves feeling guilty for not emulating her principles, and the feeling makes them squirmy, and because of that they push it away and accuse her of being preachy.

I've heard her speak and read interviews she's given, and I've never gleaned as much as a hint of moral smugness. She knows I myself admire her work and her principles but that I am not a biodynamic acolyte, and I work with many growers practicing "integrated" viticulture. Christine and I are friends, and if she wanted to preach she could easily preach to me; it's a privilege of friendship not to have to be "polite." But she never has. We have grown used to wines that put on a show for us, but these wines don't. They walk alongside you, and suddenly you feel how much you wanted the company. It is exactly that lit-from-within serenity that makes these wines so singular, and so precious.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner "Hefeabzug" +**

ANK-108

**CORE-LIST WINE.** I made an afternoon visit this year, coming straight from Ott. I sat on the side of the table this year, to stay out of the hot sun, and enjoyed the new perspective. This was the first wine. How would their 2011s be? It was *relatively* loose-knit by Nikolaihof standards, and so it showed its leeliness more — *Hefeabzug* means "sur lie" — but it's splendidly salty and oyster, dynamic and snappy and long. And, hmmm... check out what's up next:

**2004 Grüner Veltliner "Hefeabzug" +**

ANK-051

In case you harbored any notion that this little leesy youngster wouldn't age, here's an eight-year old wine from a so-so vintage, and it's all celeriac and parsley and wintergreen and green tea — I mean, you really won't believe it. And it's yummy! And they have some; not enough for sure, but more than a tiny amount.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel +**

ANK-109

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel, 6/1.5L +**

ANK-109M

Oh, a dream. Nikolaihof at their tender best. Like a slow-motion gurgling stream of affection and loving kindness. Don't waste time "studying" a wine like this; just let go and let it love you.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd, 6/750ml ++**

ANK-110

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd, 6/1.5L ++**

ANK-110M

Their non-vinification removes all trace of severity from 2010; it's like a complex deciduous forest on a warm rainy day, the scent of the leaves and the dripping bark. The finish is haunting and poetic. It's deep and sweet and will be amazingly complex in 4-6 years.

I should emphasize, I don't need to or want to summon any kind of spell when I'm tasting here. I try instead to erase my screen and then transcribe whatever takes place. I mean, the wines are how they are, and I seem to feel my only authentic response is directly into image and metaphor. And the tasting itself is quite workmanlike; 4-5 glasses are lined up and the wines poured into flights, just like anywhere else. And then they start to peel, and the usual deconstruction of flavors just isn't called for. Better to fall into the aura of the peeling, to hear the complicated overtones, to feel the air between the wine and me. That's what seems to work.

**2011 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel**

ANK-112

**2011 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel 6/1.5L**

ANK-112M

Hmmm; the two bio-d estates have the only '11s with grip and phenols; this is silvery and markedly mineral, less burly than this site often is, very long and snappy.

**2009 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd, 6/750ml (+)**

ANK-113

**2009 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd, 6/1.5L (+)**

ANK-113M

As '09 is, this shows chamomile and beeswax, but as '09 rarely is, this is taut and grippy, and maybe still too young. There's a grassy herbal currant-leaf mid-palate, and the wine almost visibly picks up steam in the glass. Still, it's a shy kind of critter for this estate.

**2008 Riesling Steiner Hund Reserve, 6/750ml ++**

ANK-114

This vineyard is existentially unique, as if it had its own magnetic fields. Druids would have built their megaliths there. Maybe at night a UFO lands silently and all the little space dudes get out and do some magic, I don't know. But I know of no other great wine that seems so unknowable, overwhelming and haunting.

For a Nikolaihof '08 this is markedly ripe (13%), and it shows a lot of counterpoint between its druidic exotics and Chartreuse-y herbalness, versus its jasmine and white chocolate *yang* side. Potentially great, it's still busy working through its contradictions. The implosion of minerality may eventually mediate among them. A superb and complicated Riesling.

**1998 "Steinriesler" +++**

ANK-117

"Riesler" is an archaic term for Riesling. Saahs wanted to see how a wine might age in cask without sulfur if it were an ordinary and not a grand wine to begin with. The first example was a glorious 1999, offered two years ago. So what do they do for an encore?

Offer something even older.

This is a masterpiece of time, nature and instinct. Less "humble" than that '99 was, and more insanely, dauntingly complex. I could detail its three paragraphs worth of nuance if I had 40 minutes to study it. Let's just say, a perfect *positive* oxidation, a whole encyclopedia of wild flowers and herbs, a mélange of every possible salt, and the gentlest note of allspice and pink peppercorn.

I don't care what it costs — don't miss it.

**1995 Riesling "Vinothek," 6/750ml +++**

ANK-111

**1995 Riesling "Vinothek," 6/1.5L +++**

ANK-111M

First came the 1990 Riesling, then the 1991 GV, then the 1993 GV, each of them as beautiful and soulful as wine could ever be.

And now this.

It's just 12.5% alcohol. This tender wine has been alone so long, it's almost forgotten how to speak in language — so it sings. All it does is sing. You want to speak of its noble oxidation but you get caught in the sultry web of its amazing floweriness and pure vetiver. It actually, after all these years in cask, needs oxygen. Your sensual-analytical skills don't help you here. Put them away. Quiet down, all the way down. You can enter the house, they've left the door unlocked. But once inside, the rooms are dim. You find your way by an instinct you didn't know you had. You listen as you never did before. And you are given back to yourself, a strange new person, swimming in beauty and as supple as a child, pensive and amazed.

*<psssssssssssst!>... I have just a few bottles of an astonishing 1999 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd, bottle-aged, and it's a +++ quality wine, juicy-greeny-salty and fabulously complex-ly floral. Not cheap, but who's worth it if not you?*

**2011 Gelber Muskateller +**

ANK-116

Sapid, greeny Muscat, with the herbal sideways grin of a Styrian wine, the sense you could squeeze a sweet cool green soup from it; not at all catty, but intricately floral and herbal. I know this isn't cheap, but it's Muscat aristocracy, up with Catoir and Zind-Humbrecht.

# Hans Reisetbauer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



- Apple in Oak Barrel** // 6/375ml // XHR-024
- Plum Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-001
- Williams Pear Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-002
- Apricot Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-003
- Cherry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-004
- Elderberry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-005
- Rowanberry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-006
- Raspberry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-009
- Wild Cherry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-011
- Carrot Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-013
- Ginger Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-014
- Mixed Case Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-010  
Pear, Apricot, Plum, Rowanberry, Raspberry, Wild Cherry
- Whisky** // 6/750ml // XHR-015
- Blue Gin** // 6/750ml // XHR-025
- Brut Apfel** // XHR-026

*(all Eau de Vie and Blue Gin available in magnums, 3/1.5L)*

# Reference



## EARLIER VINTAGES

**2010:** is as obscure in Austria as it was in Germany. I have no doubt the vintage is remarkable and maybe (for GrüVe) superb, but it's in quite a dour pout at the moment, especially compared to the innocently beaming charm of the '11. Don't regret a bottle you bought, but do be aware this vintage will go in and out of the shadows, and that '11 doesn't flatter it.

**2009:** I wonder if any vintage could have withstood the withering assault of vinous ordnance of 2010, because this was an instance where the yearling was not flattered by the new baby. And I *like* '09 and will continue to like it. Now it's showing itself as a fruity vintage, perhaps a little formless or maybe it just seems that way alongside '10. It's what we call a crowd-pleaser.

**2008:** The lithe silvery minerality and slender focused fruit of this vintage are and will always be delightful. And most of its reds are much better than the year's reputation for lightness would suggest. What they show is both fruit and substance.

**2007** continues to be a beaming sweetheart of a vintage. At first the light wines seemed slight after the muscular '06s. But the top wines in 2007 seem better than their '06 brethren. The vintage has shed some of its emphatic minerality and grown more smoky and creamy, but overall I'd have to say 2007 is the single most attractive vintage of the decade so far.

## GRAPE VARIETIES

### Grüner Veltliner

However "trendy" GrüVe may have been, its greatest

value is it isn't merely trendy, but rather has a permanent place in the pantheon of important grapes, and a prominent place among food's best friends. Among the many wonderful things Grüner Veltliner is, it is above all THE wine that will partner all the foods you thought you'd *never* find a wine for.

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

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

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

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

### Riesling

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

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

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

### Gelber Muskateller

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

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

I'm offering every single one I could get my greedy hands on. Here's what I have. Unscrew that cap, splash the greeny gurgle of wine into the nearest glass; sniff and salivate — drink and *be HAPPY*.

### Pinot Blanc

a.k.a. WEISSBURGUNDER. Austria makes the best wines I have ever tasted from this variety. Nuttier

and tighter-wound than in Alsace, which may be due to the Auxerrois that the Alsatiens are permitted to use in their "Pinot Blanc" wines. At the mid-range in Austria the wines consistently surprised me by their stylishness, fine nuttiness and many other facets. At their best they were just utterly golden; brilliant, complex, delicious. You oughta buy more.

## AUSTRIAN WINE LAWS

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

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

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

Such are the terms of the debate!

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

case to make, provided one has the courage to accept the consequences of making unattractive wines. What too many do, sadly, is to sell unattractiveness as virtuous, in a fine example of Orwellian doublespeak.

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

But maybe a little empathy is called for. I arrived right in the creative heat of the wine-renaissance in Austria, and am less sensitive to the dubious past that preceded it, but which the growers remember. After the War and into the '70s Austrian wine was usually a pale imitation of German, but cheaper. Co-ops and *négociants* controlled the market, and integrity was an endangered species. Sweetness sold, especially when it was used to add a spurious prettiness to overcropped insipid wine. When Austrian growers experienced a rebirth of passion and idealism, they also wanted to distinguish themselves by breaking ways with the past, and so they favored dry wines with mass and vinosity. I do understand their wariness about residual sugar; the slope doesn't look as slippery to me because I have never fallen down it. That said, enough time has passed that they can lay aside their fear, because the dogmatic opposition to homeopathic bits of RS is taking potential beauty away from their wines, and making them less flexible at the table.

## DAC

And just what does this acronym mean? It means "Don't ask, Charlie," because I'm not going to answer you. This may seem churlish, but I am truly annoyed. I published an article in last September's *WORLD OF FINE WINE* that detailed why. Some growers agree with me, and I suspect others do but hesitate to speak out. So, in a nutshell, this is the pith of my dismay.

DAC, however laudable its aims (and to a certain extent they are), is essentially a bureaucratic and abstract construct, the results of which add *nothing* to the facts on the ground, only adding to the drinker's burden, because now he needs to learn not only the facts, but the bureaucratic *system* of categorizing them. And if the DAC is modeled after appellation laws in France or Italy, one does well to ask how usefully *those* laws are working out.

They will say that every grown up wine culture has codified an appellation system in order to guarantee typicity, distinctiveness and integrity. They will say, as Austria strives to both emerge from an earlier era of mediocrity and to join the mainstream of Fine European

wines, it is time for an appellation system to be established.

I will reply, as we see how these systems ramify in practice, we also see the ways they can strait-jacket a wine culture, can inhibit visionary thinking and retard innovation. There is a constant ongoing tension between protecting that which has proven to be a region's most profound mode of expression — such as Sangiovese in Brunello, for example — while also permitting a sense of questing and exploration. Sometimes it works very well, and sometimes it stifles people, and to the extent the laws are ignored, they become relics of irrelevance.

Why, then, would the Austrians willingly take that risk? What does it add? I think it appeals to their pride. And I think that the pride is justified; after all, what wine culture has accomplished what Austria has, in just the last 27 years?

But the DAC fixes something that isn't broken, something that is actually vital and healthy, and the "cure" for the non-existent disease has serious risks of its own.

It attempts to codify the facts on the ground. Ask yourselves *why*. How is your world improved by codifying these things?

"The Kamptal is best known for its outstanding Grüner Veltliners and Rieslings, though other varieties do well there." That's what the books will tell you. *How is that not enough??*

And now? The "Kamptal DAC" permits only Grüner Veltliner and Riesling, insists the wines be dry, and insists on minimum alcohol levels. That's a new bunch of stuff you, poor drinker, has to memorize, and which has added *nothing* at all useful for you. Indeed, if Hiedler could always sell his Sauvignon Blanc with "Kamptal" on the label, because that's where it grew, then how is your life improved by his now having to *declassify* the Sauv-B to "Niederösterreich" — which you now must also learn the meaning of — because the variety isn't approved for the Kamptal-DAC?

Learning the facts is enough. Having to learn how a bureaucrat or a marketing guy has catalogued the facts is a waste of your time.

To my justly proud Austrian friends: do not show your pride by clamoring to be included in an already existing system. Show it by saying "We have no need for the existing appellation systems or to imitate them here at home. We will instead evolve *new* systems that will preserve the gains we have made and will keep alive the spirit of adventure that make ours unique among Old-World wine cultures."

So, I will not refer to "DAC" unless it is *the actual name of the wine*. Then we have to use it. But if it's merely a useless appendix to an already complete name, we're going to ignore it. Hiedler's *Grüner Veltliner Thal* is not improved by being called *Grünern Veltliner Thal Kamptal DAC*.

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## THE MAN THE MYTH THE LEGEND

If its true that the road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom, Terry Theise has been there and back. A brief perusal of his writing makes it quickly apparent that the man has no reservations about conveying his thoughts and feelings on wine, life, sex, philosophy and general cosmology.

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