

# terry theise estate selections

GERMANY 2002



Imported by:

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# Wine Spoken Here



## WHAT IS LEFT TO SAY

The self steps out of the circle;  
it stops wanting to be  
the farmer, the wife and the child.

It stops trying to please  
by learning everyone's dialect; it finds it can live, after all,  
in a world of strangers.

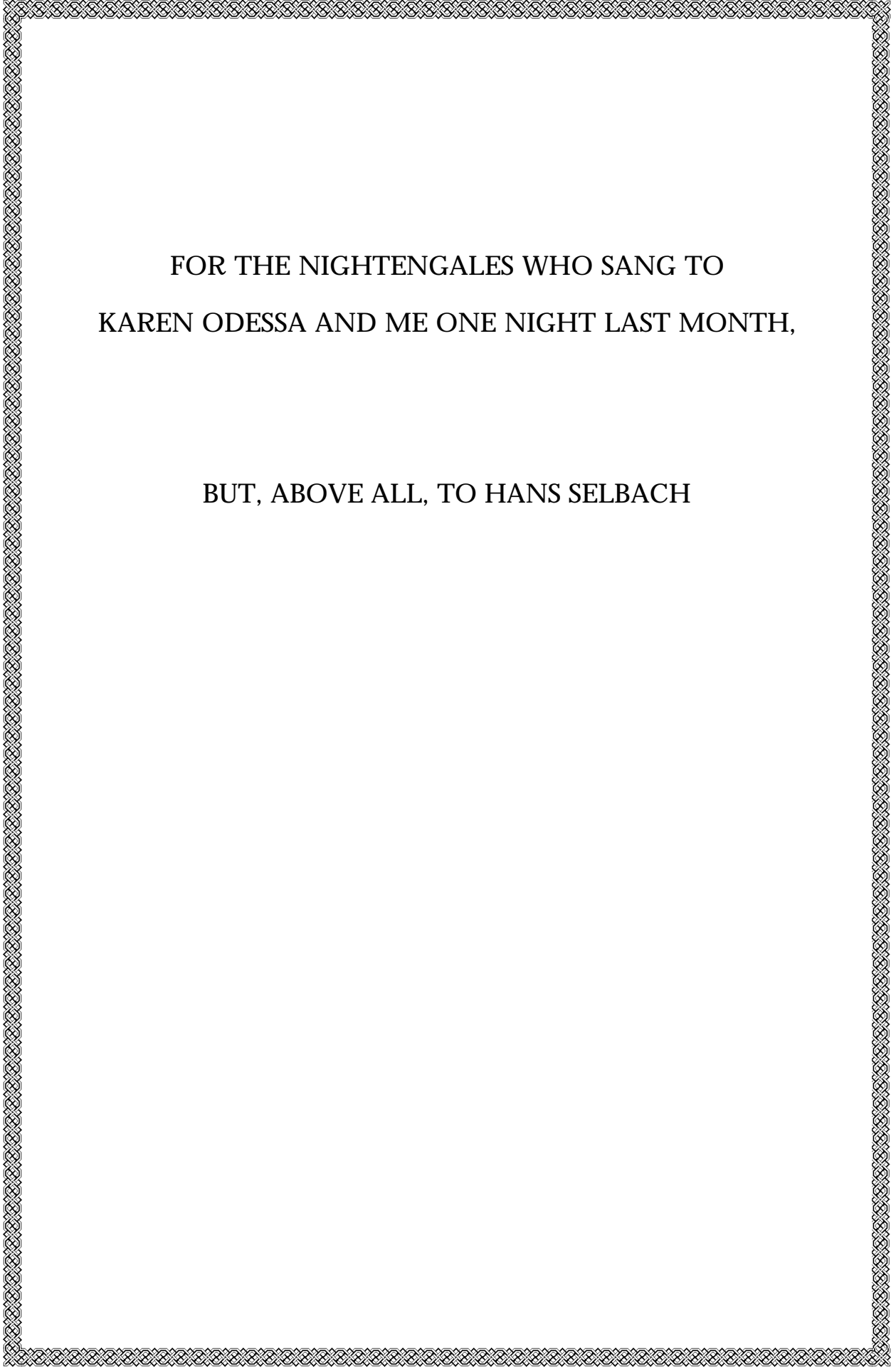
It sends itself fewer flowers;  
it stops preserving its tears in amber.

How splendidly arrogant it was  
when it believed the gold-filled tomb  
of language awaited its raids!  
Now it frequents the junkyards,  
knowing all words are secondhand.

It has not chosen its poverty,  
this new frugality.  
It did not want to fall out of love  
With itself. Young,  
it celebrated itself  
and richly sang itself,  
seeing only itself  
in the mirror of the world.

It cannot return. It assumes  
its place in a universe of stars  
that do not see it. Even the dead  
no longer need it to be at peace.  
Its function is to applaud.

-Lisel Mueller



FOR THE NIGHTENGALES WHO SANG TO  
KAREN ODESSA AND ME ONE NIGHT LAST MONTH,

BUT, ABOVE ALL, TO HANS SELBACH



# *The 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.*

*Distinctinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.*

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

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## LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

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

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

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

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

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

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

**M**y visit to Germany last month was unexciting. Oh sure, I tasted the best wines of the last 25 years, and there's the fact that my wife was charged by a wild boar, if that's what you mean by excitement. Otherwise, ho hum.

The boar was doing whatever boars do towards evening, in the wild terraces above Müller-Catoir. Karen Odessa had wandered out there to sniff the wild plum and almond blossoms. A narrow little trail runs vertically up the hill between the terraces. K.O. heard a rustling and turned to see the boar, which seemed to be unaware of her. So, appallingly, she clapped, to get the beast's attention. Yup, she got it! The now-terrified animal saw that its only means of escape lay on the very path on which my wife



was standing, so it did what wild boars do, and ran like hell the only way it could. Yikes!

Karen O. turned and ran too, and grabbed whatever scraggly branches were at hand in order to lift herself, and managed

to just get her legs off the ground when the boar shot between them.

This having elapsed, she ran back down toward the buildings – “I didn’t look back, are you kidding?” she said – to where we all stood in the courtyard calmly yakking away, unaware of the Mutual Of Omaha Wild Kingdom drama which had taken place mere meters away.

Needless to say no one believed her. Oh sure, she was scratched and bruised, not to mention terrified, but hey, it could have been a hedgehog. “Hedgehogs are capable of considerable ferocity if they feel their young are threatened,” says Marlin Perkins. “Jim here (Marlin’s long-suffering factotum) will now attempt to grab one of the little critters just to enrage the female hedgehog! His family will certainly be glad to know he’s fully covered by Mutual Of Omaha for what promises to be a sensational mauling...”

So, as you see, another tranquil year.

Not like two years ago, when I wept in front of eleven of my customers and tried not to let them see it. We were tasting at Schmitt-Wagner, and Bruno Schmitt had raided his comprehensive cellar of old vintages. He does it every time I visit, and I can never get over the honor he shows me. Though I suspect he gets a big ol’ kick out of it himself; the wines come out like baseballs at a batting cage and he’s always announcing the vintage before you have a chance to guess it, he’s so eager and revved up.

This time he brought out a treasure remarkable even by his standards, an Auslese from the great 1937 vintage. I had tasted the wine once before (this is a generous man) and I waited for what I knew would come. As the wine was poured the group inhaled audibly at the color, and I saw many faces grow meditative as they sniffed those first mysterious fragrances. But as always seems to happen, when you

expect to be moved you’re too self-conscious and you sort of can’t be moved. That was me. My guests had walked through that little tear in the curtain out into the other world. I was happy for them.

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

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

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

These ideas have started to become my schtick; they’ve crystalized out of my experience over the years into something that looks like a contribution I can make. Thus I write and talk about them. If you actually read this catalog (you have my sympathies) you might imagine I think about these things a lot, but the truth is I hardly think of



them at all. I do if I have to, and I have to now. In my daily life I think mostly about baseball, sex and guitar solos. So, when I all-of-a-sudden am blindsided by an incandescent example of everything I think is important about wine, it wipes me out. And thus, I sat weeping in front of eleven of my customers and tried not to let them see.

Charles Simic once defined poetry as “three mismatched shoes at the entrance of a dark alley” (thanks to Molly McQuade for the quote). The basic enigma that



changes the lens by which we receive the world. The more I get into wine the less reducible I feel it to be. Its enigma deepens even as it appears to grow more transparent. It is

helpful to see wine connected to gardening, to making things grow, and it's even more helpful when the person encouraging the growing is companionably connected to the earth; most of all, when he sees the thing through to completion. Which, in wine, means to produce and to bottle it.

We were all over in Germany at various times last March. It's important you know that each of my colleagues was with me, did what I did, tasted what I tasted, and will speak from their own experiences about the wines, even Anthony, who managed to say awake. You can't really understand wine – at least not this kind of wine – if you don't go there. I remember sitting with Helmut Dönnhoff trying to glean why his '99s were in another league from all the others, and I heard, perhaps for the first time, a certain urgency about his voice. It isn't at all breathy; he speaks with a kind of closed-throated passion which resonates from his piercing blue eyes. That precise driven-ness is the “secret” of those wines. If you haven't been with him you won't – can't – get everything his wines are saying. Nor can they be entirely seen without having walked those vineyards, looked into the soils, breathed the air, listened to the local birds.

I am aware of my blessings. I know that many of you can't have this experience as easily as I do, maybe not at all. It is why there is sometimes a chasm between the way I relate to wine and sell it and the ways you relate to wine and buy it. Until recently that chasm was a place I felt lonely and unseen. But I can't change it, and it's self-indulgent to feel the pain of that place when there's so much of fascination to be found there. I like what you can see when no-one can see you!

None of this is valuable if the wines don't taste good. Josh Greene's interview with me for Wine & Spirits suggested that superb quality was a secondary consideration for me, but the truth is I barely consider it at all: It's a given. There is a “professional” intelligence that seeks to guarantee every wine tastes good every time. But after all these years (17!) I'm drawn to tell you from whom you are

buying these wines, and to suggest there are meanings beyond the assembling of X-number of wines that tasted good.

Oops, meanings. Dirty word. Can't go there, because what if someone feels inadequate because they don't feel these “meanings” as I do. Dear reader, I have no hidden agenda; you don't need my permission to approach wine as your temperament urges. I have my own subjective lil' truth to speak, and I will because that's how I want to “do business,” and you can ignore it or simply observe it for whatever it's worth.

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

It is also a sense of PROPERNESS, that things are where they belong. After all the years of trial and error along came Riesling, the vine that **belonged** in these thin, mineral soils and this cool, long growing season. And because Europeans are more aware than we Yanks that people actually existed before us, they're aware of the real size of their place in the cosmos. They listen to the soil and work to do its bidding. They know that the Riesling vine is the poet of their corner of the earth. They want to hear the poem. They want us to hear it. And so they work to bring the words clearly onto the page. And they are aware they do not, themselves, CREATE those words. The text is created somewhere else, below the ground.

One risks unleashing a great fury if one insists that soil creates flavor. That fury is worth considering, as I shall do later in these pages, in a little essay called A PRIMER ON TERROIR. (Miramax is bidding for the movie rights by offering to sign Ned Beatty to play “loam.”)

I live a disphasic existence. The way fine German wines are made makes perfect sense to me. Soils and exposures are complex and variable; therefore the wines are kept separate and produced in small lots. The climate is sometimes iffy, so the wines are categorized by how ripe the grapes were, since you can't presume upon ripeness. The production structure is artisanal, and there's a lot of hands-on by family vintners who literally live above their wines. This means that individual wines come and go; they're different every year. They resist being categorized; it is in their essence to be discontinuous. Superficially they're a pain in the neck. Yet it is even more distressing when a vintner tries to rationalize away the innate character of his type of wine. I think vintners should vint, and marketing people should market and salespeople should sell. And I think I could, if I really wanted to or had to, make this all less onerous for accountants, warehouse people, data processing people, all the innocent bystanders for whom I feel great sympathy. I could do it. But only at the price of slaughtering something I feel is even more vital to protect.

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

“Whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn’t a fish!”

In a recent SPECTATOR Matt Kramer wrote a provocative column in which he took issue with aesthetes who were kvetching that certain ugly buildings from the sixties were being considered as architectural monuments. Kramer conceded the buildings were eyesores, but that wasn’t the point, as he saw it. The buildings, ugly as they were, REPRESENTED a sensibility which made its mark on the history of architecture, and as artifacts they signified something important even if we felt them to be ugly. Then he applied the principle to wine; he claimed that there is a value in wine deeper than how much sensual pleasure it gives us. Paraphrasing Matt now, he wrote a wonderful sentence to the effect that wine can tell us something about the earth that we can receive no other way, and that this mattered more than how “good” it happened to taste.

Superficially it defies a certain logic. It might appear that wine has no reason to exist except to give pleasure. First it has to taste good or why would we drink it? But consider this. Grant me for the sake of argument that Volnay at its best is sublime wine in its perfume and class but also a wine which can be light in body. Nothing wrong with that! Also grant me that the Gevrey type at its best has plenty of body and satisfying meaty depth, but sometimes seems to yearn for more perfume and class. You could, if you wanted to, open a bottle of each and MIX them to create a hypothetically superior Burgundy. Now you’d have body and perfume. But would you do such a thing? You would in effect OBLITERATE the Beings of Volnay and Gevrey in order to create the Thing you seek.

So I would suggest that we derive many pleasures from wine, some sensual, some cerebral, some even mystical, and that we are wise to nurture all of them. If we’re wine freaks, we care about who the wine is just as we care about how it tastes.

When you speculate metaphysically you can easily forget how or when to stop. You get a tiger by the tail and it pulls you into an endless sequence of “whys” and “whats” which eventually become absurd. What happens then is we usually give up. We reach the point of absurdity and mistakenly conclude that because we arrived at an absurd place, the

entire journey was absurd. Now that’s absurd! All that’s happened is we’ve been shown where to stop speculating.

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

Here’s the crux of it. Something in us craves diversity. We hunger for it in ways too numerous to cite. Some creative life-urge seems to be expressed by diversity. It is counter to the life-force to struggle against it, it is literally deadening to live in a standardized world. Along with diversity comes habitat. Diverse members of a specie have diverse preferences as to where they live and what they eat in order to survive. I feel strongly that the best grapes are those which are fastidious in their preferences. They may live, technically, away from their natural homes, but they won’t thrive. They give boring wines. The world’s most fascinating, meaningful and DELICIOUS wines are made from grapes grown where they belong, in the soils and climates that suit them. And they are individuals. And they are not common. And they are worth everything, just everything; they are why we care at all about this crazy way we make a living.



Kerpen Estate

## CONTINUING NEW APPROACH TO TASTING NOTES

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

-Elaine Scarry

I used to care a great deal about writing tasting notes as much for my own writer's ego as for the actual wines. I searched for ever-more esoteric associations so you would be impressed with my palate. I strove for pretty language so you'd think I was a good writer. Sometimes I actually wrote well, and sometimes the wine actually did taste like "polyvinyl siding in direct sunlight on a Fall day with an approaching cold front" (I no longer represent that agency), but mostly I felt victim to my own affect.

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

It's an odd business, this tasting and conveying through words. It makes a wine into a precious object of attention excluding the rest of the world. I have a specific mercantile purpose in telling you how my selections tasted, but it's been years since I wrote or read tasting notes for fun. Who bloody **cares** if it's white peach or yellow peach or peach pit or peach skin or the BARK from the peach



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

In fact this year, for the first time in my life, I began to find it wearisome to write notes. If the wines were true (as nearly all of them were) I was reduced to repeating what I'd written countless times before. I also found the 2001s almost frustratingly complex! In effect they were too compelling to be merely "received"; they demanded a kind of deliberate intellectual attention to try and glean their facets and design.

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

I want my notes to help you, of course, and I want them to convey how the wine spoke. I'd rather not try to grasp or apprehend a wine. It's a kind of parlor-trick to be able to string associations together, like you have a better palate if you "find" twelve things the wine smells like and the next guy only found nine. It's still all about you. If I examine the facet of consciousness I use to receive wine, it feels improbable and miraculous. I try, at once, to both be lambent and receptive and to direct a beam of attention and, in truth, I haven't a clue how I do it, nor am I conscious of trying to do it. I only know I summon a kind of calm.

Then I get to hear the wine, and if it doesn't speak in words then I try to find a way to record whatever language it does speak. Image is fine. Some might think it twee, but I'll happily crawl out on that limb. Feelings of texture are fairly easy to describe, and texture is at least as important as actual flavor. And associative language can be useful, especially if it's a genre of wine we're describing. Signature flavors are helpful to know.

Those blasted chefs have come up with a damnably cunning zen concept for elusive flavor; umami. As best I can capture the concept, umami is an interior flavor you don't taste as a discrete taste but is deeply present on your tertiary palate, especially as you exhale. Certain foods (such as mushrooms) are generous with umami, and certain kinds of preparations (long slow braising) encourage it. It's present in wine also, especially in wines whose flavors aren't carried on swift currents of acidity. Umami has crept into a few of my notes so you should know what I think I mean by it! It's the taste of yourself tasting.

I hit a hot streak once in which I bulls-eyed something like five consecutive old vintages we'd been tasting blind. It's fun to be good at palate-macho, though I know it's mostly a parlor game, plus it involves a lot of luck. But it is the one time on these trips that I don't have to assess a wine in terms of "does it make the cut?" nor am I obliged to describe it. In other words, I can relax. Wine's a sometimes shy dog; you **grasp** at it, it runs away. You wait patiently for it, it's curiosity gets the best of it, it comes to you. If you're anxious (Oh shit, will I get it right?) it reads your fear and keeps its distance. If you're simply receptive, there it is, laying at your feet and smiling. Usually you "get" the wine with the first impression. Your guess is correct. You get all the samolians. The others, well, they get an edition of the "Mosel Wines Of The 60s" board game, plus the bitter memory of having been bested by some zen galoot.

## MAKING THE CASE FOR GERMAN WINES

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

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

Happily, one barely needs to make the case for German wines any more. We're still far from the mainstream (and I'm not sure I'd want to be there in any case) but I'm sure you've noticed these wines are MAKING THE SCENE in their cool Hugo Boss duds. I am sometimes asked why; I think there's a few reasons: 1) Who knows! I mean, do you know, does anyone know? Maybe it was just Time. 2) Many drinkers are suffering debilitating attacks of Chard-ennui and are seeking wines that taste more real and complex. 3) Best for last. A whole new generation of sommeliers has arisen, worshipping no false gods, interested only in how wines work with food, more willing to gamble on their passion and experience than were their snooty, ossified forbears.

Thus if I repeat this text it's not to convince you; you're very likely smarter about these things than I am. It's to give you some ammo with which to convince others. The few holdouts, the recalcitrant, the disparately stubborn, clinging for dear life to those old shopworn faiths, we gotta try to redeem these poor souls.

German wine is not what most people think it is, because Riesling is not what most people think it is. I once told a woman at a tasting, when she asked if I had any Chardonnays, that all my wines were Chardonnays. "Then give me your best one," she asked, and I think I poured her a Lingenfelder. "Oh this is **wonderful!**" she enthused. "I think this is the best Chardonnay I've ever tasted." That's because it comes from the town of RIESLING, I said, showing her the word on Rainer's label. If you want really good Chardonnay, I continued, make sure it comes from Riesling. "Thank you," she said. "You've really taught me something." Little did she know.

The paradigm for German wine is pure fruit flavors, faithfulness to the soil, and balance of all structural components so that neither sweetness nor acidity stands out. Most modern well-made German Rieslings with residual sugar tastes DRIER than most new-world Chardonnay. And in place of the wash of slutty oak you get specifically focused flavors that can be hauntingly complex. People

who simply taste these wines, will like them and be surprised by how much they like them. It isn't the wine per se that's "difficult," but rather the barriers erected in advance by the drinker.



Weingart Vineyard

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

What people think they taste and what they actually taste are sometimes divergent. What they say they like and what they actually like are often divergent! Nothing new here. Apart from which, it's really tedious to be on the defensive regarding sweetness. Somebody please tell me what's supposed to be **WRONG** with sweetness? When did it become infra-dig? We SNARF down sweetness in every other form, why not in wine? It's in most of the food we eat. What do you think would happen if we turned the tables; put them on the defensive for **rejecting** sweetness?! "Who told you it wasn't cool to drink wines with sweetness?" we could ask. "Man, that idea went out with double-knit leisure suits."

"The wines don't work with food." NOT!

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

"There's too many different wines." This is true, but

it's inextricable from the jewel of the German wine experience, just as it is in Burgundy. Comte Lafon could equalize the casks and produce one white wine and one red wine, as he might were he a Bordelais. It would definitely simplify things. Would you want him to? Would the gain in simplicity outweigh the loss of fascination? You tell me!

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

As such I think Riesling, or indeed any wine with these kinds of virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind), can give the “discriminating” palate its greatest pleasure. I wince at the pompous phrase, yet it is one of Riesling's great wonders. Wine-beginners who happen onto Riesling discover its miracle, to be at once entirely accessible and endlessly complex. It was once said the beginner would eventually leave Riesling behind in search of something more challenging (and that he'd return to Riesling later on when he realized that nothing was really any more challenging!), but I wonder if the 20-and-30-somethings I see drinking these wines will ever find them palling. It doesn't look that way. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous big wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there's confusion over this issue, and it won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster, period, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

## MAKING THE CASE FOR AUSLESE

The entire 2001 vintage makes the case for Auslese!

How strange that one never hears a wine-lover say “I just don't get Vendage Tardive. Why even bother producing such a thing? How does one use it?” A restaurant I really like – Luther, in Freinsheim in the Pfalz – ran an appetizer of mache with little strips of venison and a pumpkin chutney. We ordered a Dönnhoff '89 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese for the dish. It was nearly perfect;



Terry Theise and Helmut Dönnhoff

just not quite sweet enough. We drank the rest of the bottle with cheese. Savvy sommelieres have discovered this wicked little secret: riesling with acidity and residual sugar is the perfect wine for many cheeses.

But I am falling into the trap of defending Auslese's utility. Let's just finish the job while we're at it. Many Ausleses are not at all too sweet for the multi-culti eclecticism we see on plates all over white-tablecloth land, even in your home town. Have you tried them? So many “savory” courses are quite sweet these days, and a stern, manly Auslese will march in synch. Let's not even go to foie gras.

Next, it's not at all difficult to craft dishes for Auslesen without distorting your usual aesthetic. Norman Van Aiken's menu, to name but one leading chef, is predestined for precisely this type of wine. Make a sweet-salty salad without too much sharpness and that Auslese you've been eyeing for years will realize its destiny.

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

## MAKING THE WRONG CASE FOR GERMAN WINES

The German Wine Institute, a generic marketing organization, has decreed German wine has no chance in export markets unless it is dry. This is an arguable proposition if one sees German wine in sum, of which Riesling is less than 25% and great Riesling perhaps 25% of that 25%. That said, the idea runs counter to an intuitive truth that one leads with one's best suit. If the great Rieslings are the tip of the quality pyramid, as is generally agreed, then they should establish the “market” and let the rest coast in their slipstream.

But Germany can show a perverse knack for utter wrongheadedness disguised by plausible logic. I don't believe dry German Rieslings are successful often enough to make them a point on which anyone should focus (including their creators). A few of them beat the odds, and we enjoy them and sell them, but we simply do not NEED Germany to supply us with iffy dry wines (we're swimming in dry wines as it is) when she has something so precious and incomparable to give us with her “sweet” wines. The logic seems so overwhelming I am truly astonished to find another point of view! Perhaps the explanation is that marketing people are ipso facto deranged.



## PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION IN THIS PORTFOLIO

Visit everyone, taste everything, select what I liked the best, and then tell why. Nothing new or revolutionary. But seventeen years ago when I started this zany enterprise (at the age of sixteen, I assure you), that wasn't how "fine" German wines were made available.

Once upon a time there was a group of estates that exported their wines from Germany. Many of them made very good wine, but not all, and the ones who didn't were still rather successful simply because people had heard of them. This group of estates was sometimes called "The Great Estates of Germany" as it sounded ebullient and pompous.

They would print lists of all the wines they had to sell: many, many wines. Then brokers would assemble all the lists of all the wines, now thousands and thousands of wines with VERY LONG NAMES and these lists they would collate into one gargantuan magilla-list. For the seething white heat of creativity this involved, they took a markup.

Well, then, they'd send the lists out to all their clients around the globe, including some right here in our town. These clients would receive the list and pass it along to their clients. For this committed, impassioned dedication to rigorous selection, they took a markup.

Pretty soon you would get one of these lists, and you would get to pick the wines you wanted to buy. It was a real fun game of eenie-meenie-minee-moe. A wine lottery, which for a while sold a lotta wine. Then came trouble. First you got more selective. People like Kermit and Bobby and Marco spoiled you. Then a lot of these, um, great estates in Germany started to not make very great wine anymore. But nobody knew about this because all they did was pass paper from desk to desk instead of tasting the wines. And so a lot of the wines were yucky, and the market didn't want yucky wines. So something else needed to happen and that's where I entered the picture.

The production structure of German estate wine is artisanal, like Burgundy. Thus it was incongruous (to say the least) to see the wines marketed along Bordeaux lines as commodities passed along a network of brokers. It worked while the wines were fashionable. When they fell from favor there was nobody with any vested interest in defending them. There was barely anyone who knew what the wines tasted like! Paper-pushers, most of them.

In the old days most of the growers I knew and introduced were "unknowns," upstarts, paysannes who dared to presume their wines belonged astride the Great Ones. I loved being the champion of the underdawg. These days many of my underdawgs have morphed into the established Great Ones. Who heard of Dönnhoff? Or Jost? Or Willi Schaefer? I used to get a rueful chuckle out of the VDP's claim to comprise the ELITE of German vintners. Growers among my portfolio who have since been invited to join the lofty ranks of VDP-dom include Messmer, Wittmann, Dönnhoff, Kruger-Rumpf, Leitz, Christoffel, and Schaefer. Others have been asked to join but preferred not to: Müller-Catoir, Mathern, Selbach-Oster.

At first I believed everyone had a right to an equal

shot at the glory. I wanted to show as many facets of German wine's beauty as I could. The wines would be tossed into the rough waters of commerce, and we'd see who sank and who swam. I loved them all and couldn't bear to play favorites. Now it's all these years later, and a few have fallen and many have remained. I get chummy with lots of these families, and it hurts to let anyone go. But eventually I see what you like and what you don't like, and it's senseless even for a utopian clod like moi to keep foisting wines upon you which you manifestly don't wish to buy. A few names have been dropped. Others make very good wines but there's no personal chemistry; life appears to be indeed too short to do business with uncongenial people. A few more names are dropped.



Jakoby-Mathy vineyard

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

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

Thus in the service of Truth, here's a list of those wineries in this portfolio which do not show well in big-table tastings:

**MERZ** (too dry, mealy and vinous), **NECKERAUER** (too earthy), **SCHNEIDER** (too woody without enough primary fruit), and **ODERNHEIMER** (too resinous). I wish I could think of another way to show you these wines.

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

the aesthete usually prevails. Somebody some time has to hurl beauty right in the wan face of common sense, and it might as well be me!

I added two new growers to this year's offering, and dropped one. I'm open to further exploration.

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

That said, it's disingenuous to “sell” gray-marketing as some sort of consumerist populism. What it actually is, is adolescent pique that someone else already got to the wines you want. The system of exclusivity isn't based on the profit motive. It's based on a sustainable model for mutual loyalty between grower and importer.

Even the 3-tier system, almost universally despised, nonetheless endures because no coherent alternative has been found.

Still, the occasional plague-bearing flea aside, this remains a reasonably civil business. Poachers are the exception. But I will never use the threat of being “poached” as pressure to compromise on my selections just to keep a grower happy. I am loyal to them, but I'm just a little more loyal to you, as it must be. Most of my growers don't mind how matter-of-factly I choose from among their offerings. After all, you must select without sentiment. I take a sip and listen to hear if the wine talks to me. It must say something compelling, unambiguously and promptly. Ninety percent of my wines are selected within the first few seconds of tasting them. The same proportion of my “rejects” is decided equally quickly. The other ten percent compel, but not quite conclusively, and must be mulled over. Most of those are rejected. Because it is all too easy to make a mistake at this work: no matter how good you are, you're fallible. If you only select the wines you're absolutely sure of, you decrease the odds of screwing up. Sure, I end up regretting three or four wines each year. It cannot be otherwise. But I regret even more some of the wines I left behind, when I taste them again months later. I'd rather make a hundred mistakes of omission than one mistake of inclusion, so the little mantra I say to myself when I'm waffling about a wine is: When In Doubt, Don't.

I continually resist seeing my wines as Things or products. That's why I don't care whether the same wine is good every year. If wine **A** isn't happenin' this year, wine **B** will be, and I'll just take the better one. This can perplex or annoy growers who are into “marketing,” but that's a dangerous tendency for a vintner in any case and it can lead to ruffled feathers. This has happened. Once there was a wine I'd offered for many consecutive vintages. I'd come to expect I'd like it, and the grower came to presume I'd offer and sell it. One could even infer the wine had a following of sorts, and that it had proven useful and people would perhaps expect it.

But if I think about any of that **at the moment of tast-**

**ing** then I am not tasting objectively, and I risk making a dishonest mistake. Long story short; I tasted the wine and bypassed it in favor of something I liked more. And the grower was plenty steamed. How could I not offer a wine I'd offered each of all those consecutive vintages? Well why not? After all if it was a forgone conclusion then why bother schlepping all the way to east B.F. to taste it? Well, he said, wouldn't my customers **EXPECT** the wine, indeed **DEMAND** it? Actually, I answered, what I believe my customers expect is that no wines make it into this offering by rote; that each wine listed earns its way in because it is exceptional. Well, maybe, but what about the price-point? Surely I needed to have a wine at that price-point? Actually I don't **NEED** to have any particular “item” here; what I **NEED** is to maintain the **integrity** of these selections.

And it would have been easy to yield the point: The wine was perfectly adequate, and I like the guy! And listen, I'm not even slightly holy; it boils down to an entirely practical consideration: **SELLING GERMAN WINES IS TOO MUCH TROUBLE TO BE WORTH DOING EXCEPT FOR THE VERY BEST**. Otherwise, good grief! There's easier ways to bang your fool head against a wall.

I mean, my own palate is fallible enough without being false to it. At least you know I went nuts over every one of these wines. I have to be able to defend the choice, every choice. That's why I put my name in weensy letters on the back label.

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

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

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

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

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

5. I never taste the new vintage too early. March is usually the time when the wines are ready for bottling. I still have time to influence blending decisions, but fermentations are long-finished (usually!), and the wines have been racked, fined, spit-shined and turned out. I've tried tasting them earlier but they tasted like must with alcohol and they were either so yummy or so shriekingly raw and immature that I wondered how anyone could judge them at such a stage. Judging for oneself is one thing, but asking your customers to trust you on such a flimsy basis is another. I don't do it.

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

## a new way to measure sweetness

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

9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

**MINUS TWO** is for lovers of austere wines. Interestingly though I posed the figure I selected no wines to which I actually gave the figure!

**ONE** signifies barely discernable sweetness.

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

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

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

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!



## DRY GERMAN WINES

I think that fifty years from now some wine historian will write a book about the strange phenomenon that gripped German wine drinkers in the last quarter of the twentieth century. RAPED INTO DRYNESS could be the title (and thanks to Armin Diel for the wonderful phrase!) and the argument will be: isn't it strange that an entire wine culture, based on a late-ripening grape, naturally high in acidity, grown on the 50th parallel north latitude, should have convinced themselves they craved DRY wine? For a while they even craved dry wine with the highest possible acidity!

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

All too plausible, eh? This much I think is true; notwithstanding the occasional successes amongst the dry wines (and the frequent successes among Halbtrockens), if all German wine were made dry then I doubt if a bottle would ever have left Germany. Wine-people would visit and come back saying "Really pretty scenery, nice people, great food . . . too bad about the wines." If you've read these catalogues over the years you'll see how my feelings have evolved on this issue. In the early days I wanted to make a case for Trocken wines, because they **could** be good (at times!) and I felt you should see German wine in all its facets. They can still be good, especially in a ripe and muscular vintage like 2001, yet what drives my fury into the red zone is that this culture drinks concepts and trendiness instead of sensually enjoying wine because of HOW IT TASTES.

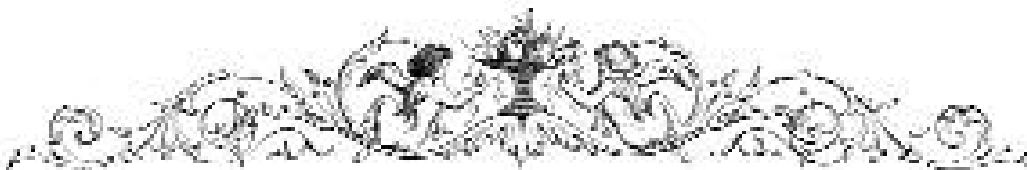
But it makes me sad when growers don't even show me their dry wines, because they're missing the point. They think I simply don't like dry wines, and it's true that I'm far less likely to like their dry wines—but I like wine **whenever it is vivid and balanced** irrespective of residual sugar or any other isolated analytical component.

In fact the analysis is at best an astigmatic guide to judging the amount of sweetness that a wine should have. Many growers have already made these decisions at the time of picking (a pox on the demand for Trocken-at-all-costs which creates these stillborn wines!), while others look at their must-analyses and go by acidity. The more enlightened taste during fermentation, but unless the grower has a superb palate (and palate-memory), what tastes "balanced" in this stormily incomplete state may

taste unbalanced later on. This problem was demonstrated by many wines in 2001. Perhaps the sometimes brusque acids were less discernible during or immediately after fermentation. Or maybe the sometime-tartness on many wines' finishes (the result of summer drought) only emerged after racking and filtration. The real problem is growers who work according to a formula: Kabinett has 40 grams per liter, Spätlese has 55 grams per liter, etc. Even if the recipe works four years out of five, it's dangerous to make wine on auto-pilot. The best vintners are either palate-geniuses or they permit themselves the flexibility to make adjustments later, either by judicious blending or by dosage.

It occurs to me that I haven't had a "failed" Trocken wine in three years at Müller-Catoir, yet grotesque imbalance is the order of the day among most other Trockens. What does this estate know that the others don't? I don't think there is an answer, certainly none confined to analytical folderol. **I think it boils down to a simple lack of PALATE.** I begin to wonder if the typical domestic German wine drinker (producers included) has lost the ability to discern bitterness and disharmony! I strongly suspect they have. I see it when I taste with them.

It's hard to read where the whole Trocken thing is going these days. For every grower who discerns a tendency away from the bone-dry beasties, another will tell you Trocken is all he can sell. It's especially dreadful in the Pfalz, and a little better on the Mosel. There's also a huge irony at work. Initially the Germans began making Trocken wines in order to regain market share they were losing to the Alsations and Italians. They invented the whole catechism of theological explanation AFTER THE FACT, as it wasn't too cool to simply say "Um, we can make dry wines too if that's what you all want to drink." And now an entire generation of wine drinkers in Germany are trained (brainwashed would be more like it) to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered once again that other countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves 'em right. This problem is so pernicious that Stuart Pigott has just published a wonderfully impassioned book whose stated purpose is to remind the Germans that many of the world's most exquisite white wines grow in their own back yards. Yet I seem to be the only person who sees the whole sorry phenomenon as an inevitable result of the Trocken madness. The Germans do not automatically despise their home-grown products; far from it. But their wines have somehow become unfashionable. And I argue the reason is the dry wines weren't good enough to sustain a claim on the market's attention.



The latest twist to this sorry saga is even more surre-  
alistic. Today's hip young German wine trendy actively dis-  
likes acidity and wants his Trockens as "smooth" as possi-  
ble. Hence the resurgence of Pinots Blanc and Gris. Hey  
guys, what about **sour-power**? Maybe I'm too pessimistic,  
and this little burp of fashion really augurs a time when  
they'll happily slurp down rivers of neutral innocuous Pinots  
and leave the Rieslings alone; oh wouldn't that be nice.

Another curious twist in this perplexing (and per-  
plexed) domestic clientele is the sudden craze for anything  
red. French paradox, you see. The waiting list for  
Dornfelder clippings is two and a half years. All over the  
Pfalz (and Baden too, I'd imagine) people are planting  
Merlot and Cabernet. That's what we need: Germany to  
deliver more boring red wine upon a world catatonic with  
ennui already.

Perhaps my lil' "SOS" idea will seem so manifestly sen-  
sible to the German wine pooh-bahs they'll jettison  
all their asshole ideas and adopt it. As if.

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



Harvest at Weingart

It's also time to  
bury the whole  
putrid misconcep-  
tion of German  
wines as sweet  
wines. Sweet wines,  
as I see them, are  
bona fide dessert  
wines. Their domi-  
nant impression is  
sweetness. In good  
German wine,  
sweetness is barely  
visible in itself; it is,  
rather, a catalyst to  
the expression of  
other flavors.

Cooks will know  
what I mean. You

use a little nutmeg when you sauté mushrooms, not so they'll  
taste like nutmeg, but so they'll taste more mushroomy. Just  
so with sweetness in German wine. The right amount of  
residual sugar **makes every other flavor in the wine come to  
life**. Stewart Pigott says it best: "We don't call wines which  
have an oak component 'oak wines,' so why should we call  
wines with a sweet component 'sweet wines'?"

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

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

## MORE PRINCIPLES

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

After clarity come the lovelier questions. What is the actu-  
al quality of the flavor? To what extent is it beautiful?  
(Subjective, yes, but not impossible, and not meaningless.  
After all, I like truffles and I like tortilla chips, but I'm not con-  
fused about which flavor is more beautiful.) Next, is there a  
harmonious interplay among all the flavor components? Are  
all the parts in balance? Then, is the intensity of flavor appro-  
priate? Not how intense is it, since sheer firepower doesn't  
impress me; I'd rather have a delicate but fine and intricate fla-  
vor than an intensely boring flavor. Then, is the flavor mono-  
facted or does it seem to evolve into sentences and para-  
graphs? Is the finish long, and does it also evolve, or does it  
merely echo the highest note of fruit? Then, is the structure,  
the architecture, the carpentry—call it what you will—bal-  
anced, firm, organized, is there nuance, seasoning? This takes  
a paragraph to delineate, but less than an instant to discern.

Most important, at least for my romantic side: is the  
wine distinctive, does it have character? The thing that  
Matt Kramer calls "somewhereness," the signature of the  
place the grapes were grown. I won't make bold to posit  
any Universal Vinous Truth here, but I do believe—  
absolutely and without qualification—that Riesling grown  
in the Rhineland is a mirror reflecting the soil it grew in,  
and that different soils give consistently different flavors to  
its wines. Wehlener Sonnenuhr has its distinct signature,  
different from its neighbors on either side (Josefshöfer and  
Zeltinger Sonnenuhr). The Münsterer sites Pittersberg and  
Dautenpflänzer make wines as distinct as two Rieslings can  
be from each other. Also neighbors. Any reasonably expe-  
rienced taster can taste the distinctions blind and amaze the  
growers! It isn't metaphysical; it's matter-of-fact.

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

To this end I tend to work with growers who see them-  
selves as midwives assisting in the birth of the wine. They  
have their own visions of their soils and the flavors that  
result, and labor only to protect them. "**We are not wine-  
makers; we do not make wine,**" says Rainer Lingenfelder.  
"We just prepare the environment in which the wine comes  
into existence almost by itself. We don't want to polish, to  
style a wine; we want to allow its natural, original character  
to shine through." Contrast that sentiment to our odd hero-  
worship of the new world winemaker who "sculpts" a wine,  
the master alchemist who by dint of his gifts both technical  
and mysterious turns mere grape juice into Grgich Hills, and  
you have paradigms for the ways wine is conceived of in the  
new and old worlds. Guess which side I'm on!

## HOW I APPROACH WINE, OR LET WINE APPROACH ME

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

It's best when you make a mistake, and the easiest mistake is thinking you've got it aced. Because now you're not asking questions any more, you're waiting for each wine to confirm your conclusions. I think that wine will contrive to



Detrioration of the Importer: Part 1

confuse our assumptions **in order to get us to still our egos and listen.** I don't use "ego" in its typical pejorative as a synonym for our conceits, but rather as that part of us which insists on grasping and apprehending. Wine resists being grasped. If you hold it too tightly, it can't dance with you. Hold it just right, and it will glide over the floor with you as if you were a single body

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

What turns me on the most is the Joyful Noise! The clamor of methods, visions, opinions, the warp and woof of temperaments.



Part 3

The coexistence of all these points of view in my own mind seems to give it energy and vitality, and makes it more receptive to pleasure. Most of the time when people turn these into moral questions, they do it after the fact. If Mosel growers developed techniques for stopping fermentation to leave sweetness in their wines because they could do so—their wines are naturally low in pH—it's only natural they should defend their practice and claim to find it superior to the use of Süssreserve. But that

doesn't mean I have to believe them! Not when my own experience tells me otherwise. You learn to listen to someone explain why he does what he does, for it reveals important things about the man (or woman) and the kinds of wines (s)he makes. But that's all, and that's enough. It's a waste of time trying to figure out who's "right."

Here's an example to illustrate the point. There's talk these days about machine harvesters, which are used more often than you might think in Germany. One vintner, seeing a horizontal flicker of disapproval cross my face when he mentioned machine harvesting, said to me, "You know Terry, in the 1992 vintage we machine-harvested a Spätlese that had three degrees Oechsle more than a wine picked by hand from the same vineyard on the same day. The machine shook all the stem-rotten bunches to the ground. Plus in a year with lots of rot and where the rot is spreading quickly, you need to get your fruit in as quickly as you can. I wish we'd had a machine harvester for the 1976 vintage."

Well I mulled it over and got past my squeamishness about things mechanical and actually saw the reason for his argument. A



Part 2

few days later I was discussing it with another grower, who had his own wisdom to add: "It can be true about getting higher must-weights with the machine harvester, but the opposite can also be true. You know that flowering isn't always uniform, and sometimes in the middle of a grape bunch there are little unripe berries from the late flowering? Well, the machine doesn't sort them out, and sometimes you get lower must-weights using the machine." Call me what you want, but this kind of thing just slays me. Not because I have to decide Which Guy Is RIGHT, but because as a mental exercise it **forces me to be reasonable.**

To consider and not jump to conclusions and remember that conscientious people may differ in their



Part 4

approaches . . . and most of all to reflect with joy at the multiplicity of temperaments walking our green world.

I can't find a single convincing argument in favor of tasting blind.

Have you heard Keith Jarrett's latest solo piano CD? He's been suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome for several years, curtailing his performing career and making it all but impossible for him to even play the piano on some days. The CD is a recital of standards and folk songs played very straight, with little embellishment or technical bravura. The approach is said to have been compelled by Jarrett's draining ennervation, but the result is nearly sublime, a tender, deliberate and caressing reading of these songs, essential and pure.

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

Why, then, do we play at reducing wine to a thing without context? I don't see how it improves the usefulness of our tasting to rob wine of its meaning. What's the good of tasting blind? Where's the silver lining of experiencing wine in a vacuum? Yes, it can train us to focus our palates. It can hone our powers of concentration. Then we can discard it! It has served its purpose. If we keep tasting blind we run a grave risk. It is homicidal to a wine's context, and wine without context is bereft of meaning, and the experience of meaning is too rare to squander.

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

I'm not even talking about recreational drinking, fun (remember fun?); the only genuinely professional approach to wine is to know as much about it as possible! Who made it, under what condition did it grow, what's the maker's track record, where is (s)he in the "pecking order?" Then and only then can a genuinely thoughtful evaluation take place, of a wine in the fullness of its being. Blind tasting? **Done it, done with it.**



We'll repeat a few and add one or two in our ceaseless attempt to create a catalogue large enough to squash very large bugs with. I still like my SOMMELIER ALERT! idea, and I'll continue to group the wines by style. I will change my system of noting favorite wines. Instead of my little font games, you will see pluses (+).

I have noted favorite wines for a few years and have not noticed any of the mischief I feared, the idea seems to have done all the good I hoped and none of the harm. I may even expand on it.

I had feared what could happen if I drew too much attention to a few big faves: could I sell anything else? Would it be fair to the other wines, which after all I also adore?

But, I told myself, this entire catalog exists in order to draw attention to the best, in this case the best 350 or so wines I culled from tasting a couple of thousand. What's the harm of codifying a Hors Classe list, first-among-equals if you will. The harm, I think, is focusing a disproportionate degree and TYPE of attention on those wines. Our American obsession with the BEST and FASTEST and MOST POWERFUL of things is something I'd rather not feed. Still, there's some wines in here you shouldn't miss no matter what! Every wine in this offering is elite! Some are simply spectacular. But do remember . . .

- The wines with one plus seemed to shine ON THE DAY I TASTED THEM. You might not have agreed, and I might not agree with myself when I taste them again. What I know is that all these wines, all gazillion of them, are excellent. Separating the hall-of-famers from the mere all-stars is subjective and momentary.

- I was democratic in the identification of special faves. Is a QbA from Leitz a "better" wine than an Auslese from Christoffel? No sir! Did it sing to me at the moment I tasted it and wrote "this is a fabulously successful and lovely wine of its type?" Da!

- There are growers every one of whose wines deserved your special attention. In those instances I highlighted those wines which somehow stood out as especially supernal.

It was telling to observe myself singling certain wines out. I have never believed in the idea of a "perfect" wine, 100 out of 100 or 20 out of 20 or what-have-you. Wine, for me is less a Thing than a Being, and I find that kind of reduction to an absolute scale actually diminishes the pleasure I take in it. But David Schildknecht proposes a way out the dilemma: in this world-view of wine, "perfection" is an intuitive certainty that something is being experienced BETTER THAN WHICH CANNOT BE IMAGINED. Not that something "better" might not exist in an absolute sense, nor even that on another occasion something else might be experienced of even more surpassing beauty, but only that sweet flush when you know THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS.

I don't grade on a curve. I couldn't precisely tell you how or why I give a glyph to a wine, but I feel quite certain while it's happening. In effect I register my own response without focusing on it. The problem with scales purporting to precision is they demand too much self-examination. The moment you're trying to decide whether the wine's an "91" or a "92" you are hyper-focused on your reaction and not on the wine. It doesn't give a rat's ass how many points you "award" it; it only wants to make you happy and (if it's significant wine) to remind you of the fascination of the world.

## THE 2001 VINTAGE

It began with a few teasing calls and emails from growers saying the 2001s looked very good. A few wrote me during the harvest, notes like "Picked Auslese today in shirt-sleeves (at the end of October!); harvest very happy, potentially high quality."

Then the whispers began. This could be something very special. A couple growers brought cask-samples with them when they visited in January, grinning like the cat who ate the canary.

But I have learned, wizened sage that I am, that grower-euphoria is a predictable phenomenon in any decent vintage, and I take it with a grain of salt. We'll see how the wines are after they've been filtered and sulfured and racked and fined and they're ready to taste. 2001 a great year? Sure, we'll see . . .

The bastards. They were right.

As I tasted these wines I continually peered into the past to find anything comparable. 1990 sprang to mind; but the 2001s are juicier than '90s, they have vigorous ripe acidity but none of the green-acids of '90; they are just as deep and monumental but they have more charm. So: better than '90.

Forget the 80s; no vintage in that decade came close.

Thus we go all the way back to 1976. That freak-vintage! The greatest, maybe 5% of all the Rieslings, are indeed sensational (and still improving), but the vintage as a whole produced fewer quintessentially great wines than 2001. So: better than '76.

1975 made me pause. No vintage since this one has shown the same quality of sheer fruit, the same truly noble botrytis, or the same harmony of the two. But, yields are lower now, and the 2001s have these qualities along with even more depth. Here I need to equivocate though; I suspect 2001 is a greater vintage than 1975. We'll see in the fullness of time.

Which takes us back **30 years** to 1971, that supernaturally great vintage. 2001 is its colleague, but not its superior.

Thus I happily report we have the greatest German wine vintage in at least 25 and probably 30 years.

I have never tasted a young vintage that was positive in so many ways. It has extraordinary mass without passing over into opacity. It has remarkable delineation, more than you would ever anticipate from such big wines. It has fabulously lavish and juicy fruit but it isn't fruit-forward; it makes a large yet balanced statement predominantly mineral. It is sensationally mineral, almost salty at times, but so ripe and fleshy it never seems austere. It has the finest botrytis flavors I have tasted since I can remember. It has profundity without seeming haughty; it is always delicious.

Finally, despite its perfect solidity, it isn't implacable or inscrutable. It is, rather, gorgeously opalescent. I've never tasted a vintage like it.

It is also remarkably homogenous. Fine to great wines were made everywhere, with very few exceptions. But like every vintage, 2001 has its shadow-side.

After a reasonably warm summer the only problem was drought. Those who had thundershowers were fine; others nervously waited for rain. Some 2001s tend to finish with a lash of tartness; one grower told me "This always happens on drought years, you feel the acidity at the end because there's not enough extract to buffer it." Makes sense.

Then came September. You're going to be reading

quite a bit about this European September. It was almost freakishly cold and rainy. I was in Europe from the 5th till the 20th; the highest temperature was 63 degrees, and there was but a single day when no rain fell. I froze my patooties off (until then I didn't even know I had patooties or where to find them). But thankfully it remained cold; otherwise we might have had a repeat of the dreadful mildew-fungus invasion of September 2000. In 2001 the vine simply hunkered down and waited.

When the sun finally returned on October 3rd, growers had Rieslings with fairly good must-weights (say decent Kabinett) but with unacceptably high acids. So they waited.

And blissfully they enjoyed one of the mellowest and most benevolent "golden Octobers" in at least a decade. "It was a picture-book harvest from Alpha to Omega, which soothed our nerves!" said Johannes Selbach. But nature had one trick still up her sleeve. When the grapes came in – quantities were good – very little juice emerged from the press. Riesling especially was thick-skinned with measly amounts of liquid. But I have the sense the growers got over their dismay very quickly when they tasted their musts.

I had to be alert for several problems among the 2001s. Some wines had more power than was good for them. The problem was exacerbated when the grower misjudged the sweetness, as some did. A few wines were clunky and musclebound, and others were crudely tart. On the other hand, most growers "read" the vintage perfectly and most of the wines are ideally balanced.

In fact 2001 is a Zucker-fresser (a sugar-eater) and many wines have twice the sweetness the palate actually tastes. A grateful bow to the resolute grower! Stefan Rumpf delighted in having us guess the sweetness of his wines. "What do you think, 30? Maybe 35?" "Yes, in that zone," I'd reply. "HA! **Sixty!**" he'd answer with equal parts glee and perplexity. Nor is acidity the explanation, for the 2001s have ideal measures of acid but nothing like the very high readings of '98, '96 or '90. I think there's so much sheer material in these 2001s that sugars are subsumed into a great huge froth of flavor. It's as if they're soaking into the mineral density. This isn't entirely metaphorical; many 2001s have a tactile (and thrilling) sense of salt-sweet yin-yang that's so wickedly delicious you want to hiss with joy.

Even the few wines with apparently excessive sweetness are forgivable, because these wines will give immense pleasure 15-20 years from now. Most growers are aware of the stature of their 2001s, and have made them with the assumption they'll be laid away (the wines, not the growers); thus many big wines bottled in fulls not halves, and some wines with ostensibly excess sweetness.

And oh man, this makes me soooo happy: it's a GREAT Scheurebe vintage, the best I can remember.

The typical 2001 is a wine of immediate depth and concentration, a larger bell of flavor pealing in a huge cathedral. Then you notice their nuance. Then you notice how defined they are structurally, and you see how cunningly salts and sweetness play off each other. Then you register their clinging length; you taste them for 15-20 minutes even after spitting. Finally you melt, because not only is there so much to admire in these crazy-ass great wines; they also taste beautiful. You can't escape them, you're in their thrall, you may try to resist but oh man, it feels so good. So my advice, as your professional wine consultant is: don't try.



The wines will age classically. There has been no better vintage for cellaring since 1990, and these are a notch above.

A crude commercial note. Whatever your regular buying behavior is for German wines, you must ~~must~~ **MUST** increase it by 150% in this vintage. I will taunt you mercilessly if you don't. C'mon guys; you buy ga-ga quantities of every other category from "great, collectible" vintages. It's time to buy German wines again. If you're a 100-case customer, I want you to be a 250-case customer, and me and my colleagues are going to be pit-bulls on this point. Remember, great though it is, **there isn't much of it**. It's a small crop. You'll probably get one chance, so don't waste it.

So who's the Hors Classe in 2001? First, please remember that everybody's wines are the best they've ever been, so the entire curve is swollen. A grower's merely "good" quality in 2001 equals the BEST quality in an ordinary vintage. That said, I'd nominate these estates to the highest categories:

### **In No Special Order:**

STRUB: incredible vintage across the board; 1st-growth quality.

MESSMER: fabulous array of sweet wines.

KRUGER-RUMPF: steadily wonderful.

MEULENHOF-JUSTEN: again consistently exciting.

MERKELBACH: their greatest vintage in 25 years, nothing but gems.

SCHMITT-WAGNER: one masterpiece after another; perfect Mosel wines.

WITTMANN: astonishing dry wines and remarkable Spätlesen.

### **The Best-of-the-Best:**

MÜLLER-CATOIR: through Spätlese, their greatest vintage ever.

DÖNNHOFF: improbable conciliation of filigree and density.

CHRISTOFFEL: heart-rending wines, the best collection ever tasted on the Mosel.

SELBACH-OSTER: steadily fabulous and sometimes supernal across the wide range.

LEITZ: as near to a perfect vintage as possible on this mortal earth; four incredible masterpieces and three more wonder-wines.

## **2000 REVISITED**

Normally while I taste the new vintage, the yearling begins to reveal what its eventual character will be, the way a child shows flashes of its adult appearance at a certain, thrilling point. Yet in retasting 2000 this was not the case, or not yet.

It's always hard to taste the vintage-before-a-great-one. 2000 is lighter than '01. Usually – not always – it suffers in direct comparison. Sometimes it does the very opposite; when you expect it to be cowed it rises up and shows its best. Taste Strub's two vintages side by side and see what I mean.

2000 was certainly the year over which many bullets were sweated, yet I don't wish to trash it just yet, and possibly not ever. Taking a clear view, its most disturbing facet is a tendency to show unpleasant botrytis notes, even when the grower insisted botrytis wasn't present. "This had

none, zero; we selected it out," I heard often, but where then did the nuance come from? Perhaps from mere proximity to dubious fruit? Or maybe there's a core-flavor in some 2000s that mimics botrytis. Or maybe we humans, tasting many hundreds of them, are conditioned to expect the flavor and therefore we do, even if it isn't there.

The best of 2000 are very exciting wines. I bought them for myself. I'll drink them on the soon side, just to be cautious. I don't feel they're basically stable for long keeping. I hope I'm wrong. I really don't know what the vintage-tag will be, the flavor by which it's identified in the fullness of time. For now, 2000 is a clear early Spring day with a warm sun but with still a bit of bite in the wind.

## **1999 REVISITED**

It's tempting to call it a genial simple clod. Yet the same temptation existed in 1973 and '79 and these have aged gracefully, and we make better wines now than they did then. Still, a truly interesting or concentrated '99 is occasional enough to make you take notice and appreciate. I first became impressed with Hexamer (a new discovery in the Nahe) when I saw what fine characterful '99s he made, no mean feat! I can't discern a vintage-signature unless a general forward juiciness might suffice. Curiously, though they're 180-degrees apart in profile, neither '00 nor '99 is taking shape as '98 did very early. The odds of finding a pleasant wine are higher in '99. The odds of finding a compelling wine are higher in 2000.

## **EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED**

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

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

1996 is deep in hibernation. It was fascinating to start tasting the 1996 Champagnes last year just at the time the German wines of that vintage were at their least forthcoming. To some extent the evolution of many 1990s is a harbinger for the development of the 1996s, though 1990 has more density and body. My guess as of today: there will be more great 1990s than 1996s, but the best 1996s will be the best wines of all. Call me out on this foolhardy forecast when I'm an old coot. Indeed 1996 can be seen as a test case for acidity, and we'll see how those spiky acids resolve in the fullness of time.

## THINGS I WOULD DO IF I WERE RULER OF ALL THE KNOWN WORLD

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

The Germans are finally starting to adapt, albeit with less celerity than their compadres in Austria. Personally I see no reason why any and all wines up to Spätlese couldn't be closed with fake corks, screwcaps, crown caps or lamb-skin condoms if that's what it takes to replenish the cork supply so that we go back to the days of 1-2%. Can you imagine if milk had a spoilage rate of 10-14% because of variations in the cartons?? Yet we tolerate an equal proportion of spoilt wine with docile indulgence. Grrrr.

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

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

I think I would decree that new vintages could only come along every eighteen months. Once a year is getting to be too often. David Schildknecht gave me this idea, and because of that I would appoint him Minister Of Wine Writing.

I would decree that the word HALBTROCKEN be stricken from the lexicon, thrown in the garbage, fished out, and thrown back in.

If the Germans insisted on using label nomenclature in their own language, I'd decree that dry wines be called

TROCKEN and that **bone dry** wines be called SEHR TROCKEN (or, if I were really in command, Trocken **de Sade**).

I would further decree that these determinations not under any circumstances be based on actual amounts of sugar and/or acidity as measured in the lab, but rather on **the taste of the wine**. I know this idea is radical (if not heretical) but perhaps the world is ready for it.

There are certain persons I would prohibit from public discourse. Their voices are simply too dangerous. I shall not name them, but will cite one of their more pernicious ideas to show you what I mean. I am not just a grouch. These guys have to be muzzled. Ready?

An idea has been promulgated whereby certain vineyards shall be classified and those sites can stand alone on a label, without reference to a village name. Think of Burgundy. Musigny. It makes sense. The problem commences with the nomenclature. These apostles of vinous wisdom have arrived at **Erstes Gewächs** to denote the Grand Crus, and even for a German-speaker like me that's, like, an OWEE! (It's also an ironic pun, inasmuch as "Gewächs" sounds like "Geh' weck!" which means "Go away!") For they are pitifully aware of foreign markets, these folks; they're the same villians who want all German wines to be DRY.

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

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

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

It is also a dreadful violence to individual wines. Doesn't anyone in Germany actually taste wine any more? Never mind what might be suitable for this wine or that! They **MUST** be dry. Let's LOBOTOMIZE these wines. Abandon fruit, all ye who enter here. These clowns are murdering great German wines; they must be stopped. If one of you well-meaning but disastrously wrongheaded people are reading this, please, forget all your abstractions, "the market," "consumer taste," "the modern drinker" and just taste wine! If you make wines that taste balanced and taste delicious you will—imagine!—find a market for them. I'm a barely sentient galoot and even I have found a market, so don't tell me that a suave guy like Guradze can't do the same.



## WHAT IS A PALATE?

I confess I have been worrying this question, because I can't apprehend how differently we seem to taste things. I mean, most of us agree on what red or yellow look like, and most of would agree that minor chords sound sad and major chords sound happy. It is manifestly obvious to me that low-alcohol white wine with happy acids and a certain amount of sweetness taste superb with an enormous range of food, and yet it's not only that you haven't experienced it. You have, and you disagree! I sat in Chinois on Main in Santa Monica once and watched someone eat shrimp in a pineapple sauce and drink 1986 Gruaud Larose. To my palate, that would be like a bowling ball dropped on my already-infected toe. I'm unwilling to believe that people **want** discordant (and thus ugly) flavors on their palates, and so I have to conclude they don't perceive them as discordant.

I'm not talking about aversions. We all have those. My Karen Odessa doesn't like pine nuts (so I make a pesto myself!) and I don't like cumin and you don't like bleu cheese. No, I'm talking about flavors we can all tolerate but respond to at times so disparately you wonder if we're actually tasting the same thing. Are there no objective standards of any kind?

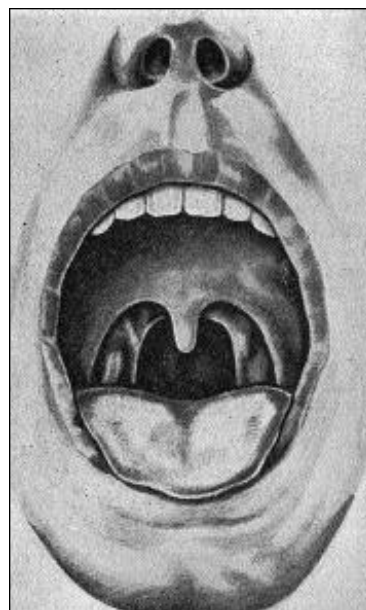
I suspect there are objective truths out there, to which we are each more or less sensitive. And then we add our individual subjectivities to the mix. Body chemistry plays a part, as do personal habits (such as smoking). But most of what we call "palate" seems to reduce to the quality of attention you pay to the things you taste, and to simple experience.

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

But mostly we taste without thinking about it. Try this: put three different brands of tortilla chips in three bowls, taste them, and note which of the three you liked best and why. Presto taste-o! You're doing it; you are EXERCISING YOUR PALATE. If you did this for thirty-seven years you would have a killer palate for tortilla chips. What you'd do then I have no idea.

Here's how I'd explain my own palate. Why am I telling you this? Just musing I guess. Let me explain how I see my own palate, and then you might better be able to use me better, since you'll know where we diverge and where we congrue.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

I risk repeating material I wrote a few pages back, but I don't think one can overstress these things. I try and make tasting opportunities available to you but in the real world you can't taste every wine every time. So I want you to know what I mean when I tell you what the wines taste like.

## HOW GERMAN WINES AGE

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

It’s a blessing and a curse that German wine tastes so good when it’s young. As my own tastes change over time I’ve grown more sympathetic to the drinking of these wines quite early. Our lives are so stressful and the grind is so remorseless that a beaming glass of unaffected delight is a thing we all deserve. It’s a lovely, unfussy pleasure. But it is not the only pleasure, and it is not the pleasure we want each time we approach a wine. If we are relaxed enough to engage our full selves—not just our attentions, but our hearts as well—the aromas and tastes of mature Riesling can be totally enthralling. And that too is an experience we deserve to have.

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

Different wines handle bottling differently; Johannes Leitz says that filigree, delicate wines lose the most from bottling, while robust, lusty wines come through better. I’ve seen this at work at Christoffel also; the Erdeners always show better younger than the more delicate, fragile Ürzigers. But generally the dumb state lasts from two weeks to four months after bottling. Then the wine has all its flavor again.

However, with certain young wines, Mosel wines especially, there’s a problem we wine merchants hardly like to discuss at all, and if we do it’s only in furtive whispers after we scan the space we’re in to make sure no lay-people are present. This is, you may already have guessed,

**THE SULFUR PROBLEM.** Some young Mosel wines (and in very isolated instances non-Mosel wines also) may have a cheesy kind of whiff about them. This is a little unbound hydrogen sulfide that usually comes from the lees and can be present in wines which are racked late. Certain growers like to keep their wines on the primary lees after fermentation to give them more stuffing and texture. It’s a great idea and it makes for wines that age splendidly, but that cheesy smell can be a nuisance if you try and drink the wine too soon.

So don’t!

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

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

The mature flavor begins as a kind of singe around the edge of the fruit. Finally that singe—as though the fruit had been flambéed—seems to encompass the fruit, to subsume it. The fruit is not devoured, but it has chrysalized into a brighter and richer thing. An entire panoply of secondary flavors begins to appear, and the wine becomes truly vinous; it is born as wine, leaving the placenta of grapiness behind. If it is a fine wine, especially a wine with botrytis, these flavors constitute a real elixir, the effect of which is completely seductive. But even smaller wines take on a patina of poise and mysteriousness.

There are also strict chemical reactions wherein acidity softens and sugars polymerize, so that each is less pronounced as the wine ages. In the 1990-vintage zeitgeist the idea was to make “sweet” wines as dry as possible, but many of these wines now seem obdurate and lumpen, with still-prominent acids and not enough fruit; yang, but no yin. Sometimes it’s necessary to allow apparently-excessive sweetness in a baby-wine as a guarantor of great cellaring. A few of the 2001s appear to have more sweetness than they strictly need, but from the right cellar I’m actually glad to see it; it denotes a grower who’s thinking years ahead to the wine’s maturity.

Let’s take a few hypothetical wines and forecast how they’ll age. We’ll presume it’s a good grower in a good site in a good year. The Riesling Kabinett starts to lose its first fruit at perhaps one and a half years after bottling. It’s a little dumb for another two years. Then it begins to open up, and continues to improve for perhaps three years, leveling off for another three to five years before begin-



*Karlsmühle Cellar*



Bruno Schmitt

ning to fade. If the vintage has been poor, giving the wine high acidity and extract, the whole process is slowed down, and the wine has a twenty-year life span even if you figure conservatively.

A Spätlese, too, starts to shut down for its “adolescence” at about three years, emerging at about six or seven, improving for three more years and settling down for many years after. Twenty-five to thirty-year Spätlesen are commonplace.

Auslese is harder to track, if it is sweet. Its dumb phase is camouflaged under a thick foliage of sweetness. At ten years old it’s beginning to sing. If it’s good it gets better for another ten years. BA needs at least fifteen years to lose its early, one-dimensional richness. TBA is monolithic for a generation. If a BA doesn’t need twenty years to reach its peak, and if a TBA doesn’t need thirty, they’re something short of the genuine article.

Eiswein is a mystery, at least to me. It can be hard to drink when young, due to those zany acids. That same acidity can develop vegetal flavors with age if it was unripe to begin with. Though the older wine is smooth, its grassiness is not to my taste. If the acidity is ripe, an Eiswein can age into something beyond any words I can find. There is no parallel in the wine experience. But Eiswein hasn’t been made for very long, so we don’t know enough about how it ages and what it does along the way.

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

But maybe I’m in a temporary daze induced by the staggering 2001 Eisweins. Don’t even try to talk me down.

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

That being said, KABINETT wines are seldom aged to whatever potential pinnacles they may have, but they could well be. Only the slightest need to be drunk young. In 2001 I am finishing my 1992s and really digging the 1993s. It isn’t too early to contemplate 1995 Kabinetts either. 1994s should probably start being uncorked too; they won’t shed acidity before they lose fruit, at least at the Kabinett level. Feel free to broach the first of your ’97s too; they’re still young but their cool perfumey elegance will charm you.

SPÄTLESE is the first category of German Riesling that really begs to be cellared. Finish your 1988s and 1989s. Start in on the 1990s. Drink through any 1991s you may have. Have a party and dispose of your remaining 1992s, not because they’re in danger of sudden demise but because they’ll never taste **better** than now. It’s time to start drinking 1993s in earnest. If you’re really smart and have older vintages in your cellar, 1986 is nice and smoky and just past its absolute best. 1985 is fine and going nowhere fast. You might peek in on the occasional 1994. The better 1995s and all the 1996s need patience.

AUSLESE. Don’t drink anything younger than 1993. The 1988s are especially suave right now. Earlier vintages are just fine depending on how they were stored. You can hardly go wrong drinking pedigreed Riesling Auslese at any point between 10 and 25 years after its vintage. Check in on a few 1990s. I’ve had a couple 1993s showing superbly.

All of these advisories pertain to wines with conventional residual sugar. Halbtrockens and Trockens mature faster.

I didn’t hear anyone in Germany talking about how the wines don’t age as they did before. A few years ago that notion was all the vogue, possibly because of two vintages (1991 and 1993) whose wines appeared to age “prematurely.” The question remains: did those wines indeed taste too old too soon, or was there **something in the particular vintage make-up** that mimicked the flavor of age? That’s what I suspected, and indeed many of the wines suspected of having aged prematurely got a second wind. Their detractors have crawled away in shame.

## LABEL BASICS

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

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

But lately the Germans are playing with the notion of a vineyard classification. This was a good idea when I first proposed it in 1983 and it remains a good idea now. It remains to be seen whether they'll bog it down in a lot of political game playing, and most of all I hope they resist the urge to get too ambitious. I have always felt the more specific a **guarantee** a classification purports to be, the more misleading it actually is. I am personally in favor of determining which are the Grand Cru vineyards and which are the Premier Cru. These and only these sites could thereafter be named, and all other vineyard names could be scrapped, along with the entire hideous Grosslage system. We'll see.

The common complaint is the German label is too verbose. Here's a nice terse response: bullshit. If this were the label of a French wine, we'd be subjected to "Grand Vin du Rheinhessen, mis en bouteille au domaine Strub, viticulteur a Nierstein-sur Rhin, Grand Cru Paterberg du Nierstein, Vendage Tardive, Riesling . . ." get the picture? The difference is that you feel urbane and seductive speaking the French words. In German you feel like Sergeant Schulz. I was on a little warpath in Germany last month, correcting my colleagues' mispronunciations until I was sure they'd spit in my soup. I don't object to our mangling the complicated diphthongs, but any drooling idiot can say Zone-en-ur (Sonnenuhr). So please, gimme a break about the German label.

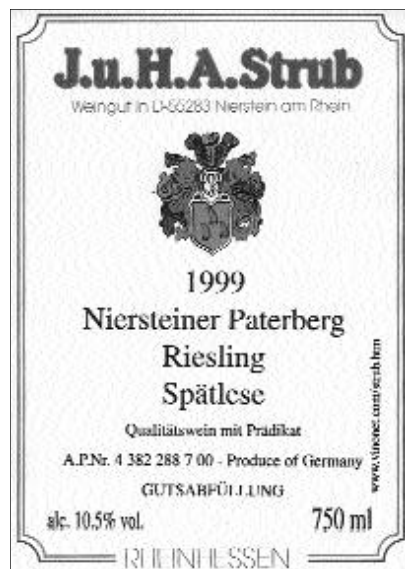
Here's what it means: Strub is the producer. If you see the word Weingut in any proximity, that's your signal. A Weingut is a winery which estate-bottles its wine. Look for that word. Vintage is self-evident. Niersteiner

**Paterberg** identifies the site and locality. Nierstein is a place from which the populace, whether Homo Sapiens or the progeny of *vitis vinifera*, are known as Niersteiners. O.K., New Yorkers? Paterberg is a vineyard. How are you supposed to know that? It's always the second word in the sequence. Meursault Perrieres. Niersteiner Paterberg. NBD!

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). The phrase *Qualitätswein mit Prädikat* is a bit of bureaucratic puffery. Quality wine with special distinction, right! The distinction in this case is that the wine is not chaptalized. Chaptalized wines can only be labeled *Qualitätswein b.A.*; they aren't subject to predicates. Only Germans have perversely decided that chaptalized wine is ipso facto inferior wine. The French cheerily go on consuming just about all their wines except the most southerly, not caring that sugar was added to the grape must to boost the alcohol a few degrees. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the *Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum standards. That word *Gutsabfüllung* means estate bottled. Think about it: it's actually shorter than *mise en bouteilles au domaine*; it's just a single word instead of a seven-syllable phrase. And then finally on the bottom we find Rheinhessen, in this case the region of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No "*Grand vin de Bourgogne*" here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the BATF, which will require "Red Burgundy Wine" to appear on the strip label.

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



## **GLOSSARY:**

### **OECHSLE**

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

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays remarkable ripeness for its quality level. Most of my growers are contemptuous of the lenient standards for minimum ripeness. And you need to know if, for example, I'm offering you a Kabinett with near-Auslese ripeness because you might be looking for a light wine and you won't get it. Each grower sets up his own schemata, and if the baseline level is, say, equivalent to Spätlese, then the lightest wine could be called "Kabinett" even with Spätlese-level ripeness. Better to be remembered for a superb Kabinett than to be forgotten for a run-of-the-mill Spätlese. German wine in general is riper than it was fifteen years ago (it's a global-warming thing), even though I have stopped using aerosol deodorants personally.

### **GL**

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

### **EXTRACT**

This is a word that's nearly always used incorrectly. Most wine people use it as a vague metaphor for who-knows-what virtue they claim to find in a wine, saying that such-and-such is "highly extracted." I don't know what that means. Extract really is simple and tangible. It is everything in wine except sugar, acid, water, and alcohol. You can measure it in the lab, and all German wine carrying an A.P. number has had its extract measured. The average reading would be somewhere in the low 20s—speaking in g.l. now. I'd expect to see a Riesling QbA or Kabinett with 20 to 24 g.l. extract, or 2.2 to 2.4 percent. I'd look for Spätlese to be a little higher, Auslese still higher, and the stickies quite high, up to 40 or even 50 g.l.

I'll bring extract to your attention if it's noteworthy. High extract corresponds with low yields, old vines, moist soils, and generally with high acidity. Can you taste extract? Not as a specific flavor, but as a largeness of flavor, especially mid-palate flavor—the second wave of taste that comes on after the initial burst of fruit. Extract is also a buffer, ameliorating both acidity and sweetness. High extract is a thing devoutly to be sought in fine wine, and while I don't focus obsessively on components of flavor, I do look for extract as a frequent harbinger of quality. Wines with high extract have more authority, more length, more interest of flavor.

### **ACIDITY**

Acidity is, once again, a thing I'll point out if it is remarkable. I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine except Riesling has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient. Curiously, it does seem that before the second World War, many German Rieslings underwent partial malolactic fermentation, probably by accident, and the wines of ripe vintages may have been lower in acid than we experience these days. Yet the wines aged fabulously. Among my vintners only Lingenfelder is friendly toward malo, and Rainer feels a perfect acidity for his wines is between 7.5 and 8 g.l., making them more typically Alsatian than German. As a rule, Riesling begins to show its splashy cool freshness around 8 g.l., and at 8.5 or 9 g.l. the wine starts to focus and tighten into a lemony vigor. Above 9 g.l. we start feeling acidity as a major component of the wine's structure. This is usually favorable, but acidity, like every other component, is just a piece in a mosaic that has to look like something. One also learns to distinguish among types of acidity. Tartaric is less sharp, malic more so. There's a thin line between an acid-fueled flavor power and just plain sharpness. Ten years ago it seemed that all I talked about with my growers was this figure or that; nowadays we hardly do it at all.

The Germans have lurched backward from their acid-obsession. Now the pack has moved too far in the opposite direction. The poor grower! The ones who try to "gauge the market" end up being whipped around, dupes to fashion. The Good Guys just go on making the best wines they can and look for people to sell them to. I would never advocate a return to the days of Trocken wines with 11 grams of acidity (you could disfigure your own face if you let any of that stuff dribble down your chin), but it concerns me to hear so many vintners talk about adjusting acids downward to make their young dry wines palatable. It signals an inappropriate focus on acidity as such, rather than on the entire flavor of the wine. As Hans-Günter Schwarz (of Müller-Catoir) so wisely puts it: "Acidity is the fundament of fruit."

### **TYPES OF SOIL**

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

## TROCKEN AND HALBTROCKEN

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

## FEINHERB

This is a new description ushered in with the 1999 vintage. It doesn’t seem to be catching on. “Herb” has long been a German word denoting a wine on the dry side but probably not bone dry. Many growers dislike the word “Halbtrocken” (with good reason), but Feinherb may not be the answer. I actually have the answer, if they’d ask me. Technically Feinherb is a Halbtrocken with a higher upward limit on residual sugar, but still leaning discernibly in a dry direction. Lingenfelder’s wines typify.

## SÜSSRESERVE

This is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a fully fermented wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor assured—at least in theory. I intervene as often as I can in this process, as I have definite ideas about harmony. Where the story of a blend is interesting I’ll share it with you. The practice is nearly universal along the Rhine but uncommon along the Mosel, where sweetness is adjusted by interrupting fermentation. Actually, I have decided that I don’t like the word “Süssreserve” any more and I won’t use it in this text. It may be silly, but we have a much sexier and more palatable word for a highly similar practice and process: DOSAGE. Since nobody objects to the idea of Dosage in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I’ll use the nicer one.

Another interesting digression (I am full of these, or at any rate, full of something): when you’re blending with Süssreserve, you first produce a makeshift blend based on an intuition of what the base wine seems to need. It’s often wrong, so you add or subtract in the direction you wish to move. Much of the time the wine seems sweet-sour, with sugar unknit and detached from fruit and acidity, standing out like a sore thumb. You’d be tempted to conclude you’d used too much sweetening. You’d be wrong. Most of the time you don’t need less sweetness; you need more. And as you inch upward in increments you’ll find when you’ve got the blend perfect the sweetness seems to VANISH! Now it’s part of a balanced, whole picture. I’m tempted to believe that most of the anti-Süssreserve crap you hear results from poorly blended wines from vintners who didn’t respect their material and were only interested in the quickest shortcut to a saleable product.

## FLURBEREINIGUNG

Literally this means the “rectification of the fields.” It’s actually a process whereby costs of production are diminished by rationalizing land holdings and building roads, paths, and walkways. Formerly the growers’ holdings were split into myriad tiny parcels and scattered hither and yon over the hillside. Often there was no easy access. It could take a longer time to get to one’s vines than to actually work them.

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

## HOCHGEWÄCHS

Do us both a favor and don’t even try to pronounce this. Just do what I do and call it “hogwash,” for that’s what it is. Another perfect example of an idea that started out right and turned into a bureaucratic nightmare. Here’s the scenario. You’re a conscientious grower; a lot of your wines exceed the legal minimum for their quality levels. Especially your QbA wines, which are near or actually at Kabinett ripeness. You don’t want to make a thin Kabinett from these grapes, so you chaptalize. No problem so far. Except that when you try to sell the wine, now labeled QbA, it competes against oceans of mass-produced, cheap, lowest-common-denominator QbA selling for pennies per bottle at the corner supermarket. Nobody will pay your price. Where’s your incentive?

Thus the creation of this new term (actually the co-opting of an earlier term with a different meaning, but that’s another story). Think of it as a kind of “super QbA,” or it you prefer, a chaptalized Kabinett or damn-near Kabinett. Any chaptalized wine with at least x-ripeness can be sold as Hochgewächs. You can even chaptalize Spätlese quality must if you feel like it. Hogwash also has special requirements in terms of how many points the wine needs in order to qualify, and, most significant, **one hundred percent purity of vintage**, grape variety and vineyard site—versus 85% as the general rule in Germany.

So you can see why they needed to do it, but the thing is just so typically half-assed! Why don’t they show some courage and raise the requirements for Qualitätswein? Easy answer: because the merchants and co-ops have too much political clout. But hey, no problem, dude! I don’t mind struggling my entire career to erase the miserable impression so many people have of German wine because of all the oceans of bilge those wineries turn out!

## GUTSABFÜLLUNG

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



# SOMMELIER ALERT!

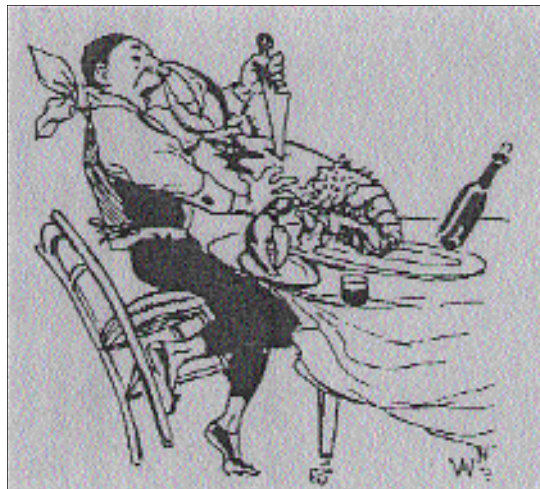
I'm highlighting the wines I think are the best candidates for restaurant use. That's bound to be arbitrary to some extent, but I care a lot about how these wines are used, and I pay close attention to flavor synergies. That plus my wife is a chef and I've had my consciousness raised. You'll see all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

I don't really have scholarly criteria; it's more intuitive. I do look for bold, forthright flavor. But inasmuch as all the 2001s have bold forthright flavor, guys, I really don't know what to tell ya. I know restaurants don't buy "vintages" the way retailers do, but there have never been better German wines for exactly your environment and its needs. It's buzzing and noisy and I think you want wines that reach out and talk to you.

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

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

Briefly put, if you don't already know, I think you'd be surprised how well German white wine will work with your food. It's actually, dare I say it, the best available white wine you could use. When chefs create preps they are usually looking for flavor synergies, sometimes harmonies and sometimes **telling** disharmonies. Nobody deliberately combines discordant flavors in a prep. Why stop there? The idea that "anything goes; you should drink what you like" is dangerous, because it isn't true. Why, you start letting people drink what they **like** and the next thing you know they're wearing white before Memorial Day! I don't care about what's Correct, but I do know what tastes good and I have a small idea why.



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

# sommelier alert

GDH-121	2001 Dönnhoff Riesling	30
GDH-122	2001 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett	30
GDH-123	2001 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese	30
GDH-124	2001 Dönnhoff Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese	30
GDH-125	2001 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese	30
GDH-126	2001 Dönnhoff Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese	30
GDH-127	2001 Dönnhoff Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese	30
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GST-090	2001 Strub Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Kabinett	48
GST-089	2001 Strub Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Kabinett	48
GBK-036	2001 Brüder Dr. Becker Dienheimer Tafelstein Riesling Kabinett	50
GBK-038	2001 Brüder Dr. Becker Dienheimer Tafelstein Scheurebe Kabinett	50
GBK-039	2001 Brüder Dr. Becker Dienheimer Tafelstein Scheurebe Spätlese	50
GMZ-048	2001 Merz Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken	55
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GKR-075	2001 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett	80
GKR-065	1992 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese	80
GKR-077	1998 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese "R"	80
GKR-68	1991 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Trocken "R"	80
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GDR-102	2001 Darting Dürkheimer Steinberg Muskateller Kabinett	85
GDR-100	2001 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese	86
GNE-081	2001 Neckerauer Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	88
GKS-001	2001 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	90
GKS-002	2001 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Kabinett	90
GKS-004	1990 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Auslese	90
GMS-075	2001 Messmer Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	92
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GJU-063	2001 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.131
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# nahe wines



It is a joy to labor lovingly on behalf of what I feel to be the loveliest Riesling wines on the face of the earth.

You know, the Rhineland is really quite compact. You can get to the Nahe in a half-hour from the Rheingau, a half-hour from the Rheinhessen, an hour from the Pfalz, and an hour from the Mosel. Yet the Nahe is the forgotten acre just out of view, trilling beyond earshot in its winsome, lonely corner. Especially after the soaring scenery of the Mosel, the dreamy Nahe is almost narcotically soothing. It's still, and intimate, and stirs the soul as it calms the nerves.

It is sad to contemplate what must happen here: more hotels, more restaurants, more activity, higher profile. Without these, the Nahe has little future as a viable wine region. There is no relation between costs of cultivation on difficult land and the prices one can fetch for the wines, nor is there tourism enough to at least provide cash flow. There are several reasons why. Other regions,

the Saar for example, have been able to prosper without mass tourism. The Saar is as dreamy as the Nahe. But the Saar has Egon Müller. That may not sound like much (no disrespect to the great keeper of the Schärzhof is intended) but everybody has heard of this estate; it is on the wine map. Yes, the Nahe has Dönnhoff (vintner of the year in the 2000 *Gault-Millau* and very much an epicenter-o-

wine interests you in and of itself, these wines will give you as much delight and absorption as wine ever can.

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but they are more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam** and **clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry**, **melaphyr**, **gneiss**, **rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honey-suckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatically filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a

**The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be.**

wine-geekdom) and it has Johann Lafer, Germany's most celebrated chef. Still it's sleepy, nor does it ring with affluence as does the Pfalz.

But at least there's one place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VISITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the next orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be: intricate, searchingly complex, with hypnotically shimmering overtones of flavor that can stir you to a point between perplexity and awe. Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted. If the pure flavor of

**Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted.**

walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was

grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other—we looked like a chain-gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. “You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you’ve just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity.”

I know of nowhere else in the world of wine where grapes grow on such an intricate confluence of geological currents. No grape except the Riesling could do justice to such soil.

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the

world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

In my dream I wished I could bring you here with me, and we could sit out for a few hours in the afternoon light and look down on those miraculous vineyards and listen to the birds. Let that time gestate in our hearts, so that when we taste the wines later on we taste them with that heart, relaxed, dilated and ready. And then I think of those wines, arranged in sterile rows on a table somewhere, while I pace nearby and worry about how they’ll “show.” And for a moment it becomes impossible to be both people at once, the hot-shot wine guy and the plain-and-simple me who sits on the hill pensive, calm and grateful.

I happen to believe that wine **means** something. And much of what wine means was visible to me then, and every time since. I also buy wine in part because of what it means, which is a more vital question than its simple exterior flavor. Yet if we wish to make a living buying and sell-



View of the Hermannshöhle and other vineyards from the Lemberg

fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil forming miasmic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being shown to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the

ing wine, we often confront a perplexing question: who are we to be? We all let meaning into our lives in some way; we thirst for meaning unawares. When you cheer like a banshee for the home team, you’re feeding a need for **meaning**; on the face of it, what does it matter who wins the game? We create meaning because we need to have it in our lives. Wine is one of the things which happens to feed that need in me, and Nahe wine does so in a particularly suggestive, caressing way. “There are mysteries here of the most exquisite sweetness; I will show them to you,” it seems to say.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

It is a truly weird arrangement of feelings. I drive down the street knowing for the next several hours I'm going to be as roused and moved as wine can make me. I also know I'm going to see an old friend. I also know I'm going to be made considerable fun of, especially if I do or say anything remotely precious. This I receive as a wry perquisite of Helmut Dönnhoff's approval; he teases me.

He has a cool new tasting room since last year, lots of wood, high ceilings, clear. On the wall are pictures of Helmut with Madonna and Jerry Springer – just checking you're paying attention. There are actually no pictures I can recall. But there's more space, and the acoustics amplify his reedy voice.

The past few years I've felt a subtle pressure to be matter-of-fact, as if Helmut would disapprove if I was still amazed after all these years. Oh I did used to be amazed! And now, ground down and weathered, now I'm not.

But funny, when you pass through the stage of delighted incredulity that wine can taste like these wines do, when you simply take it as an unaccountable gift of nature, you pay another kind of attention. Now it isn't about how you're going to feel. It's just about the wine. And you feel that happy absorption in something outside, the freedom of attending to the outer world. And suddenly the wines become more vividly real, even more enthralling, yet it all happens quietly, you have no words for what you see because you've been focused on your own feelings, and you have to start over.

I think this is where Mr. Dönnhoff wanted, in his way, to lead me. One doesn't dare preen. The shrine compresses itself and liquefies, and soon you realize it is inside you now.

My favorite of all those aching drawings of Käthe Kollwitz is called "Prisoners Listening To Music." In it the damned, the wretched, are looking wonderingly at a cloister inside themselves they didn't know was there. The experience of beauty reminds us we are at least partly angels. We must be, if, when they visit us, we understand them. Dönnhoff's wines are quiet and searching, and you hear them from an interior world monastic and still.

These are Rieslings of the very highest order. Behind them is a temperament as warm, rigorous and thoughtful as any I know. Helmut Dönnhoff begins, like his wines, with a certain cordial reserve, unfolding layer by layer. He's a taster who concentrates intensely and doesn't make snap judgments. If he sees you concentrating, weighing, sifting, reflecting, he is content. He's less concerned with what you may have concluded than in the WAY you go about tasting. He is alert for any disagreements he and I might have (though these are almost



Helmut Dönnhoff

- Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg and Kupfergrube, Norheimer Kirschheck and Dellchen
- Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry and weathered volcanic soil
- Grape varieties: 75% Riesling, 25% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder

unheard-of these days); he stops what he's doing, affixes me with his piercing glare, and man, I gotta produce. He is fascinated by the minutiae of wine, the little eyelashes of flavor, the tenderest and most precise articulation of nuances. But he discusses it all matter-of-factly, like a father who's over his first giddy wonder at his newborn and can now study the baby with calm adoration.

Dönnhoff sees his work as craft; such art as may exist in wine comes from nature. "All the real work of the vintage happens before the pressing," he says. "What you do afterwards is repair." He approaches wine respectfully but not reverentially.

As a vintner he takes his duties completely seriously and applies himself calmly and fastidiously to his work. The result is a community of wines as transparent and filigree as spider webs, but the wonder for Helmut lies not in the strange fact of such a thing's existence, but in the beauty of the workmanship. That's him in a nutshell. He wants to make wine that is pure and serene in flavor.

My friend Robert Houde has a great way to convey this idea: "People have to get over the idea that intensity always means **volume**," he says. Thank you Robert! Think of some yahoo blabbing away behind you in a movie the-

ater. Beyond all patience, you turn to this clod and whisper, “Would you please SHUT UP?” You haven’t raised your voice above a whisper, but you have spoken with seething intensity. Wine does this too. It is always asking me to shut up.

Of all the vintners with whom I’ve worked awhile—and I began with Dönnhoff in 1987—Helmut has perhaps developed the most conspicuously. He was quite retiring when we first met, but no more. (Bernd Philippi has done his vile part in corrupting poor Helmut.) After being WINZER DES JAHRES in *Gault-Millau* it is hard to hide in your old wee crannies. Helmut knows where his wines fall in the quality continuum. He is a little surprised that nobody else is making such pristine and exquisite wines. In fact he doesn’t really care about rankings or accolades but he is serious about upholding standards. If he is to become a Spokesperson, then he will do cordial honor to that role, all the while wondering if it’s strictly relevant.

He has also moved forward as a taster. In the old days we’d taste in a self-consciously “professional” manner, and would analyze and pick apart the wines until they were entirely dissected and we knew just how hip we were. Not anymore. Now we’re not hip at all, thank God. I loved something Helmut said once: “DAS GANZE DING MUSS KLINGEN!” That is, the whole thing must harmonize; it isn’t enough if this **part** or that **part** is interesting or arresting, the whole picture has to be balanced. Helmut is unaware of it, but he offered quite a gleaming gift of instruction with that simple little sentence. We’d all be better wine drinkers—and happier lovers of LIFE—if we could somehow remember: the whole thing must harmonize.

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast. The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn’t bottle-ready after six months

it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn’t it?

“Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality,” he says, adding: “You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you’re not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology.” He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. “It is the concentration of all the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its real taste and structure,” he says. He is determined to maintain the specificity of his wines. He is fervent on the subject of individuality; he hates to blend. He resists even the blending of separate pickings of similar ripeness from the same site; he is too respectful of each wine’s story. “If you have a barrel that’s not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character.” Fermentation runs its own course here. Süssreserve is occasionally (and somewhat apologetically) used to fine-tune in the lower prädikat wines.

I know a lot of you who regard these wines with an almost religious awe. Certainly their clarity and beauty touches on the mystical, as does the angelic care with which their flavors are etched. Yet 2001 is a regal, statuesque vintage; how would Dönnhoff’s wines be? “Taste them and see!” came his no-nonsense reply.

It was as small here as everywhere: 45hl/ha. The lowest must was 80 Oechsle, and nothing was chaptalized. “They’re rather crude, these brutes,” said Helmut. “Like Pfalz wines!”

It says something about the Riesling religion that its high priests are so **down to earth**, because great Riesling COMES DOWN TO **EARTH**. Earth and soil is the reason it is great. Welcome then, to many of the greatest soils in the world of wine, and the wry, genial and careful man who midwives them into being for us.

### Some Notes On The Vineyards:

In essence the **BRÜCKE** is a mineral wine; it shows a more masculine profile, it’s more fibrous and nutty than many other Nahe wines, but just at the moment you think you’re tasting everything in it, it comes at you with even more nuance, yet another facet of flavor. If new-world-oaky-creamslut wines are like basic addition and subtraction, these wines are like integral calculus—except that any ragamuffin palate (even mine!) can grok them.

**NIEDERHÄUSER HERMANNSHÖLE** is one of those vineyards that gives utterly miraculous wine. You shake your head in delighted perplexity that fermented grape juice can attain such flavors. It is a steep hillside, not very large (8.5 hectares), with ideal exposition and a soil whose complexity is mirrored in its wines. Walk fifty yards through the vineyard and you see a mish-mash of soils, as though this were a geological junction, an Arc de Triomphe-like conflagration. There is slate, porphyry, melaphyr and conglomerates—sometimes all jumbled together. The only possible drawback is drought in the drier years. Its favorable exposure makes Eiswein almost impossible.

Dönnhoff is currently producing the very best wines from **HERMANNSHÖLE**, and you need look no further to see one of the wine-world’s great confluences of a great vineyard and a great proprietor. I don’t care what a hot-shot palate you have, the complexities of these wines will tax it to its outermost limits. The fundamental aromas and flavors are a mingling of sharply sweet cherry, sometimes black cherry, and currant-cassis, but there is a hint of anise too, something spriggy, and an undertow of stoniness from the slate. Botrytis brings tropical fruit notes. I would go so far as to claim that NO SINGLE WINE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD IS AS COMPLEX AS DÖNNHOFF’S BEST FROM HERMANNSHÖLE.

**Dönnhoff at a glance:**

In this humble taster's opinion, these are the greatest Rieslings on earth. No other wine, anywhere, exceeds the clarity, polish, complexity and sheer beauty of flavor of this grower's finest wines.

**how the wines taste:**

Simply, like the most perfect Riesling that can ever be.

**GDH-121 2001 Estate Riesling**

This year it's a blend from the Felsenberg (Porphyry) and the Kieselberg (slate, sand and gravel over loam, and steep); it is oh-so stylish, silky and complex, with just a little of the '01 phenolic nip in the finish. Lovely. Off to a fine start.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)

**GDH-122 2001 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett**

+

A reticent, semolina-like nose; oh whew! Another whole dimension here. The symphony of Leistenberg, thicker than just slate, easily Spätlese body and layered-ness. "Well it was Spätlese, even by law a small Auslese . . . but keep tasting, there's more wines!" said Dönnhoff.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between six and 20 years)

**GDH-123 2001 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese**

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Kirschheck (cherry-hedge) is an unheralded Grand Cru, nearly ten hectares of which is 80% steep. The three growers I represent with parcels there all say it's slatey, but the standard reference book says: "sandy loam on a bed of sandstone-Rotliegend." Whatever! It tastes slatey. "It's slate, quit worrying about it," said one grower, who then added: "but remember it's not the devonian slate of the Mosel but rather a sort of slate called Tholey, which is sandier." Ah so! I've often found great affinity between these wines and Christoffel's Würzgartens, but this wine's just too big-boned, though it's also racy, joyous, silky and seductive, with an ice-splash of freshness on the finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-three years)

**GDH-124 2001 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese**

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Kupfergrube is the Nahe's most famous vineyard and one of its two or three greatest. It was planted by convict labor between the World Wars on the site of an old copper-mine (hence its name). It is fourteen hectares in size, Mosel-steep and full of an impossibly-complicated mish-mash-o-minerals. It is the sine qua non of Nahe-ness at its best. This site—and if THIS isn't its best then Dolly Parton doesn't sleep on her back—Exquisite nose! This is the first **great** wine from these still-young vines (15 yrs.); amazing mineral interplay, rich yet animated, heartbreakingly piquant sweetness.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty five years)

**GDH-125 2001 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese**

+(+)

Brücke is Dönnhoff's monopole site along the river, in which the soil visibly changes in the space of about 100 yards—four times. The past few years it has given Helmut's weightiest wines. Amazing: from these 2.5 acres come white wines more noble and complex than any on this earth, and the consumer can buy this wine for not much over \$25, and that from one of the greatest vintners alive! The first sip was racier and more raspberried than usual, with more pointed acidity—Helmut picked this continuously throughout the harvest to ensure clean fruit). I told him it needed to be sweeter. Helmut answered "Wait, just wait. Time, time, time." But, he also left the room and returned with a sample from a second cask. Ah. This quickly conferred a kind of velvet into the wine, and deepened its fruit. "Thinking of combining them?" I asked slyly. "Could be!" he answered archly. "Do you agree with my impression?" I inquired. "Yes." So!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1(between eight and twenty-five years)

**GDH-126 2001 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**

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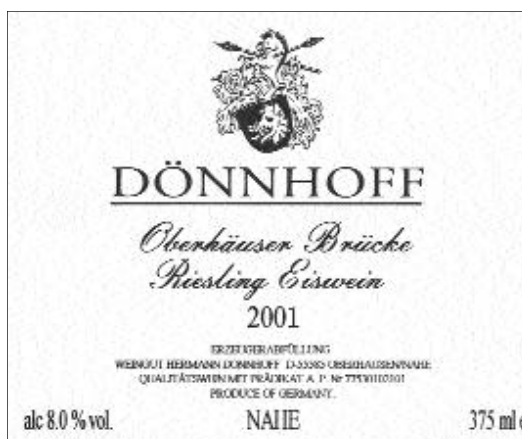
My friends, if you could pound jewels into silk, it would be this. All the sublime fruit of the vineyard with all the sensational density of the '01s; melodic, blossoming, still as a monk's garden, cloister-quiet.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 ( between eight and twenty five years)



- GDH-127 **2001 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese** + + +  
 Don't be mad at me; there's hardly a drop of this; it was a small half-cask that should have fermented dry, but I think it's my personal favorite wine of the vintage; astonishing complexity and elegance: the quintessential vineyard fragrance, fabulous length, golden, maizy, resonant, gorgeous, and still talc-y, malty and mineral to within an inch of its life. Long, with a high, choral elegance. There's terribly little of this, but Helmut tells me I'll get "some, eventually."  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GDH-128 **2001 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Auslese**  
 So this is what you were hiding, you sly dog. 98 Oechsle, and tastes for all the world like great Trittenheimer Apotheke; it's forward, laughing and delighted you're there; a laugh-out-loud prettiness balanced against cherries and slate. Oh just yum!  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GDH-129 **2001 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Auslese**  
 "A secretive, riddlesome bit of land," is how Helmut describes it, and this wine is as inscrutable as always; it's the saltiest wine yet, with fascinating hints of mirabelle (green-gage plums) and a honey-spice note, but only the intricate finish hints at the beauty to come.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GDH-130 **2001 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese** + +  
 There are two, of which this is the lighter and the one with all clean fruit, and it's glowing and ravishing, clearly of the genre "Auslese" but with all the mineral imagineable, and with polish, and inimitable class—Rieslingness.  
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty two years)
- GDH-131 **2001 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese** + +  
 Again, the lighter of two. Don't get me wrong, I like botrytis-bombs, and the big bro' of this one, a jungferwein (first crop) with 120 Oechsle has all the yang you could fit in your happy mouth, but first, no need to clean out the cellar of 2001s in one swell foop, and second, I prefer the vinosity of the lighter wines to the liquerousness of the richer ones. This great wine is higher-toned than the Brücke, more mystic, more cherry; a deep exhalation of exquisiteness; piquant, but with old-vines density (50+).
- GDH-132H **2001 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein (Friday), 12/375ml** + + +  
 Brücke is predestined for the making of great Eiswein. In the summer it is a heat-trap, but after the first real Autumn chill it doesn't get sun until late morning, and its position in the middle of a narrow valley causes it to collect cold breezes from the hilltops. And then, of course, Dönnhoff is a genius, so that doesn't hurt. The legendary "Monday" Eiswein was THE sweet-wine of the 1998 vintage (I was glad to see Gault-Millau agreed with me!), and the ninety-nine was in a class by itself. This 2001 was made from grapes which had 100 Oechsle before freezing, is as great as Eiswein can be; clear, vertical, piquant, haunting . . . and drinkable! Even now. And friend, no one nowhere in the world can make a wine anything like this. Taste it (if you can get it!) and see what wine is capable of.  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and forty years)



# weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

NEW GUY! And a happy, happy discovery indeed. First of all, yes; I am determined to represent every Nahe vintner named “Helmut” (though in fact Mr. Hexamer is a Harald, and this Harald-angel’s wines do sing), and second, it does seem Quixotic of me to reach into the outer depths of an already-obscure reason to find a sterling young vintner. All along I challenged myself to answer the question “Why should my customer care?” I can’t answer it. But, the wine can.

This arose as a tip from Dönnhoff. The same tip appears to have been given to David Schildknecht, who came back enthusiastic. Samples were procured, and tasted over the winter, with great pleasure. (The man made some of the most interesting wines from the rarely-enthralling 1999 vintage.) We squeezed in a visit to Meddersheim, which believe me requires a detour. Harald and

Petra Hexamer are all the things one wants a young vintner-family to be. But first let me back up a little.

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-somethings are opting to carry on their family’s wineries. This isn’t entirely bad. The ones who do self-select; they’re the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner with good warm feelings.

But whatever my theoretical musings, Harald Hexamer is about as dear as they come. I have a little questionnaire I hand out to all my growers (the answers from which are often quoted herein) and when Hexamer sent his back he wrote “For some of these questions I could have written a book in response.”

He has twelve hectares, and growing. Somewhere between 55-58% is Riesling (“It keeps growing and I can’t keep up with it”). as he obtains land given up for sale by the ones who choose against a wine life. He aims to become identified with a genuinely superb vineyard which has an unfortunate name for non-Germans . . . **Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg**. (It is fine with me if you want simply to call it “the Grafenberg spot”.)

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a complicated melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately delighted: a true terroir wine.

In fact these wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as “density”), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent lightness. These are rare and wonderful wines, sybarites; I’m not looking to add estates to this portfolio in my advanc-

- Vineyard area: 11.4 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Meddersheimer Altenberg, Sobernheimer Marbach
- Soil types: Quartz, red weatherbeaten clay
- Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 12% Spätburgunder, 10% Müller-Thurgau, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, and 11% others

ing decrepitude unless they offer irresistible deliciousness.

Hexamer is emblematic of the best of cutting edge thinking among quality-minded vintners. He’s a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellar master. “I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is decisive.” He often harvests riper grapes from another site (Marbach) but the wines of Rheingrafenberg are “more filigree and better-structured.” He handles as little as possible. Doesn’t deacidify, doesn’t use dosage. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary (“but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit—below 10 degrees—back to the winery.”) Yields are controlled by pruning (“We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine”). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; “The most filigree wines come from this method.” 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

All quite modern, yet Hexamer’s not what I’d call a

modernist. Rather, he seeks the most neutral cellar-environment so as to preserve the complexities he pulls in from the mountain. He's also a fun guy to drink wine with, and shows ceaseless curiosity and omnivorous glee in all the world's wines.

It might have been facile to begin with a vintage like 2001, when even the ordinary made fine wines. But we tasted 1999 and 2000 in depth, and several old vintages also, and I am fully confident this estate is fundamentally groovin'.

#### Hexamer at a glance:

wines of terroir.

Sensational new discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GHX-001 2001 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

This is just the thing! Terroir and wonderful complexity; stylish, lovely yet clearly with a craggy identity of its very own; some amalgam of granitic-silica stoniness along with berries (black-and-redcurrants) and quince. Excellent value.

SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

#### GHX-002 2001 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese

This is even finer than the Kabinett, higher-toned, more iridescent.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)

#### GHX-003 2001 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese "S"

S for selection; the \*\*\* quality or the long-capsule or whatever; in this case the least among the Auslesen declassified, though it tastes like Auslese and its sweetness is tangier now as the ripeness climbs; roses roses roses and more roses, and a shade darker on the palate; alto to the regular Spät's soprano. Pretty extravagant stuff here!

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty three years)

#### GHX-004 2001 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese

+

This was one of several small lots of very late-picked wines, one more celestial than the next. Even after three weeks and countless hundreds of impressive wines, I can't forget how shimmeringly iridescent and pure these wines were. This was picked November 7th in the morning after a frosty night; it has fabulously lovely pure heavenly fruit, and an amazing nose smelling just like 20-year old Blanc de Blancs. You can look forward to a few driplets of two more Auslesen, picked even later, as well as two unbelievable Eisweins. This is the next Nahe superstar if he keeps this nutso stuff up . . .

SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty eight years)

Helmut Mathern picked some lousy time to get sick, poor guy. He's in one of those treatment programs which creates its own debilitations, and he's tired and his palate's out of whack, just at the time he needs to start thinking about bottling. Kevin and I offered what help we could, and the by now Helmut will have been visited by his friend Hans-Günter Schwarz (Müller-Catoir) who's stopped by to taste, advise and be a mensch.

Mathern is basically a small-town grower committed to his private customer base, wishing to offer them drinkable wines they can afford. It's partly his own talent and partly his great vineyards that raised him above the crowd. The local VDP is eagerly recruiting him, to hear it told, and he's really not sure what's right for his winery. Flattering though it is to be courted, I have the impression

Mathern doesn't want to eschew his simple roots, and he also worries he'll have to raise his prices!

Personally I think 1998 was his breakthrough vintage. 1994 and 1995 were extremely promising, but I wish the 1996s had remained as they were without de-acidification; they were very good but might have been supernal. 1997 is who-knows-what! And 1999 was graceful, lithe and leaping. If you wanted to make people feel good about the 1999s, you would show them these wines first. "Wow, nice vintage!" they would say, as you sniggered into your hands. 2000, not surprisingly, is crashing cymbals of happiness.

It bears mentioning, by the way, that 2000 has its best chance of success here in the central Nahe. This family of wines is as wonderful as German Riesling can be.

There's a new cellar that should ratchet these wines up to who-knows-what level, as Helmut Mathern has more space to work and more wherewithal to produce small lots of peak-wines. Other happy news is his acquisition of three-fourths of a hectare in the **Hermannshöhle**, which gets a geek like me salivatin' like a Pavlov's dawg.

He's nearly all stainless steel now, though he hasn't chucked his old casks, which come in handy in obdurate vintages where a little roundness is needed. 2001 was all steel. Notwithstanding his health challenges the wines are entirely typical, made larger-than-life by the 2001 ripeness.

Fulsome and extravagant as my notes must seem to many readers, they faithfully record how I felt at the time. If you'd been there you might have felt the same way. Great wine still pumps me up, and I guess I'm just an emotional guy. It's O.K. if you think I'm silly. I accept that risk when I write as I do. It would be false to my spirit to force understatement. Solemnity has no place near such wines! When you taste really good Nahe wines they're so bewitching you swear you've never experienced anything so racy, high-bred and fine.

Mathern picks entirely by hand—always a good sign. He considers his best vineyard the Rosenberg ("We have

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 9,200 cases
- Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Rosenberg, Felsensteyer, Kertz and Roseneck, Norheimer Dellchen and Kirschheck
- Soil types: Porphyry and slate
- Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 7% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Dornfelder, 8% other varieties

45-year old vines there, and the microclimate's excellent"). Like most good Nahe vintners, Mathern is a soil proponent; you can't NOT be when the sheer FACT of SOIL = FLAVOR stares you in the face all the time. His own wines mimic the Saar and Ruwer, wines he says he likes to drink if he can't get a hold of a Nahe wine. Yet it won't work to force these wines through the zingy-reductive matrix.

What they are at their best is fascinating Riesling, and I'm excited to work with a young man, "The best by far in Niederhausen," according to Helmut Dönnhoff. He has such a bright future ahead of him.

These wines are so patently outstanding I wonder they don't sell more vigorously. It must be the "reductive" thing; Mathern's wines, like J.J. Prüm's and Ernie Loosen's, can show a lot of cheesy-yeasty stink their first year or two. One of the tank-samples was so stubborn Helmut dosed it with a little copper-sulfate so we could form a true impression. It was clearer, to be sure, but "I know I can remove this smell from the wines but I'm afraid of what else I might remove," he said, and I had to agree.

### A Look At The Vineyards:

NIEDERHÄUSER ROSENHECK is a 17 hectare vineyard that is 75% steep, with a southeast exposure and typically complicated soils based on slate (with loess-loam, stony clay and a grayish-brown sandstone: complexity, remember?). I'd classify the site as "1er Cru" for its forthright and satisfyingly lusty style, allied with mineral Riesling finesse. Mathern's certainly the leading grower.

NIEDERHÄUSER FELSENSTEYER is an entirely steep 10 hectare vineyard made most famous by Crusius and more recently by Mathern too. The book says the soil is loamy but you've never seen loam with that color, an almost raspberry-ish purple.

NIEDERHÄUSER ROSENBERG brings us back to porphyry in a steep 12 hectare vineyard you drive through if you exit Niederhausen up the hill. It's probably a 1er Cru but in Mathern's hands it makes Grand Cru wines

#### **Mathern at a glance:**

Hard to believe this unassuming and hale fellow is the rising star in the region, but his nervy, high-bred wines quiver with spice and penetration. Excellent 2001s.

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

They are spicy and then some! Taste one of these keen, shimmering beauties and see what we mean by the word "racy." They're almost always spritzy, with clarity enough to shrink your pupils; specific flavors vary with the site, and the very least of these is quick as a lynx, while the best, from the oldest vines, show a confounding depth and polish beneath their taut nervy energy.

#### GMA-048 **2001 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett**

This may be labelled "feinherb." It's always on the dry side (with 23 g.l. residual sugar) but it doesn't always have 89 degrees Oechsle! That's legally Auslese, boy-toys, and it makes this wine taste **dry**; very jazzy nose, spicy and almost brash; it's racy and bites clean, but you'll have to accept it distinctly dry and hyper-energetic.

SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)

#### GMA-049 **2001 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Spätlese**

This is a slate sandwich, minerally, fibrous and a dead-ringer for a Mosel wine, especially in a massive muscular vintage like 2001 when even the Mosels tasted like Nahe wines.

SOS: 1 (between five and sixteen years)

#### GMA-050 **2001 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**

Again quite sleek and pikant (this is different from "piquant" which I use to mean sweet-with-a-charmingly-tart-edge. Pikant is a nip of spiciness or heat). I asked for (and was guaranteed eight g.l. more sweetness to smooth its tart profile—it had 51 g.l. and barely displayed half that—but from spice, penetration and complexity no wish goes unfulfilled.

SOS: 2 (or so I anticipate) (between six and eighteen years)

**GMA-051 2001 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**

(#211) One gets the impression Mathern's synched-in to this site; it gives him his best wines though it usually plays 2nd-fiddle to Hermannshöhle. This comes from 51-year-old vines, and it's a typically wonderful '01; wild lavender, hyacinth and violets on the nose, piquant and girlish palate (albeit a girl who knows judo); well-bound sweetness, great length; this is the wine we dosed with copper-sulfate, so it might well have a reductive nose when you taste it, but be assured below lies a deft and wonderful Nahe Riesling.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

**GMA-052 2001 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**

(#2120) 40-year vines now, and various clones (the significance of which you'll see in the next wine); discreet hyacinth aroma; electric stuff; feels dry all the way to the sweet-salty wash on the finish. Fennel and pears; none too sweet for food. A bargain at its price.

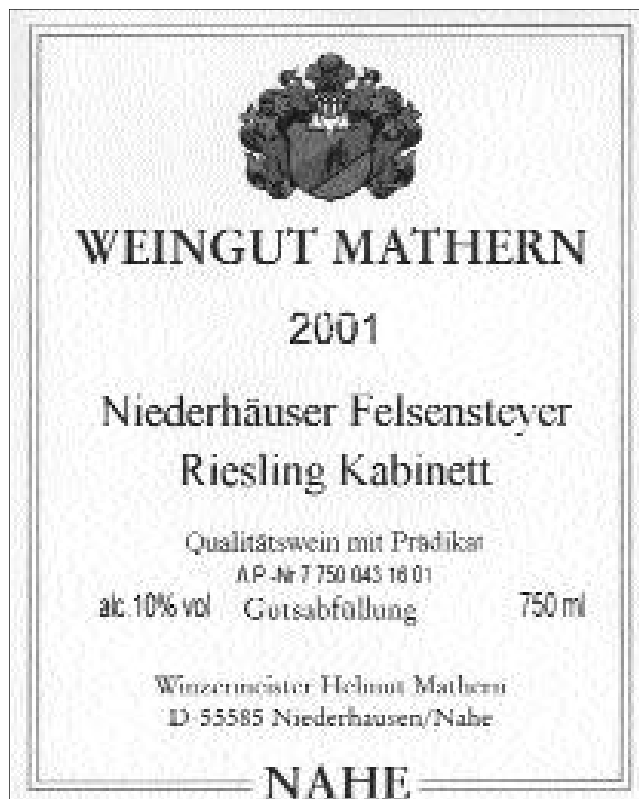
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)

**GMA-053 2001 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**

+

(#2121) This is a single clone, #500 from the Nahe Staatsdomain, and the wine is just fabulous; spice, piney tang, a liqueur of violet and lavender; deft citric-cassis note (as if it contained 10% Scheu, which it doesn't) but what's amazing here is the endless length and complexity. A steal at this price!

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty four years)



Ah, Hubert, he of the purple label . . . you know, his VW van he uses for deliveries is also painted purple, and when he gave me a copy of his very thick (and totally incomprehensible) doctoral dissertation I found to my delighted horror that it also had a purple cover. Why doesn't this man own an airline? Imagine, bright violet bratwursts soaring through the sky.

At first it was this deliciously weird Sherryized Silvaner that brought me to this address. Johann Lafer turned me onto it. Well, I still love that stuff but nobody bought any, so I dropped it from the portfolio. What I get from Gänz are a few reliable and bargain-priced wines, the occasional serious Riesling, and the isolated sticky. Plus the oddest collection of psilocybin-bottles you'll ever see, even if you're actually seeing straight.



### Gänz at a glance:

Value City!

### how the wines taste:

They are clean and forthright above all. I do need to cherry-pick here, but when I find something it is usually incredibly well-priced.

#### GGA-054 2001 Guldentaler Apostelberg Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken

Back to the quality of the fabulous '99, all wild chinook salmon; pure, fine, ethereal Pinot Noir nose; packed to bursting with fruit, charm, but with the '01 thickness and grip; almost a yellow-beet element. Picked at 85 Oechsle: AUSLESE! At this price. (By the by,

(GGA-055) the Portugieser Rosé is markedly smaller and more tutti-frutti, but can be special-ordered by its fans, who won't be disappointed.)

SOS: 0 (between now and a little later but still not too long)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GGA-056 2001 Bretzenheimer Hofgut Scheurebe Kabinett

This is what you call a "tasty little number," though it's only a surmise of Scheu even with a wild weedy top-note that ultimately identifies the finish, but the gestalt is just a juicy fruit-driven wine that's lavish without being candied. Sometimes varietal specificity emerges in the bottle. We'll find out!

SOS: 2 (between immediately and five years)

#### GGA-053 2001 Gänz-Tradition Riesling Spätlese Trocken

Oh so juicy! Thickly saturated fruit and no rough edges; hawthorne and lime-blossom and a chunky block of solid finish; grew impressively in the glass.

SOS: 0 (between one and four years, or, if you forget, again in ten years)

#### GGA-057 2001 Guldentaler Sonnenberg Riesling Spätlese

Wonderful. Just alive and vital, solid and direct; incredible nutmeg fragrance, piquant, juicy, hints of stone, fine curranty length. The 2001s have command. They also have layers but not eensy little tuiles; complex slabs of dough!

SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)

#### GGA-058H 2001 Guldentaler Apostelberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml

+

Slightly radishy nose evolves into a classic tropical fruit and brown-butter; this intensifies the Spätlese – no botrytis – meyer lemon and white nectarine; palate has a whip-crack of steely shrieky acidity, but it doesn't work sharp, but rather salty. This isn't grandiose but it's perfect at its weight (140 Oechsle) and kee-rist, it hits the shelf around \$40. So!

SOS: 4 (between nine and twenty five years)

# kruger-rumpf

## nahe • münster sarmsheim

I have always liked Stefan Rumpf's wines but until recently that feeling seldom penetrated below the level of admiration. They were (and remain) scrupulously true, but they used to be too phenologically gritty in texture for me to get the warm 'n fuzzies. Then Stefan began to consider this question for himself, largely because his colleagues were getting higher "scores" in the wine rags. Hey, whatever it takes! The 1996 series inaugurated an era of greater friendliness to sweetness and botrytis. 1997 continued the trend. With the minerally and dense ninety-eights, Stefan really turned the corner, and 1999 started to show a serene assurance close enough to tickle the feet of mastery. They were and remain among the most exciting wines from 1999. 2000 was a small but correct vintage here, but 2001 is in another league entirely; I loved these wines. It was also at this address

that the whole sweetness-issue around the 2001s became clearest. For Stefan's wines taste as though they have less than half the sweetness they actually have. We were all incredulous. Surely there was a mistake, a decimal point off, a warp in the figures ("Did I say twenty; I meant forty!") but no; in this winery the 2001 vintage slurps sweetness like a parched man slurps cold water.

Rumpf's will never be "smooth" wines—I imagine they're quite low in pH. They also need about two years after bottling to shed a rambunctious nippy-ness. With a little more seductiveness of texture these could almost be erotic, they are so perfumed and bewitching. One also needs to remember how large this domain is; it's the largest in my German portfolio and getting larger. This is partly due to sheer opportunity. When the Nahe Staatsdomain fell upon hard times the first thing they wanted to do was jettison all their sites in the lower Nahe, as these were too far from HQ. Thus, good land, way cheap. Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is about to make RHEINHESSEN WINES. "But it will take some time," he said, "because we had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries. 5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite well with an over-

cropped Riesling - give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

The label is the plainest thing about a Rumpf wine (he threatens to



Stefan & Cornelia Rumpf

change it; none too soon!). Stefan aims to make wines that are tensile but not austere, with dashingly defined mineral and fruit and the utmost aromatic expression. And by the

- Vineyard area: 19.5 hectares
- Annual production: 10,000 cases
- Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer, Pittersberg and Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch and Burgberg
- Soil types: Slate and volcanic soil
- Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 10% each of Silvaner and Weissburgunder, 5% each of Chardonnay, Grauburgunder and Spätburgunder

way, if you find yourself anywhere in the Rhineland you owe it to yourself to stop and eat at Cornelia Rumpf's new restaurant-Weinstube. It's a really pretty room and the food's just completely happy and pure; you're reminded again just how wonderful it is to EAT. You know, I get my share of grande cuisine meals in Europe, yet if I had just one chance to go back and eat just one dish again, I'd come here and have a double-helping of the Feldsalat. This is an incredibly sweet and tender green which we call mâche, or mouse ears or sometimes lamb's lettuce, and which is a specialty over here but which grows wild in the vineyards there. All you have to do is serve it plain and pure, dress it discreetly, and then it's the Platonic perfection of salad. I never enjoyed a plate of food more.

As a vintner, Stefan is as practical as they come. Ask him how he does things and he often answers, "It depends." Two fairly consistent practices are early racking and early bottling, but for the rest he lets the wine do the talking. "You can't improve wine in the cellar, only make it worse," he says. "At least ninety percent of the quality of a wine comes from the raw material you harvest." He sees himself as a craftsman, a worker, whose goal is to make clean, varietally typical wine that expresses its origins in the soil.



### Kruger-Rumpf at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

They're still built on a sturdy frame of acidity and soil-flavors, but they have opened the floodgates of richness, and heavenly choirs sing. The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the KAPELLENBERGS are still apple-y and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you'll see the truth behind the cliché.

- GKF-072 **2001 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
(cask #2) OK, here's some figures; 90 Oechsle (Auslese!), 43 g.l. sweetness with 8.5 g.l. acidity; what I need you to remember is that an Auslese with 4.3% r.s. is going to taste pretty dry, and so it is here. Though this has an impressively complex nose; spice cake and mutsu apples; fine and serene; palate is dense and minerally; this is turning into quite the queen, this site. Glorious "Kabinett."  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (from four to fifteen years)
- GKF-071 **2001 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
(cask #11) Tastes like ripe-vintage Graacher Himmelrich; slatey-nutty, exceptionally dense and mineral, fibrous and almost indecently long. Lots of authority here.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (between four and seventeen years)
- GKF-073 **2001 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** +  
(cask #16) You will not taste the 78 g.l. sweetness; and don't go looking to the acidity for a clue – at 8.8 g.l. it's crisp but not freakishly high. I think sweetness is basically swallowed into a wide maw of pure **stuff**. This wine is extravagant and noble – there's no other word – vanilla, violet, hyacinth, kirsch. A Jungferwein (first tiny crop from young vines, thus exceptional concentration); a racy, high-bred potpourri of every possible berry and every possible mineral; some odd little geo-magnetic spot where jewels burst into color.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)
- GKF-074 **2001 Scheurebe Auslese**  
Remember, this hails from the Grand Cru Dautenpflänzer but the site is only "classified" for Riesling. I probably shouldn't tell you. Don't say you heard it from me; I'll deny under oath that I even **know** you. This started with 76 g.l. sweetness which we increased to 91 and it still tastes barely sweet, but lo, this is the sagey monster; salty, rillettes, boudin blanc. Scheu at its kinkest, and that has to be a good thing.  
SOS: 2 (between now and seven years if it's pure varietality you're after, but the wine will "peak" in nine years and not fade till seventeen)
- GKF-075H **2001 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +  
(#48, the middle of three amazing freezies) 170 Oechsle with 15 g.l. acidity in the finished wine, and this is the french toast and the maple-syrup and the few drops of 40-year old balsamico – it's golden, maizy, warm and melt-y, absurdly long; not the little celestial berry type, but rather the icicle-sharp honey type. Whew!  
SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty five years)

Crusius' style is perfectly aligned with the general profile of 2001; his wines are always dense and vinous and in this vintage where tout le monde's wines were dense and vinous, Peter Crusius' wines were talmudically inscrutable. And almost meaty.

It's a style which seems more and more to harken to a bygone age. Everything shimmers with fruit and minerally clarity now; it's the aesthetic of our time. These wines have nothing to do with grapes except as a metamorphosis of grapes into something fundamentally Other.

I suspect it's why we don't really understand them. They do not explain themselves the way other fine German wines do. Nor are they toe-tappers or melodically hummable. They seem to want to remind us that, once upon a time, real men had real time for real wines like these, wines

which were voluminous but not explicit. The drinker had to do some of the work.

I like that such wines exist, and I have always liked Crusius' wines, terroir nut that I am. I wish these weren't so expensive, 'cause it deters you, I know.

Peter Crusius is such a genial guy, always ready to laugh and kibbitz, that the almost theological complexities of his wines come as a shock. You expect the wines to have emerged from an ascetic or a Jesuit, not a guy you'd want to eat a few schnitzels and tell jokes with. It shows how unexceptional the whole terroir question actually is. Peter Crusius simply lives with a prosaic fact; his vineyards produce remarkable and noble flavors. That's his day-to-day world. It shouldn't be an issue, and it only becomes one when some defensive nimrod challenges it. In Peter's tasting room I can almost forget the existence of people who deny the truth of terroir. I join in the laughter. Then comes that first wine . . .

These wines very politely demand full concentration. I try to concentrate. The wines are like needlepoint on the palate. I am nearly overcome with joy that Riesling can taste like this. That wine can taste like this.

Crusius' wines are intensely vinous, conspicuously against the general fashion for reductive wines with brilliant primary fruit. It's fascinating to compare them to Dönnhoff. Though their vineyard holdings overlap in the Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg, I'd say Dönnhoff's wines lean toward the Saar while Crusius' lean toward the Rheingau; the latter has more iron, more mass, but less chiseled detail. Peter Crusius makes wines of great authority, but they're never solemn or huffy. Vineyard distinctions are crucial, but all the wines are generous and solid; they're full wines.

Peter harvests by hand alone and usually ferments with ambient yeasts in order to preserve terroir. The wines are racked early to keep them fresh. Crusius wants clarity, purity, ripe fruit and elegance. His wines are rarely slick or dashing. What can make them astounding is the nuance that inhabits that solidity. And such nuance derives from . . . you guessed it: the vineyards.

Prominent among these is one of the most extraordinary Riesling sites in the world: the see-it-to-believe-it

- Vineyard area: 13.5 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Top sites: Traiser Bastei and Rotenfels, Schlossböckelheimer Felsensteyer, Norheimer Kirschheck
- Soil types: Volcanic and weathered slate, gravelly loam
- Grape varieties: 70% Riesling, 15% Weissburgunder, 5% each of Müller-Thurgau and Spätburgunder, 5% other varieties

vineyard called Traiser Bastei. Between Norheim and Bad Münster rise the highest cliffs in Europe north of the Alps. From across the valley it looks like a sheer wall of stone, but driving beneath it you see the most gothically sharp towers and chimneys; you might almost be on the moon. The stone is pure porphyry, and the few feet of crumbling detritus at the foot of the spires make up the Bastei. It's steep, mostly terraced, faces due south and is a heat-trap, with the sun beating down from the rocks onto the vines. It's a tiny site, just three owners. "From the standpoint of microclimate, inclination and age of the vines it's surely our best site," says Peter. It is, however, too small to permit flexible harvesting. It can produce one of the singular great Rieslings on earth. "It's often so smoky and spicy that it's barely a characteristic Riesling at all," says Peter. I'd say it's one of white wine's great winged messengers, always scarce, precious, and welcome. The moment you taste it for the first time you know your understanding of white wine has been extended. It's so scarce I don't always have one to show you.

The other great site is the aforementioned Felsenberg; the wines are more elegant and queenly. "We have a larger holding there and can harvest it more selectively," says Peter. Finally there are excellent holdings in the Traiser

Rotenfels ("racy and typical Rieslings," says Peter), and in the lovely Niederhäuser Felsensteyer.

I found it telling that Peter indicates a preference for Wachau Rieslings; his own wines seem to echo the

Wachau's fulminant minerality and amplitude. Crusius had no part of the acidity-fetish of the 1980s and early 1990s. The wines have as much acidity as is good for them, but this house doesn't preen over components.

**Dr. Crusius at a glance:**

Aristocratic, venerable Nahe estate producing searching, complex wines from a remarkable collection of vineyards. Pure terroir expression here - almost the anti-fruit! Wonderful quality the past two vintages.

**how the wines taste:**

Especially winey; they're exotic and mysterious and they rarely taste explicitly of primary fruit. They're weighty for Nahe wines, and full of perfume. They are sometimes reflective, as though they are considering some soil-essence and wanted to share their musings with your palate. They can be caressingly fragrant and evocative. What do they evoke? Taste and see.

**GCR-020 2001 Traiser Rotenfels Riesling Kabinett**

The same soil as Bastei but without the heat-trap microclimate; there's a lot of power and torque here; unusually backward (by their standards) and assertive, muscular. "Nothing wrong with power!" says Peter, characteristically. High spearminty tones; palate's as sappy as a Styrian wine and as adamant as Forster Kirchenstück. Time will tame this mustang, but this will probably remain a bravura double-bass drum solo by Nahe standards. SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

**GCR-021 2001 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Spätlese**

Already shows a lot of vinosity and length; classic lemon blossom aromas along with the uncanny smell of "Kavli" wheat crackers; palate is polytonal and miasmic, firming and showing more specificity on the finish. SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

**GCR-022 2001 Traiser Bastei Riesling Auslese**

Botrytis folds neatly into the Bastei character. As youthfully massive as the others. Cherry and flint, as expected. Exceptionally complex finish. A classic in the making, perhaps. But early days yet. SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty years)

**GCR-023H 2001 Traiser Rotenfels Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

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Scintillating promise here. Fine botrytis, a harmonious 12 g.l. acidity, nothing spiky or radishy here, but rather a glory of pêche-de-vignes, papaya and vanilla bean, and already resolving into a sensational mineral finish. Even now, from a cloudy pre-filtered sample, it sings and sings. SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)



It's four years now since Papa Hans Schneider left us. His son Jacob and grandson (whose name I shamefully forget, and who looks about fourteen years old but who's in fact the heir-apparent) make the wines now. Things are changing. Much more stainless steel in the cellar, in emulation of contemporary idioms. One senses they're feeling their way, but certain of the wines showed compelling promise. It is odd to think I am closer to Papa's age than to the age of this fresh-faced youth. Odder still to see the winery crawl out from under its particular rock. Personally I liked the rustic 19th-century touch of a lot of the old wines. They didn't make wines like that anymore. And now, they don't. But progress lurches on in its blithe heedless rush.

Still, a chap named Gerhard Eichelmann who publishes a corpulent book with his tasting notes on "5,909 wines" (I kid you not) places this winery barely below Dönnhoff, tied with two others

(one of them Crusius) for second place in the Nahe. So what if I'm nonplussed? It's like seeing your friends again after three years and not believing the kids are bigger than when you saw them last.

It is indeed all changed. But Papa Hans still casts a giant shadow. I met him in May 1978 when I made my first-ever foray to the Rhineland. He'd have been in his fifties then, more vigorous but every bit as cussed and opinionated as he was to the end. When I visited just a few weeks before his death, it turned out, he only greeted me briefly before attending to a group of visitors in the next room. Every now and again we'd hear him through the wall, yammering away, worrying one of his many pet themes, and his son and I made eye-contact and exchanged knowing smiles.

This was a man made to talk. And not merely to converse, but to address, to pontificate, to perorate. He seems to have been born unable to speak except in rhetoric. What a character this was.

His may have been the last surviving example of an estate that combined viticulture and agriculture. It seemed to have frozen in time somewhere just after the War. Other growers would speak in pure bewilderment of Schneider's antediluvian techniques: "It's like an open air museum of

how wine was made fifty years ago," one grower said to me. No growers' association meeting was complete without Hans Schneider. "If I looked around and didn't see him, I'd try to leave undetected," one guy told me. "The meetings were dull without him."



A few years ago I began to notice the influence of Schneider's son in the winery. Papa started to retreat into the background, becoming more of an entertaining anachronism. This was a good thing; it modernized the wines and made it simpler to do business with the estate.

- Vineyard area: 10 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle and Rosenheck, Norheimer Dellchen and Kirschheck
- Soil types: Volcanic soils, slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% other varieties

Yet Hans remained, and will long remain, the spiritual compass for this family and their wines.

I wonder if we Americans can really understand such a thing. So many of our basic human contexts—enses of time, of history, of continuity, family and community—lay in tatters. And we ourselves have shredded these things so we could get at other things we imagine we want. Can we actually see someone's wines as representatives of a family legacy? Can we understand how wines become members of the family? It is sometimes obscure even for me, and I want to believe it.

The Europeans themselves rarely talk about it. You know the great saying, "Whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn't a fish." These people live these principles from the inside; they don't even know they are principles, they are tolerantly perplexed at being found exemplary. They'd find it inconceivable that a man could feel his soil existed to serve him. They are stewards of their soils for their brief sojourns on this planet, and they know in their bones that those soils contain dark and ancient truths beyond our "knowing."

So I think of Schneiders, and how they render their wines, those strange songs of the earth who share the house with the family. There's our world, all a-rush and full of clamor. Schneiders have a computer in the house now, and a satellite dish on their roof, and an email address. For all I know they watch more CNN than I do. I'm not into making them adorable peasants. I am just struggling to isolate a slippery little creature, that they seem fundamentally **anchored** and that we do not. And wine is part of what anchors them, or part of what they're

anchored to, or perhaps these are the same thing. And so it seems strange to dissect the wines as though they had no context in human life. It can't be done.

Thankfully the wines are lovely. I'd never have returned otherwise. But they are lovely in just such a way, such a particularly Schneidery way. They shouldn't be served too cold, as it mutes the astonishing perfume that's their *raison d'être*. Also, theirs is a self-contained world; the wines aren't planned, nor are intended to be placed, in gigantic tastings with seventy-five other wines. Schneider is a perfect example of the impossibility of isolating wines

from the people who make them. Yet every drinker doesn't have the chance to go there and sit in the parlor and soak up the vibes, and so the wine must have something of value purely *per se*. Which harks back, again, to those aromas and flavors. If you can somehow drink a few of these at cellar temperature in circumstances permissive of reflection, I guarantee you'll never be as enthralled by any other wines. Even wines I might agree are "better." They are intensely poetic wines, but not necessarily lyric wines. They are elemental in some way; they have no time for frills or flourishes. They just exhale the earth.

### Schneider at a glance:

"Colorful" stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted. They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great wine-y depth in the best of them.

### how the wines taste:

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, more contemporary now. The 2001s, not surprisingly, are delightful. But you'd be well advised not to even try isolating any single consistent denominator from a village with 52 different soil types (!) That said, it's clear these hail from great land. They're amazingly aromatic.

#### GJS-048L 2001 Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter

This year it's 100% Klamm, a Grand Cru. Of all the happy cheap Riesling I sell none – repeat none – hails from such great soil, nor shows such pedigree. It is literally incredible to get such quality at the laughable price asked. This is all peaches and roses, sweet cured-smoky, all dimples and pink cheeks. Failure to purchase this wine shall be punished with fine, imprisonment or both.

SOS: 2 (between two and nine years)

#### GJS-049 2001 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Kabinett

Cherries! Tangy and pretty. More schmalz than Dönnhoff's. I asked for it a little drier. Wait'll you get a whiff of this beauty.

SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)

#### GJS-047 2001 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

Pure unadulterated expression of the site, and softly dry, with no edges; juicy and complex, rich and generous. Taste the sheer possibilities of Riesling.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to five years)

#### GJS-050 2001 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Spätlese

Steepest site on the Nahe, a Grand Cru, porphyry, loam and rotliegend. Yet this smells for all the world like Hermannshöhle, and hails in fact from the parcel nearest the Hermannshöhle. Good Auslese at 94 Oechsle; all kinds of yin-yang here, classic Nahe complexity, with the resonance and breed of a Crusius wine. Three-dimensional. Here's why we love riesling. Best of show from 2001 in this house.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

#### GJS-051 2001 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese

100% stainless steel. As always, slow to unfurl, but a finish of theological intricacy. This is as firm and bright a wine as Schneider has ever made. A haunting, spectral wash of blossom on the finish. Enticing promise here.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

#### GJS-052 2001 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Auslese

At the moment this is the best of three Auslesen, and it's a real gusher in the old style, with stylish fruit and a lissome gait.

SOS: 3 (between six and eighteen years)

# rheinhessen wines



Oh lament the poor Rheinhessen; if there ever were a place with an image problem, this is the one. I must say all my pity for the underdog is roused by this region. It is absolutely perfect for aimless meandering. Its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

Notwithstanding my romantic fantasies, all is far from well here. Nobody can make a living selling simple bulk wine any more, and the economic backbone for the region has been shattered. The emergence of the new generation mitigates here as elsewhere, (and the Keller estate is drawing positive attention to the area with its sexy wines) but you need a really unassailable idealism to

worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flattish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may just be possible that, after all, great wines aren't written into most of this land, no matter how diligently a vintner tries to extract them. And it may be that

exposed; the growers know the value of their wines and the market's willing to pay it. Rheinhessen is still a buyer's market, happy for us in the short term, if the growers can survive. Second, to seek out the few die-hards and bring them (and their marvelous wines) to your attention. My world would be a far less pleasant place but for Mr. Wittmann's Albalongas. In fact Wittmann alone stands as a kind of beacon of hope; he's getting prices he deserves, tilling his land uncompromisingly, willing to experiment, able and willing to restrict yields, making a go of it and making exciting wines besides. In common with all my Rheinhessen vintners, he is determined to make **better** wine than the region should rightfully give.

**Rheinhessen is still a buyer's market,  
happy for us in the short term, if the  
growers can survive.**

the production of merely (if wholly and soul-satisfyingly) GOOD wine just isn't good enough. Just speculating. I do know that prices remain perilously low throughout the Rheinhessen, even in the isolated peak-areas of Nierstein, Oppenheim, Nackenheim and Bingen (who tried and failed to establish a separate identity for themselves). Indeed, the relative lack of really first-class estates in a place with as much good land as Nierstein bears sad witness to the disincentives for idealists to flourish here.

What, then, is the Rheinhessen's purpose for us? There are several. First, to give us excellent wine where we can find it and at the most favorable prices we can pay anywhere in Germany. Even the Pfalz has become too



# take me to your liter

This is a schizy segment of my portfolio. Some of you report great success with this size. Others report it's impossible to sell. These, in my opinion, are the arguments in favor of the Liter:



- It doesn't sit around in the fridge as long as a magnum, thereby diminishing the chance of spoilage.
- It's the perfect size bottle for three or four people on a casual occasion. It contains eight glasses of wine.
- It's the perfect size for the cook who wants or needs a cup or so to cook with. There's the equivalent of a full bottle left over for drinking with the meal!
- It nearly always contains a dry, light wine that's low in alcohol and very high on pure refreshment value. It's nearly always estate-bottled.

It seems to me the only way to sell this size is to floor-stack it. If it stands on the shelf alongside 750s, it won't stand out enough as a larger package. If it's floor-stacked, you can always put a sign behind it screaming **FULL LITER!** Equivalent to just 56¢ per a 750!!!!

But some of you have tried all these bright ideas and you tell me the wines still don't sell. I have one final bright idea. FORGET THEY'RE LITERS. Don't even tell anybody it's a bigger bottle. It's just a bottle of wine for ten bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 25% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the Super Deal aisle at your local supermarket. Flex shampoo, 25% more **free**. Man we love that word **free**. Free wine!

I think I offer the very best jug-wine quality you can find anywhere on the market today. I know of no other merchant offering such a variety of cheap, estate-bottled wine in large bottles. I say this in all modesty, or at least in as much modesty as I can muster! They'll do the job at least as well as—I think better than—anything else in the category. Give them a try if you haven't yet. Here they are, the PICK OF THE LITERS:

- GJS-048L 2001 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett
- GST-088L 2001 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett
- GMZ-45 1999 Weingut Merz Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken
- GMZ-046L 2000 Weingut Merz Ockenheimer Riesling Kabinett Trocken
- GGY-037L 2001 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken
- GGY-038L 2001 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Kapellenberg Riesling Halbtrocken
- GDR-104L 2001 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst
- GDR-095L 2001 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett
- GMS-074L 2001 Herbert Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken
- GTM-061L 2001 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken
- GTM-062L 2001 Theo Minges Riesling
- GOD-40L 2000 Claus Odernheimer "Rheingau Riesling"

I always seem to be telling Walter Strub not to worry. I tasted his 2001s fairly early on (in fact they were the first great range I tasted on this trip) but even before we started Walter was apologizing. "I fined them the last few days, and this morning when I drew the samples I was so upset, they had no aroma, please understand . . ." No worries, friend; we've been doing this, how many years now?

We made a brisk run through them all, noting what was most interesting and jotting down a few ideas for blends and dosage levels. Just Walter, Margit (his shameless Eiswein-sloshing wife), Corrie and me. Then we started working the blends. This is important, because I sell a lot of these wines, and a decision I make in 30 seconds on a March afternoon will repercuss for twelve months

and a lot of customers. So we were workmanlike and for us, rather quiet.

When it was done we had eight superb wines (and left another three or four beauties in the wings, in case these sell out) plus the greatest dessert wine Walter has made, and I looked it over and looked at my friend. He shrugged. "That's my vintage."

Hmmm. Walter, I think these are the finest wines you've made. Both individually, but even more important as a collection. I think it's your best vintage, better than '96. You get better each year. Not only that, these are among the very best wines in my entire portfolio. Bravo; well done.

I had to leave soon thereafter, to drive to the airport so I'd be near my wife's early-arriving flight the next morning. Walter and I stood by my car. "Well, say hello to Karen for us . . . and thank you." For what? "Oh, I feel much better now than I did when I drew those samples this morning!"

I must say I am delightedly mystified by all this. Walter has an excellent palate. He ought to know how good his own wines are. He even said he was satisfied with them when we first discussed the vintage months ago. He



Walter Strub

really doesn't need me to validate or corroborate him. But I don't think it's really about the wines. It's about an innate modesty my friend feels, and it's part of the reason he's one of the best men I have ever known. What's strictly germane to us, dear reader, is the wine, I know that. Call this an outpouring of gratitude and affection, but I need to tell you; this man is a sweetheart.

- Vineyard area: 18.2 hectares
- Annual production: 8,400 cases
- Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal
- Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam and chalk
- Grape varieties: 68% Riesling, 15% of each Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner, 2% other varieties including Grüner Veltliner!

I hope later that night while I counted the hours till Karen would land, Walter and Margit were awake in their quiet house and he said "I'm so relieved", and she answered "I knew the wines would be great". On the wall above my desk I have a photograph of an old woman binding and pruning. She's wearing some sort of macadam, as it's cold outside. Her pocket is bulging with all the clippings she's produced. Her hand grasps the stalk with vigor and insight, as if it had eyes of its own and could see inside the vine. One little stalk is rakishly dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her fine old eyes have seen more than we can imagine; her face is furrowed with the winds of centuries. I keep her there where I can see her because I need to see the basis for this work I do. It's all well and good for me to compliment my friend on his "achievement," but I'll bet it feels less like an "achievement" to him than a decathlon which he only finished panting and gasping.

Walter asked me once if I thought he was doing the right thing with his whole-cluster pressing. I said yes, I did, but if he had doubts he could maybe experiment with one wine next time, and see how it turned out. As it turned out, whole-cluster pressing was indispensable in the dubious 2000 vintage, if you wanted to remove any taint of uncleanness. Walter's is a restless and questing nature. He wants to see how everything would turn out. He's a pil-



grim in the cellar. “The worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision,” he says, though certain patterns become evident over time. “I am always the first to start picking and the last to finish.” He says. Walter’s wine is rarely the ripest in Nierstein, and I think it’s because he wants to pick clean fruit above all, and will let go of a few degrees Oechsle if the resulting wine will have the clarity and elegance he seeks. He often rushes to gather his Riesling just when it’s “a point,” sometimes leaving his Silvaner hanging. The Riesling always has priority, and it must be harvested in the best possible condition.

He fertilizes organically, and doesn’t get a ton of fruit —just 50 hectoliters per hectare on average over the past five years. His cellar is almost all stainless steel now. With whole-cluster pressing you sacrifice a bit of body, but Niersteiners have all the body they need in ripe years. You obtain remarkable filigree and polish in such wines, and you retain high acidity. I have the sense that Walter is finally starting to feel his wines express his dreams for them. His Riesling usually ferments from its own yeasts. Lower-acid types are often started with yeast cultures for slower, colder fermentations, so they don’t lose the little acid they have. After fermentation, Walter likes to keep his Riesling on the gross lees for several weeks to give it stuffing and nuance, but that’s only possible in clean vintages.

But none of this is quite as systematic as I make it sound. In effect, our hero blunders through with good instincts and good will. He has a strong sense of what Nierstein is. He’s naturally enamored of its special soil, the sedimentary rust-colored sandstone they call Rotliegend. Dig down a way and you’ll come to slate, which prevents the wines from bulking up too much in Nierstein’s warm microclimate. In fact Walter has little trays of each of his various soils in the tasting room, in case you want to see what you’re drinking and don’t have time for a drive among the vines. Rotliegend gives Riesling a smoky sweetness, like something that’s been cured over a sweet wood. It’s a striking example of a soil signature; anywhere it occurs, in any concentration or in any microclimate, it always announces itself in the wine with its unique aroma and flavor. Fruit usually runs to peach. Nierstein is its *sine qua non*, though, and a Nierstein vintner has this paradigm to serve.

“You can’t FORM a wine by working with must or mash, or even with the wine itself. It is unalterably formed

in the vineyard,” says Walter. He won’t identify a “best” site (though he has his secret favorites), pointing out quite reasonably that “some years favor the ORBEL if it’s damp, as this site is porous; other years the HIPPIG is better, as it’s a damper and a cooler site.” What neither of us can fathom is the perennially excellent wine given by the PATERBERG. “It’s not a noble soil,” Walter says, shrugging. This is more than an idle question to a German vintner, who sees soil as the DNA of his wine. He had a great success in another replanting project: a parcel of Silvaner was hacked out of the BRÜCKCHEN to replant with Riesling, but it was a rare part of Brückchen, on a chalky soil rather than the usual clay. The wines have been wonderful.

After a recent trip to Austria, where I set Strubs up with a few of my chums, Walter came back buzzing about Grüner Veltliner, which he claims “was traditional in Rheinhessen in the 19th century” before being superseded by the plebian Silvaner. The happy upshot of all this is we now have Strub GrüVe to look forward to. Hats off to the man who’ll try anything!

Walter Strub continues to be modest and questing, never quite according his wines the same status as the Mosel and Nahe wines he so dearly loves, and yet each year he gets closer and closer to attaining their brilliance and radiance. I’ll go out on a limb now, but I think some of the credit for this has to go to Walter’s wife Margit. I can see her reading this for the first time and saying, “What is he talking about now?!” But I see something in her steady genial temperament, her superb competence (she runs the shipping operation by which about half of my German wines get to me), her mischievous sense of humor, and the particular friendly bond she fashions with her husband, and I know what a marriage like that can mean in the work that each of them does. Walter couldn’t make the wines he makes if not for Margit, and sitting at their table watching the way they crack each other up is one of the sweeter joys of my life.

Indeed, if it sounds as though all we do is sit and sigh dreamily at one another then I’ve given a false impression; most of what we do is howl with laughter. Notwithstanding occasional lapses into seriousness (for Walter is a born philosopher) I often leave an evening with Strubs barely able to breathe, I’ve been laughing so hard. In two years we will have known each other for twenty five years, Walter and me. What a blessing.

#### Strub at a glance:

Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to “read” and understand. A truly stunning group of 2001s!

#### how the wines taste:

They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. We were oversold on Dönnhoff one year, so I half-jokingly suggested we slap some Dönnhoff labels on STRUB wine; the stylistic resemblance is plausibly close. Walter’s recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they’re ripe and lush. They’re very often reductive and spritzzy, complex and long.

- GST-088L **2001 Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**  
 1/3rd each Paterberg Spätlese with another third of two different Brückchen Spätlesen and you should be deeply ashamed to get excellent Riesling Spätlese labelled as Kabinett and sold at Liter-wine prices. At least I am. The wine has 22 g.l. residual-unmentionable, and the Paterberg aroma really blazes through, but the thick fruit of Brückchen (especially tank #37, which was good Spätlese) is chalky, stony and ideal for the ripe body of this wonderful wine. It follows the chalky profile of earlier vintages but with the chunky salivate-o-rama fruit of 2001.  
 SOS: 0 (between three and twelve years)
- GST-091 **2001 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett** +  
 GST-091H **2001 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**  
 Borealis-bright, chalky, like really concentrated Blanc de Blancs; Japanese green tea, limey (almost a Rieslaner note); thick dense and vigorous (etc. etc.!) Chalk and apple and tarragon. SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)
- GST-090 **2001 Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Exceedingly refined nose, the apex of the red-soil fragrance; maple, cinammon, white nectarine; racy and spicy and vigorous, long, absurd depth for a Kabinett. Trust me, you're gonna be shaking your head and double-taking at the label. Yup, Kabinett all right. SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)
- GST-089 **2001 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Man these are deep and yummy this year, like some wacko chocolate that tastes like minerals. Thick, essentially dry but juicy as a veal chop, all peachy and like ham juice soaked into dark bread; every cell on the palate hums and vibrates to this. Batteries included! SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)
- GST-092 **2001 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This is basically endless, a big muscular baby but finely detailed and graceful; leather and caramel, almost like old Comté; salty, wild, deep fruit.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)
- GST-86 **2000 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 The hors classe among the excellent 2000s, and great to still have it available. TOTALLY zingy and racy and quite similar to the 1998; it has splendid tart-berry and grassy tang, juniper-smoky. This is racy to within an inch of its life, and these wines are on your palate longer than you can (almost!) bear to experience them.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)
- GST-093 **2001 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 GST-093H **2001 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
 A shimmering wintergreen tarragon lemon-grass brilliance on the nose; the palate is as graceful as the skater but as piercing as the skate; ravishing interplay of sweets, salts and menthol; all the great thick body of the '01s; classic wine of a classic year.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)
- GST-094 **2001 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese \*\*\*** +  
 Like the '98, this is a non-botrytis Auslese, with even more caramelly middle and more roasty, less grapey flavors; great length even by '01 standards; will overtake its sibling in the fullness of time. A noble sweetness and rampant acidity.  
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty five years)
- GST-095H **2001 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml** ++  
 Picked in part by an incredulous Margit, who, beginning to freeze after only just starting, asked "How many more rows to we have to pick?" along with a miserable 14-year old who was decidedly not happy to be roused from a warm bed at 4 A.M. Poor Sebastian. He even looked after the wine when Walter and Margit were in the States in January. This is stunningly great Eiswein, 184 Oechsle, and I swear to you the finish tastes like Cap'n Crunch! A thrall of tropical fruit, an elixir of insanely piquant lavender honey. The greatest sweet wine ever from Rheinstrasse 42; take a bow Wally!  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)

# brüder dr. becker

## rheinhessen • ludwigshöhe

Just their luck; one of the two certified-organic vintners I represent from Germany happens to live in a place with a damp microclimate. Humidity = lots of opportunity for mildews 'n fungi, and no recourse to chemical sprays. Therefore Brüder Dr. Becker hasn't really gotten the market traction the wines deserve.

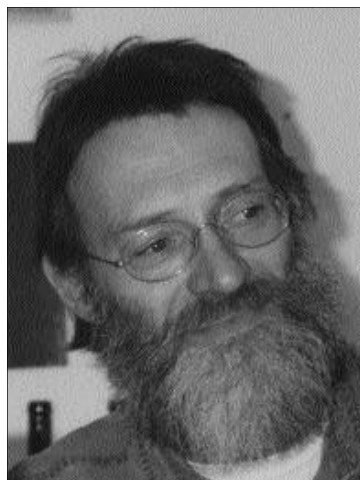
I used to think it was the wines, their resolutely unglamorous style. But I know you're smarter than that. No, it's the swings between vintages, especially recently, which have retarded the kind of Brand magnetism that would normally attend to such excellent wines.

2001 could well change that—at least temporarily—because this has to be the best vintage ever at this winery. Just don't go looking for glamor-Auslesen; the genius of this vintage lies in the enthrallingly

rich dense Kabinetts and Spätlesen.

"It was a year, how should I say this . . . not without problems," said Hans Müller, Lotte Pfeffer's common-law hubby. Lotte adds: "We had to do a lot of tweaking in the vineyards during September and October, and to harvest quite selectively." I made this visit early on, while still basking in the delusion 2001 was a benevolent and uncomplicated vintage, which it may well have been except for those who do things the hard way.

There's a picture I just love. The book is called *Winzerportraits*, and it's a rather "deluxe" collection of vintner profiles published in a magazine called *Feinschmecker*, which means gourmet, except that the Germans also have use of the word "gourmet" and OH, DON'T ASK ME TO EXPLAIN! Anyway, it's the coffee-table book defined, this thing, and most of the photographs are poses of renowned vintners in their Sunday best, the weight of all their forbears resting lightly but solemnly on their noble shoulders, as they sit on the sofa that Charlegmagne spat up on as an infant; you get the picture. Poor Helmut Dönnhoff, who ended up on the



Hans Müller

cover, told me that it took them an entire day to get the shot. So anyway, you're flipping pages and looking at people whose haircuts cost more than your car and suddenly there's Lotte Pfeffer on her tractor, shading her eyes, happily and schmutzily at work in the vineyards. That's the scoop on Brüder Dr. Becker!

Lotte Pfeffer is a hearty, radiant woman with absolutely no

- Vineyard area: 10.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,900 cases
- Top sites: Dienheimer Tafelstein, Ludwigshöher Teufelskopf
- Soil types: Loess, loam
- Grape varieties: 38% Riesling, 18% each of Silvaner and Scheurebe, 10% Spätburgunder, 7% Grau- and Weissburgunder, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 3% other varieties

Mainzer Weinbörse.

Lotte took control of the estate from her father. To hear him describe it, the transfer was accompanied by much fervent prayer to preserve the estate from cosmic nemesis. Lotte had begun a strictly organic regimen and was determined to see it through. Well, the deity cut them some slack: not only are the vineyards in generally good shape, but the wines are better than ever. Most of you know the attributes of organic viticulture by now; soils are fertilized with grasses and clovers. Pests are eradicated (one hopes) by importing their natural predators. Once the wine is in the cellar it's given time to make itself. "We let time see to clarification and fining," says Lotte. "We don't like to agitate the wine." Scheurebe is aged in tank to preserve its primary grape aromas, but Riesling spends time in old cask to round-out and complexify its bouquet, after four weeks on its primary lees. It is rarely bottled before May of the following year.

If "organic" is a sales aid, sure I'll take it, but the wines have to convince before the story convinces. Lotte isn't willing to insist that organic wines are better wines; she merely feels a responsibility to her little slice of earth, to leave it better than she found it. We actually had a lengthy chinwag about this issue. At what point, I wondered, did the needs of the wine precede the application of the organic treatment? Hans said: "It's the wrong way to ask the question. If you're going to do it you can't only do it when it's convenient. It's not a 'treatment' as such, you see. It's a philosophy."

### Brüder Dr. Becker at a glance:

Organic winery through and through, not just “no herbicides, pesticides or chemical fertilizers.” Makers of the best Scheurebe in the Rheinhessen. A stony-minerally style of wine. Exceptionally food-friendly wines. Probably the best vintage in modern history in 2001.

### how the wines taste:

They are as slim and rarefied as a Giacometti statue, and just as keenly purposive and expressive. They start with stone and add citrusy fruit if it's Riesling and cassis-like herbal fruit if it's Scheurebe. They are superbly stylish, in the way that really good clothes always look simple and effortless. They're taut, snappy wines with sinew and fabric, line-drive hitters rather than sluggers. They don't make waves in tastings; they just taste good. You get to the end of the bottle much too soon. They cry out for food. They are the way Riesling is SUPPOSED to taste when it's grown at home where it belongs. The fruit-bomb, mawkish Rieslings of most of the New World compare to these as a made-for-TV movie compares to a great novel. The dry words on the plain white page only look boring—until you start to read them . . .

#### GBK-32 2000 Dienheimer Falkenberg Riesling Kabinett

This is one of the few 2000s to show less botrytis now than when it first was bottled. Even with the sensational 2001s available I wanted to relist this lovely wine, A) because it's very attractively priced, and B) because it represents a considerable achievement in a very hard vintage. Aromas of freesia, stone, hyacinth, woodruff, currant; palate is lively, not so much pointed as a dispersal of mineral and herb in rivulets of flavor rather than a central current. Bright, shimmery finish.

SOS: 1 (now to two years)

#### GBK-036 2001 Dienheimer Tafelstein Riesling Kabinett

Tafelstein is the Grand Cru of the commune, but there's all kinds of dithering around the issue within the Rheinhessen VDP, the (silly) upshot of which is we don't know whether the site-name will be permitted on the label unless the wine is dry (I said it was silly), which this wine isn't. But rest assured “GBK-036” is exactly the wine you'll receive whatever is or is not regally permitted to adorn the label. You should want this wine. From vines older than 30 years, it has a highly stylish riesling fragrance, laurel, bay-leaf, fennel frond, soursop; palate is focused, generous, with a pretty stony backdrop, not so much mineral as jewel; clean lime-blossom finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)

#### GBK-037 2001 Dienheimer Kreuz Riesling Spätlese

Unusually, this is the famous Pfalz clone 90, the one that gives the wild-ass citric notes to many Pfalz Rieslings. Here's it's more circumspect; the wine is a touch less chiseled than the Kabinett but has more juice and gras; almost flowery; overall more bakey, more time in the kiln, even a touch of botrytis. Good grip and a salty, solid finish.

SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

#### GBK-038 2001 Dienheimer Tafelstein Scheurebe Kabinett

May or may not say “Tafelstein” (see above), but man does it say Scheurebe! It's the very prototype of Becker Scheu, the best in its region, and a compelling argument for Scheu's greatness. Contained yet riotous, with extroverted aromas of redcurrant, lemon-grass and Japanese green tea (Matja or Gyokoru). It's a downright steal and no restaurant anywhere near the “fusion” zone can afford not to be pouring this.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between immediately and four years)

#### GBK-039 2001 Dienheimer Tafelstein Scheurebe Spätlese

Again the name “Tafelstein” is pending resolution but the wine is the best Scheu I've tasted from here. Take the Kabinett and add 50% more torque, more juice and pulp – though less overtly mineral – but still classy, stylish and for Scheu comme il faut; has that semi-solid density of old (30+) vines.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between one and five years)

+

# günter wittmann

## rheinhessen • westhofen

The schedule got kind of screwy this year, and Wittmann turned out to be the very last visit we made, late in the afternoon of an otherwise free day. I was already thinking ahead to flying home – to being home – and was essentially already checked-out; this would be a rote tasting wherein I'd fall back on my "professional" acumen and coolly select the wines I wanted. And then Phillip Wittmann calmly blew my mind.

He first ran us through his dry range. After the fourth or fifth wine he disappeared to fetch a few more bottles, and Kevin and I stared at each other in pure disbelief. "What's going on here??" Every wine was excellent, every wine worked, nothing was mean or spiky or shrill or sour or any of the oogies that typically afflict German dry wines.

Please understand, I am put under pressure to be less splenetic about Trocken wines, and to include more of them in this offering. One close friend among the growers outright told me "When we come to America to show our wines it's disconcerting not to have 'every flower in the bouquet' to show customers. We think you should at least give the dry wines a fair shake." Look, Ace, it ain't my fault the Germans are slavishly devoted to wines so bitter that a moderately intelligent goat would spit them out. By rejecting them, I AM giving them a fair shake. But these Wittmanns excited me to my very core: I wanted to take them around to everyone who castigated me and say "See? This is how you do it. Start making dry wines like these and I'll select them!"

So Phillip returned to the room and I couldn't help myself. I declaimed: "Young'un, these dry wines are float-in' my boat." He looked at me quizzically. "We like them." Ah. Now he smiled. "What do you know that the others don't know?" I demanded. Now he laughed. We were all happy. He shook my hand, and I bought him a car.

Although Wittmann's is a large estate (and getting larger) they've had two teensy crops in a row, and there

- Vineyard area: 20 hectares
- Annual production: 12,500 cases
- Top sites: Westhofener Morstein, Steingrube and Aulerde
- Soil types: Clay with chalky loam, weathered limestone and loess
- Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 16% Müller-Thurgau, 10% each of Silvaner and Weissburgunder, 8% Huxelrebe, 6% Früh- and Spätburgunder, 6% Chardonnay, 9% other varieties including Scheurebe



isn't much wine for These United States. Phillip wants to sell more here, and it won't be long before we see his ruggedly handsome face on tour. Next year, if nature cooperates. I look forward to that day, because I've never been able to drive this vehicle out of third gear, and Wittmann is beyond any doubt one of the very best wineries in Germany, a true sleeper in our market.

That's gonna change.

Wittmann is über-trendy in Germany at the moment. Long time coming. I've been kvelling about the wines for at least a decade, and the imperial overlords of the German wine-writing pantheon have seen the light. That's good for my ego but bad for my portfolio, since I have to scrape and claw for even the pittance of wine I got this year. But, Phillip assures me this will change.

2001 was even smaller in size than 2000; botrytis again, which mandated incredibly relentless selection. But the resulting wines have the capaciousness firmness and structural coherence of the best 2001s, along with Wittmann's own particular juicy generosity and cunningly chiseled fruit.

It is also a pleasure to see the generations working so well together. Wittmann père handles the vineyards, fils

Phillip holds the reins in the cellar while mère does sales and marketing, though as a family enterprise, everyone does a bit of everything. Eventually all three are in the tasting room with you, and you become aware you are sitting with a family and the thing is working.

I've worked exclusively with family wineries from the beginning; we all do, those of us who import wine from the old world. I'm not unique. For most of those years I took it for granted. Then something happened, I don't know what. Maybe it was seeing so many wineries simply fold, because the whippersnappers elected to push paper and earn big-Euro. I began wondering why some were inspired to continue and others not. What inspired them?

Or maybe it was just getting older. In my thirties and early forties I was serenely confident I'd still have my pick among almost limitless choices. Here in my late forties, I suddenly realize I have made my choices, and having made them I grow more aware of how happy they make me. I am setting up house in the things I have chosen. One of them is to work with small family wineries. Now I can consider the meaning of this with all the deliberation I wish; I have plenty of time. I don't have to keep alert for the next choices to whiz by. I become attuned to the patience of the earth. And it suddenly strikes me as beautiful, nearly unbearably

beautiful, to see kin working together, so that work and love and family are joined, patiently working the patient earth, and making a thing of beauty.

Thus I sat together with the Wittmann family and drank their wines.

Wittmann belongs to an association of organic farmers. He wanted, he said, to "give my son a healthy soil for his inheritance. We don't make wines organically because they're easier to sell, but because we think it makes better wine." He's a student of soil also, and gives fascinating explanation of the geological factors responsible for Westhofen's various soils. He takes for granted that soil components give specific flavors to wine—nothing noteworthy about that, but I feel the need to hammer the point since so many people seem to think it's specious romance. Wittmann's cellar is as gentle as they come. He loves sleek, racy, filigree wines, but seldom gets them from his soils. Transport him to, say Rauenthal in the Rheingau, (I wish I could!) and he'd immediately be making better wine than 99% of all Rheingau growers.

The wines are a touch on the pricey side, but still less than they're worth. And organic viticulture costs the vintner more than conventional viticulture—a premium worth paying.

#### Wittmann at a glance:

Another entirely organic winery. Steadily creeping upward in quality each year (and the newest member of the VDP) and now one of the elite agencies in this portfolio. Grail-keeper of the great ALBALOGA grape. Remarkably outstanding 2001s!

#### how the wines taste:

Wittmann's wines are solid and positive. They radiate good health and well-being. They are firm but not heavy, like a big-boned man with almost no body fat. Their large stature doesn't prevent them being transparent and filigree. In the little mental tally I keep of my growers, Wittmann has edged his way to the top.

#### GGW-068 2001 Wittmann Scheurebe Trocken

This wine was a mind-warp, and it puts many Loire Sauvignons to shame; cassis and sage like crazy, wickedly spicy and lavishly juicy. It's six-monkeys-on-a-trapeze-o-FUN. But hurry; there isn't much. VERY LIMITED.

SOS: 0 (between immediately and before the start of Spring-training '03)

#### GGW-069 2001 Wittmann Riesling Trocken

The basic estate-riesling is actually from grapes bought from the Kirchenstück vineyard in Worms, alongside the "original" Liebfrauenmilch site from which so much mischief ensued. Look, this wine is just sock-it-down tasty. Perfectly balanced. If you got a carafe of this in a casual restaurant, you'd take one sip and be a happy human.

SOS: 0 (between immediately and two years)

#### GGW-070 2001 Aulerde Riesling (Trocken)

This will be labeled according to the Grand Cru system (look, my computer sputters with disgust if I ask it to type "Grosses Gewächs") so the label will simply show the vineyard; the assumption is the wine is dry. Yeah it's actively wrong-headed, but this wine at least is convincing; what dry Rieslings these are! I liked everything and selected for a small sensible assortment. This one's all mineral and spice – if it were Alsatian it would be Kientzler or even Friedrich Emile – yet it has **weight**, like leather, like granite. The soil is clay, marl and limestone, and the wine's a knockout.

SOS: 0 (between now and two years; again from twelve to seventeen)

- GGW-071 **2001 Kirschspiel Riesling (Trocken)**  
Limestone all the way now. Thicker, denser, more stony power. In Alsace it'd be Faller's Schlossberg. Lavishly mineral and fennely, with a long and fascinating finish.  
SOS: 0 (between now and two years; again from twelve to eighteen)
- GGW-072 **2001 Westhofener Auelerde Riesling Spätlese** +  
Sensational. All malt and papaya on the leaping, explosive nose. 100 degrees Oechsle; ringent, endless, tropically lavish; has stature and grip, extravagant fruit; German Rieslings don't get much better than this.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)
- GGW-073 **2001 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Spätlese** ++  
Almost incredible nose; cherry, malt, maple, meat; 2001! Depth, brilliance, concentration, contrapuntal and, by the way, delicious. It has precise thrust, not merely brute power. We have exactly 70 cases, so snooze ya lose. Very great Riesling.  
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty four years)
- GWS-074 **2001 Wittmann Huxelrebe Auslese**  
This is a bargain if you can overcome your squeamishness over the unfamiliar variety, though Darting fans have been known to drink Huxel without growing hair on their palms. I tasted it thinking "even if it's good I'll never select it" but I was seduced, and people in the throes of seduction are never sensible. Dammit, the wine is actually filigree. How could I leave such a beauty behind? Wet hay, talc, white raisin, pears and cloves. C'mon, times are improving, the recession's over, baseball's being played, burkas are coming off; take a chance. What you don't sell you'll be v-e-r-y happy to drink.  
SOS: 3 (between now and five years)
- GGW-075H **2001 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**  
Very rich; at this point less transparent than the Spätlese, but a grandiose thumping thing, suave and malty; a lot of wine in this wine; large block-chords of flavor.  
SOS: 3 (between nine and thirty years)
- GGW-076H **2001 Albalonga TBA, 12/375ml**  
There are people who think my affection for this variety borders on the perverse. I'd rather call it "kinky!" Crossed between Rieslaner (one of God's great grapes) and Silvaner, the Albalonga never fails to make compelling wine and at times ventures welltoward the sublime. Various Wittmann stickies over the years have been celestial, and this might well be the best of them since the insane '94. But it was still fermenting when I saw it, so purple prose deferred. It was kind of like TBA-baby food.  
SOS: ? (historically, between twenty and forty five years)
- GGW-24H **1992 Westhofener Steingrube Albalonga TBA, 12/375ml**  
Call it a re-release, but here's a chance to see one of these beauties ten years on at a most reasonable price. It's an exploding candy-cane of lysergic intensity; starting to delineate, even shows some mineral. Still a baby, but no longer an infant. So c'mon sommelieres, change that diaper and **rock**.  
SOS: 4 (between twenty and forty-five years)
- GGW-59H **1999 Westhofener Morstein Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**  
175 Oechsle with 10 grams per liter acidity. I liked this better than either of the two Beerenausleses, though to be fair they've just been filtered, but I know martially crude botrytis when I taste it, filter or no filter. This monster here is an invading army of power, nothing like the ethereal 1997 but rather a monumental flourish of ultra-seductive fruit.  
SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)

I have always liked this text. Not to appear immodest, but it's been one of the few times I felt I'd succeeded in conveying a slippery idea. Thus I was distressed when Lyselotte Merz cast me a dubious look. "We thought perhaps what you wrote was a little bit sad," she said. "When you wrote that you worried about us." Well I worry about every vintner who does all or most of the work alone and who has no visible heirs who might continue the winery. That said, my friends the Merzes are still plenty charged and show no signs of letting up.

Visits to Merz are special because they are special. Theirs is an oasis of sweetness in our world, and they are people for whom you can feel the deepest affection. This is a soulful domain, producing a kind of wine that only they could produce, informed by the two of them and the way they

feel about living a good life.

Merzes are true wine lovers, not snobs, not what I would call wine fuss-budgets, but people who feel affection for wine, and for whom daily life would be impoverished if not unthinkable without it. That affection shows in the way their own wines are handled, which is to say not handled.

Wines make their own decisions here; sugar is neither added nor removed. Whatever's left after fermentation is what goes into the bottle. There's also a distinct house-style, which you'll have noticed if you've tasted the wines.

They taste as though they're barrel-fermented, with the mealiness and seamless texture of such wines. Yet they're not. Certain wines are kept in old oak, naturally, but no flavor is imparted by such old wood anymore. The Liter Silvaner, which has the same flavor, has never seen a splinter of oak. Nor is soil the answer, since as Karl Merz points out, "My neighbors have vines alongside mine but their wines don't taste the same." For years, I wondered at this vexing mystery.

Then one year I learned the answer. Merzes ferment in an old-fashioned way, one you seldom see anymore. They have pressurized fermentation tanks, and the wines ferment under a blanket of carbon dioxide. The 1992 harvest was generous and all the grapes seemed to ripen at the same time, so Karl ran out of space in his fermenters and had to put one lot of Riesling in an ordinary tank. In the cellar I picked it out immediately as missing the house note. Then I heard the reason, and the light bulb went on over my head! So now I know the cause-effect equation, but I still don't know how it all happens, what fermentation byproduct creates this oak-like character and satiny feel. But I don't actually care; I ain't no geek oenologist.

These are nourishing people to be around, and it's nourishing to hear them talk about their wines, too.

"You should be engaged to make a good wine; let's say a wine of pure and clear nature, with a transparent face and a solid structure. This seems to be the essential base to work on." Amen to that!

"We clean the must before fermentation, which takes place very slowly and gently under pressure of CO<sub>2</sub>." After which there's no more fussing. The wines are left in cask until bottling—which is rather later than earlier. As mentioned before, no Süssreserve. "We think Süssreserve is not a real partner to be married with a wine, but something artificial; it may be a lovely make-up, but most of all it seems

- Vineyard area: 7 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Ockenheimer Laberstall and Hockenmühle
- Soil types: Clay and heavy chalky loam
- Grape varieties: 43% Riesling, 22% Silvaner, 8% each Kerner and Chardonnay, 13% other varieties

like 'lifting' a face to change its character." Now whether you agree with that opinion (and I don't), there is a clear exposition of the frame of reference which rejects Süssreserve as a matter of temperament.

"Wine for me is a piece of mosaic, the other pieces of which are friends and conversation and a way of life," says Frau Merz. "I am impressed when I taste wines of purity, clear appearance, elegant vivacity, a pleasant perfume and tempting flavors. I am trying to discover the soul of a wine." Isn't this more fun than discussing yeast cultures?

I asked Herr Merz what he longed to hear a customer say about his wines, in view of the care he takes to help them into existence. His answer expressed the spirit of his domain: "The cultivated wine drinker can obtain the kinds of wines from us he can't find anywhere else any more. I want to hear that he is fond of the wine, that this is the type of wine he was seeking for a long time and that now he feels at home."

I need to emphasize that such temperaments are uncommon among vintners, who, though they produce a thing of poetic beauty, are rarely themselves poetic in nature. The Merzes have a kind of genial urbanity that gives them something of the mien of art collectors or dealers in rare prints. They vacation in a time-share house in Provence.

It's a point I cannot overemphasize. Until you visit a domain, a bottle of wine, however fine it may be, is just a thing. It's a label without a story attached, without a human context, without a sense of place. When you do visit, see the vineyards in which the grower labors, see the cellar in which his wines are raised, see the books on his bookcases, the



tasting glasses he uses, the weight of the sound in the air of his home—some places in Europe have an extraordinarily caressing silence about them - see how he pulls a cork from a bottle, hear his jokes and asides, hear the words he uses to talk about his wines, see how he relates to his dog, see it all, hear it all, taste it all, touch it all, now the wine becomes a BEING; it is now **Karl's wine**. Think of what you learn about a friend or lover after the first time you meet his/her parents. It's like that.

Vintages at Merz don't necessarily follow the larger pattern; Karl's wines shine in precisely the conditions when many other German Rieslings do not; ripe years fairly low in acid but with large, expansive fruit. Frau Merz is wary of lengthy cellaring for the Trockens, saying: "Old dry wines

are like spinsters." And going on to add "If the sweetness is like a fruit you can't wait to bite into, then it's right." I like to think of her and Karl at the Tourtour farmer's market in early September, buying plums and pulling one out of the bag immediately. It all connects.

It's only in a larger context that I can try to convey these unique wines to you. They aren't made to "show" well in comprehensive tasting formats; you want to sit across a table and let someone else answer the phone and look closely at just a few wines. Look, there's nothing wrong with wines that make the scene. It's more that we can't afford to lose the kinds of wines that don't, that don't know how, that don't care to, because these are wines of soul. And maybe you can't taste soul but things sure taste empty when it's not there.

#### Merz at a glance:

One-of-a-kind wines, with a woodsy-mealy flavor very rarely found in German wines. Particularly successful in the drier idioms. Gentle in price!

#### how the wines taste:

They're smooth and "oaky." Though there's no new wood used. There's a gentle mealiness about these that makes the dry wines especially successful and give a lot of exotic perfume to the wines with sweetness. The wines from the chalk cliffs of the LABERSTALL show the greatest originality and complexity of fruit. In the heavier blue clay soil of the HOCKENMÜHLE ("The soil is so clayey that if we didn't grow vines we could make pots," says Karl) the wines are spicier and interestingly more chalky-minerally in profile.

- GMZ-45 **1999 Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**  
A 2nd bottling, and preferable to the first, which had more ripeness than it knew quite what to do with. When this sells through we'll go directly to a fabulous 2001. This is big, almost heady, but not at all coarse, with plenty of fruit. It's a happy dry gulper at a most attractive price.  
SOS: -1 (immediately to two years)
- GMZ-046L **2000 Ockenheimer Riesling Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**  
First offering; this is one TASTY 2000. Snappy and loaded with the happy grapey clarity of the best '00s; bright, long and tasty, with a salty mineral backwash.  
SOS: 0 (now to three years)
- GMZ-42 **2000 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
As if Hockenmühle alone weren't a hoot to cluck out, we have not merely Ockenheimer Hockenmühle but a Trocken Ockenheimer Hockenmühle - hey, we're talkin' Trocken Ockenheimer . . . you get the picture. This was my favorite among the 2000s, a vintage somewhat at odds with Merz's typical "thing:" bright, maizy nose, even a little like the Vitis cold-pressed grapeseed oil. The palate is snappy and appley and makes me think of a buckwheat crepe stuffed with sauteed oyster mushrooms.  
SOS: -1 (now to three years)
- GMZ-047 **2001 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
Nose like roasted corn and yellow peppers; juicy and voluminous with a finely measured power, though it finishes like a snorting bull; a chunky wine just spurtingly ripe. Forget fine points of finesse and just swim in the satisfaction.  
SOS: 0 (from one to five years)
- GMZ-048 **2001 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**  
Long and exotic; man, this wants crab cakes or corn fritters or soft-shells and scallions; salty and pancetta-like and herbal like marjoram and a sort of **packed-ness** like you crammed too much in your suitcase and you j-u-s-t barely got it closed but you know if you sneeze it'll burst.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 0 (from two to six years)

# p.a. ohler'sches weingut

## rheinhessen • bingen

Just call it “Ohler!”

Bernard Becker is the proprietor here, a bachelor with no airs and a local accent you can cut with a knife. He's really too simple a soul to fit in with the august overlords at the VDP, who are trying to give him the heave in any case (I imagine his prices embarrass them, plus the inconvenience of his making better wine than many of his trendier colleagues). His is one of those almost painfully old-fashioned estates; you can sometimes tell by the grandfather clock. When it booms out its chimes with an almost imperious command—“by GOD it's four o'clock!” you do get a sense that things are done the old ways.

Becker had a certain sangfroid about his wines which I think I might have done a little to correct

He had bottling problems a few years ago and had to use the local co-op to custom bottle for him. His wines, so vibrant in cask, ended up muted and dull in bottle, and I lost confidence in them. Becker noticed the result in sharply falling sales, and we had a heart-to-heart. The next year I fire-bombed his house. The year after that I had to tie a sixteen-ton weight to his leg and drop him in the Rhine. That got his attention. Now the wines are fine again. Ruthless business, this wine thing.

I do believe he does the whole five hectares all alone. About forty percent of it is on steep slopes; this isn't easy work! Each year I see a few wines in the cellar that I gather our man has simply not gotten around to. Sometimes they're shot, other times they're superb for the extra aging. But there's no systematic method, except to work clean and reduce the Süßreserve when I come around.

Bingen must be the most undervalued place in Germany for fine Riesling. And having just been through Flurbereinigung, its reputation isn't likely to leap ahead until the new vines get some age. The soils on the Bingen hill, which is directly parallel to the Rudesheimer Berg (only the Rhine lies between) contain a mélange of Rotliegend and porphyry, an amalgam of Nierstein and

- Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,000 cases
- Top sites: Binger Scharlachberg, Münsterer Dautenpflänzer
- Soil types: slate, quartzite, sandstone, porphyry
- Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe, 40% (Silvaner, Müller-Thurgau, Kerner, Huxelrebe, Dornfelder), 15% (Spätburgunder, Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder)

Nahe which gives the wines Nierstein's smoky savor with the Nahe's curranty succulence.

Becker also has some land across the Nahe, now officially Nahe wine (imagine his paperwork load dealing with two sets of bureaucrats) in two excellent sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer and Kapellenberg. All of these wines can be among the very best values I know, and Becker is more accommodating than ever with them. He's tapping into my desire for more transparent wines with lift and relief and not so much sweetness; nowadays he shows me his wines with an air of “Is this how you mean?” Yes, this is how I mean. There's good stuff in these here hills.

And prices remain almost embarrassingly low. It is odd; one ferry ride over the Rhine, less than a mile as the crow flies, and price can differ by 60%. Mind you, Becker makes these wines for all intents and purposes in his basement; he lives in an apartment building on a downtown street that looks like the last place on earth a winery would be. With the right physical space, updated equipment and his own bottling line, a man of Becker's conscientiousness would be making stellar wines. As it is, they're charming and fragrant enough and you can own them almost just by thinking about them!



Bernard Becker

### Ohler at a glance:

Value value value. Charming, fruity, uncomplicated, easy-to-like wines at ludicrous prices. As he always seems to do in high-acid years, he made splendid 2000s, including my first-ever “starred” wine from here. In 2001 he reports an unfussy vintage which needed only an “acid-correction” of the must, as the acids were “too prominent” in his rather old-fashioned view. This is one of the few estates where 2001 and 2000 are close in quality, so don’t be despinin’ dem 2000s, Slim!

### how the wines taste:

They’re forthright and fruity. The Scharlachberg wines have a peachy lift and fragrance of red roses. The Nahe wines are cooler, slatier or more violet-y and tangy according to site. Sheer charm is their strong suit. Great class or detail of flavors is unusual, but there’s plenty of sheer likability for the pittance we’re asked to pay. In favorable vintages such as 2000 and 2001, they soar above their class.

#### GOH-40 2000 Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Scheurebe Kabinett

It was an odd vintage for Scheu in general. Usually it likes a zingy high-acid year but it ripens seven to ten days before Riesling and this wasn’t ideal in the September clammies; this, therefore, is one of the few great Scheu success stories. It shows the catty sagey side-o-Scheu and it tastes like sage leaves fried in butter with lime zest. Deft and interesting. SOS: 2 (now to three years)

#### GOH-043 2001 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett

With Riesling dosage; a wine of unusual grip and persistence here, discreetly varietal but almost a Pinot Gris deep demi-glace of fruit; sagey, curranty-spicy salty wash over the sides of the tongue; long nettley finish. Yang Scheu!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (from one to five years)

#### GOH-41 2000 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Kabinett

+

This could be the best wine Ohler has ever made. Whew! Elegant and pretty, a Juliette Binoche of a wine; not just peaches but roses and tropical fruit; rarely seen dialectic, interplay and filigree; wonderful grip, yinyang of fruit and mineral. STYLISH. Be smart this year and buy the bejeezus out of it.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

#### GOH-42 2000 Binger Rosengarten Riesling Spätlese

Rosengarten is the eastern extension of the Scharlach hill, less steep. For this domain, the Rosengarten is a subtle and interesting Riesling with a touch of wild-herb and cassis. It’s planted with thirty-year-old vines on gravelly soil. I asked about that cassis thing and he told me the former owner had a few Scheu vines mixed in among the Rieslings! This is just a touch less fine, a jot more voluminous, a scintilla less polished than the Kabinett, but the basic material of this vintage does these wines a **power** of good, that dense, thick core of extract.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

#### GOH-044 2001 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese

At 89 Oechsle this was the lighter of two Scharlachbergs, but I liked it more (the other might be tres grande if he diddles with the sweetness, which he said he might); a fine, classy, discreet aroma in the freesia and papaya direction; palate has fine acid-mineral posture and is a civilized, judicious Riesling, careful to say its flavors without gaudiness or flourish. That, plus it tastes good.

SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)



# christian-wilhelm bernhard

## rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

I'd grown so accustomed to thinking of Harmut Bernhard as a young pup I was taken aback to see a little gray starting around his temples. There's a photo-essay on the wall in the tasting room showing the 1980 harvest, and Hartmut looks all of eleven years old. Maybe that's why. My fault, though, for these wines and this winery are striding forward each year, and no-longer-"young"—Hartmut Bernhard is entering his prime.

This year marks the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

Hartmut Bernhard seems to take another step forward each year. If you're a musician you go through a period when you're basically grappling with your instrument. It usually sounds good enough,

but attentive listeners can tell you're straining. Then, if you're good (and lucky), a day comes when the instrument begins to obey you, and if you're really good it will obey you before you're aware of having commanded it. Now all you hear is music. Hartmut is nearing that stage of secure command over his craft; you feel it in the wines.

It was pure luck that brought me here to this quiet corner and this sweet, tender family. I saw the Bernhards listed in a book of DLG prize winners with a label shot showing an Auxerrois. I like this variety, and you don't see much of it, and you almost never see it unblended. It's thought to be a genetic mutation of Pinot Blanc; the two marry well in the typical Alsatian blend. Auxerrois all alone is rather like a minerally Traminer with an incense-y note all its own. The Germans rarely grow it; Baden is its most frequent home. Bernhard's is a 52 year-old vineyard on porphyry soil—it's *VIEILLES VIGNES* time again. You know "Vieilles Vignes," it's French for "Raize Ze Price."

The Bernhards are out of the way, just over the hill from Bad Kreuznach and the Nahe Valley. Frei-Laubersheim is in the hillier section of Rheinhessen (they call it "Rhinehessen's

Switzerland," which is a hoot). It's one of those curious little corners of Germany. The soils are not unlike Nahe soils; igneous weathered rock, even porphyry in some places. Others are typically Rheinhessen clay; a hybrid of styles emerges. Some wines show Nahe-like skeins of curranty delineation and do best in damper years. Others are typical Rheinhessen but

with a more compact profile, as though their proximity to the Nahe caused them to speak with a Nahe-accent. They're also lighter and more buoyant than many Rheinhessen wines.

I went looking for my Auxerrois but was delighted to see Bernhard's frequent success with Riesling and

- Vineyard area: 9.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,900 cases
- Top sites: Hackenheimer Kirchberg, Frei-Laubersheimer Fels, Krichberg and Rheingrafenberg
- Soil types: Porphyry, clay and sandy loam
- Grape varieties: 28% Riesling, 16% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 10% Kerner, 9% Müller-Thurgau, 7% Portugieser, 4% Weissburgunder, 15% other varieties

Scheurebe. It's a father-and-son team, though Father retreats from the picture a little more each year. Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

I do wish, though, that I could persuade Hartmut to give me his Riesling from the porphyry vineyards with residual sugar; they need it, I want it, but I can't get it. Why? His private customers expect it Trocken! Nature sometimes intervenes, as you'll see below. Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had only Riesling dosage. I'm sure this contributes to their ever-increasing polish.

Bernhards make a bigger deal out of my visits than my meager talents warrant. I'm sure they know I like their wines, but I hope they know I respect them too. Hoping they're reading these words; gentlemen (and lady), it remains a pleasure to grow in the knowledge of our respective crafts together over the years we've known one another. And it is a joy to know you all. There. It's just the sort of thing I can't say out loud without dying of embarrassment. Now go away, I'm blushing as it is.



### Bernhard at a glance:

Jam-packed flavor bombs from clay soils, tangy-complex wines from volcanic soils. Great success with Scheurebe if you like them full-throttle! Steadily improving quality as the son consolidates his “regime.”

### how the wines taste:

It depends on the soil. Rieslings from the volcanic porphyry soils taste like Nahe wines under a sun lamp, complex and intricate. The wines from the clayey Kirchberg site are real gob-stuffers; they’re not elegant (though far from clumsy) but rather concentrated and chewy. Each year Hartmut inches closer to his pinnacle.

#### GCB-46 2000 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett

Tank 11. Here again we have that spicy monster nose. Sage, currant; paper-cut sharp; juicy; a fennelly and dense palate with a fine chalky-mineral mid-palate; extremely long and persistent finish. More pronounced and dryer-feeling than the fruit-driven 1999 was. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
SOS: 1 (now to four years)

#### GCB-050 2001 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese

This is quite sweet (stopped spontaneously) but still balanced; mango and passion fruit and malt; not a catty monster but rather a big charming peachy beauty, a gentle side of Scheu.  
SOS: 3

#### GCB-047 2001 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Halbtrocken

You will need this wine to moisten your parched throat after you finish saying its name. On the other hand, full-throttle porphyry-driven flavors are nothing to sniff at. It has 12 g.l. of its own residual sugar plus 3 more we added, all balanced with a gentle 7.5 g.l. acidity; nicely balanced, no bite; fine porphyry nose, violets, oat-bread toast; tangy elegant palate, demure and graceful structure, but all kinds of mineral and that uncanny porphyry elegance.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
SOS: 1 (from three to ten years)

#### GCB-048 2001 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett

Must-weight of a light Auslese, and 36 g.l. of its own residual sugar; violets and cherries; lovely weight and density yet with pretty, almost slim fruit; a lovely contrast of finesse and solidity.  
SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

#### GCB-049 2001 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese

This is sweeter but tastes dryer than the Kabinett. Check `em out if you think I’m wacko. See? I’m still wacko but the wines are like I say. This has a finer nose than the Kabinett, more peony and plum-blossom; works sleek and direct and has more chalky mineral nuance. Significantly long. My prose was somewhat moderate on the day; these are better than I make them sound!  
SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

What a delight it was to see that Alexander Gysler made the hallowed pages of Gault-Millau for the first time this year. Someone's paying attention. This young man is in the process of revolutionizing his family's estate, and you heard it here first; he has a wonderful future ahead of him.

My only regret is he isn't in the Rheingau! For this is precisely the kind of fresh young talent that still-ossified region badly needs. A person with Gysler's determination and program would make superb wines in, say, Rauenthal. But one takes talent where it can be found, even in sleepy Weinheim, and one is grateful. Three years ago, Gysler was among several estates I opted not to visit in order to save road-weariness. I confess, I don't have quite the stamina I used to (but with what finesse do I make up for it!) and there are a few estates I really needn't visit personally each year, as long as I can taste the wines in mint condition. Then a few weeks before flying I got a fax

from Alexander Gysler, son of Gernot, asking if I couldn't possible make time for a stop-off in Weinheim. His father was ailing and he would assume sole responsibility for the wines now, and he wanted to pick my brains about various paths he might take.

Of course I went to see him. What an odd mixture of emotions it was. Gernot was terminally ill (and would in fact die several weeks later) and I was fond of Gernot, and had been distressed to see him as diminished as he was the year before. His wife and son were either terribly stoic or terribly correct; the Germans find it unseemly to air their private griefs to any but intimates. But I was aware of the hovering sorrows, juxtaposed with a really exciting group of wines about which Alexander was justly proud. I was also distracted by one of the most striking dogs I think I have ever seen, a great obsidian patriarch who sat outside a glass door and glared at us with wounded dignity.

Gysler's is a classic example of the advent of a new generation. "My father liked soft wines," says Alexander, "and they were good of their type, but I want to change

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 5,900 cases
- Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg
- Soil types: Rotliegend and mixtures of stone, loam and clay
- Grape Varieties: Riesling, Silvaner, Huxelrebe

things." (The very same can be said of Strub, by the way. One cannot overstate the sea-change taking place in the German wine the last twenty years.) This year Alexander increased the proportion of whole-cluster pressing, even for the liter wines. He's still fermenting with cultured yeasts (five different ones) but intends to change to ambient-yeast fermentation next year "At least for the best wines." All of this builds upon the changes already made: grass in every second row (instead of every), renewal of composting, much less dosage, much less pumping. Alexander will continue to do more work in the vineyard and replant with classic varieties (Gernot never met a weird new crossing he was unwilling to grow, bless his soul). With 12 hectares, Alexander has his work cut out. Luckily the youth is so TALL he needs 35% fewer strides just to get around.

Alexander has thrown away the separator, and he's bottling the wines cold. He wanted to know what I needed. "More of things like these!" I said.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."



Alexander Gysler

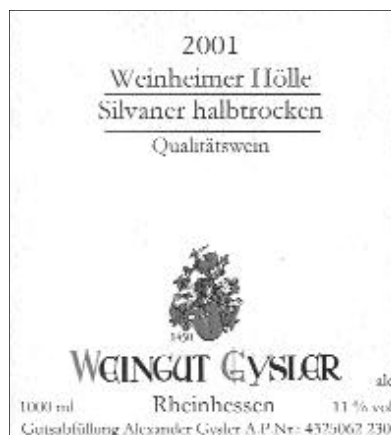
**Gysler at a glance:**

**Big** changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being! Eye-opening 1998s and remarkable 1999s augured wonderful things to come. 2000 was a challenge, occasionally risen to! 2001 kicks ass!

**how the wines taste:**

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now. Alexander will do good things.

- GGY-037L **2001 Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter** +  
 Dudes and dudettes, incubi and succubi, lissen up. If there were an international contest to determine the single-greatest wine value on earth, I'd enter this wine with every expectation of winning. It is that damn good. This vintage is the best of every vintage I've ever tasted (seventeen!). So aromatic I asked if there was "foreign" dosage, but there isn't any. It's crazy-long, varietal in the best sense, wet straw, serrano ham. What an achievement this is! Look at that price. **Shame on you** if you pass this by.  
 SOS: 1 (cries to be drunk now, this minute, but will "keep" at least five years)
- GGY-038L **2001 Weinheimer Kapellenberg Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
 The first-ever Liter Riesling from Gysler. Has 14 g.l. residual sugar; it's snappy and long, tasty basic Riesling, smoky and meaty, like the crackly skin on a pork roast but with a fennelly edge. Another outstanding bargain.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 0 (between immediately and five years)
- GGY-36 **2000 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Kabinett**  
 This shows some botrytis. Cherry-smoky nose, like a Nahe wine. Only with its own residual sugar. Tangy, curranty, racy, snappy and beaming, a sort of darling of a wine. It will VAMOOSE pronto, Tonto, so don't delay.  
 SOS: 2 (between one and five years)
- GGY-039 **2001 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Kabinett**  
 Charming; rose-like with a piquant winsome edge; the palate "reads" it as soft-ish but the finish is a stiff jab of firmness; rose and kirsch on the front, smoke and stone on the back. Yummy wine.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GGY-30H **1997 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml**  
 A December 17th harvest, the last wine harvested by Gernot before the surgery from which he shall not recover. A gentle Eiswein (8.5 grams acidity with 140-odd grams residual sugar) but pure and true. Not too sugary, but a dear and lovely essence. Finely spicy. You get to see the flavors of real Eiswein and not ruin your teeth.  
 SOS: 4 (between eight and eighteen years)



# mittelrhein wines



In 1900 there were 2000 hectares of vineyards planted in the Mittelrhein. In 1970 this had sunk to 1000. In the next thirty years it reduced again by half; as the new century began there were just 500 hectares remaining, a loss of 75% in a single century. 50 more hectares were abandoned last year alone. What's to become of this region?

In most but not all cases the best sites remain. In most cases the most impassioned vintners will continue. We're seeing a possibly beneficial herd-thinning, but we're also seeing a changing world, and would do well to consider how it will look and how happy we'll be to live in it.

Because the Mittelrhein is so rife with tourism, a lot of ordinary plonk was made to be sloshed down by heedless gawkers misty-eyedly sailing past the Loreley. I'll bet the boat-lines and taverns bid prices down to below subsistence for the poor growers. The vineyards are steep, Mosel-steep, and costs of production are high. The system was basically unsustainable. But what will take its place?

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to represent via Heinrich Weiler until the domain encountered

## At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . .

some problems and I opted out) and Linde noted wistfully that its days appeared to be numbered. "But it's one of the great sites of the region," I protested. "Why is that?" "Well look at it," Linde replied. "It's all old terraces, too steep to work by machine. You can't get to it. Do you realize what you have to do to bring the harvest in from that vineyard?" she continued. "First you have to carry all the grapes on your back as there are no pathways for tractors or wagons. Then you have to cross a busy road, **and then you have to cross the railway line**, and then you have to get into a boat and row across the Rhine!" Well, I dunno; sounds like a day in the park to me. I mean, it's not like there's man-eating fish in the river or anything. In any case, it turned out the vineyard's sole proprietor was merely leasing the winery and had no incentive to invest in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A specie of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old cas-

tle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like Eügon Müller. But I'd wager that a generation from now, the Josts and Weingarts will have become the standard "great names."

The vineyards fall into two groups: the riverfront sites (giving the slatiest, most minerally wines) and the side-valley slopes (whose wines are tangier and spicier). Soils are Devonian slate and quartzite, so the wines bear a strong resemblance to Mosel wines, though fuller in body, more "masculine" and sometimes with more lavish fruit. Most Moselans sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.



Boppard



# tasting versus drinking

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

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

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

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

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

Want to hear a story of fortitude? Peter Jost broke his leg in the vineyards just three days before the harvest one year. He was in utter denial. This simply could not be. He didn't go in for X-rays for three days, and when he did he was told "your leg is broken and you'll be laid up for about six weeks." "Um, I don't think so!" After three weeks hobbling around on crutches, including picking grapes in vineyards as steep as 60 degrees, his Doctor told him "Look, if you don't get off your feet we'll put you on your back!" The solution? A WHEELCHAIR! "I rolled through the cellar in my wheelchair and made my wines," said Peter.

This gives new meaning to the term "being on a roll," but then Jost has been rolling along for a lot of years now. When Linde came over to the States in 1995 she felt some reluctance to raid the

cellar for older vintages "because our wines have improved so much in the past few years." Indeed they are so delicious when young that one forgets their potential to develop; a 1993 Kabinett we drank with lunch in 1997 was as beautiful as Kabinett—as Riesling—could ever be.

It's worth considering why, and I think it has to do with fruit and fructose. Different Rieslings age successfully in various ways, but wines like Jost's start out with fruit complexity that compounds over time, somehow both reducing and billowing into broader bands of nuance. Fructose can evolve a stop-you-in-your-tracks complexity if it's set in a firm enough frame. The best among Jost's wines show the noblest face of Riesling's pure fruit-self.

This is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it,



Toni and Linde Jost

and any way you slice it, this is one special site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the dia-

- Vineyard area: 8.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,900 cases
- Top sites: Barcharacher Hahn, Wolfshöhle
- Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 85% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder

monds of the German wine world.

The winery is right on the main drag through the almost painfully lovely town of Bacharach. The town has its share of gawkers yet Jost's place remains unaffectedly old-world. Linde has magic hands with food and is quick with a quip; in fact Linde is a paragon of humanity in many and varied ways, and they're a good couple, with three fine daughters, and the house has that purposive calm, even in the face of frenzy, that tells you things are as they should be.

The wines, also, are calm and shining. Peter's wines are seldom ostentatious or gaudy. But what polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slatey filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb. I've learned to expect fine things here. Peter's been emphasizing lees-contact the past few vintages and now the wines have a further dimension of stylishness.

There's a school of thought that says Peter's wine are sometimes too play-it-safe; and that even more mineral dimension and expressiveness might be theirs if he'd taken a few gonzo risks with them. I sympathize with that opinion, but could only endorse it if I wanted all great German wines to be great in precisely the same way. I too have wondered why Peter's wines aren't explicitly slatier. But usually I am overcome with even greater wonder at their particular fruit, which is incomparable. As is the special

polish with which it's expressed. That polish is quite intentional. The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must," says Peter. What lees do exist are stirred. "I want a partnership between primary fruit and the richness of the lees."

Nary a wine has been de-acidified for the last decade. And Peter is friendly toward the use of Süsreserve if it's produced optimally. "Each wine should have its own

Süsreserve," he says. "It's labor-intensive and it falls just at the busiest time of the harvest, which means working the night shift!" But, he says, the later fermentation stops, the better for the wine. "In any case, at least for our wine which we ferment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur."

After two green-harvests Peter only got 54 hl/ha out of 2001. He also got some pretty brawny wines from his heat-trap Hahn. This was one of those instances where the vintage was too good. But y'know, nobody was kvetchin' back in 1976 because there "wasn't any real Kabinett." It was viewed as an extravagance, a once-in-a-half-century-vintage, and there'd be plenty of typical Kabinett soon enough. 2001 has a potential-masterpiece to give you if you got the gras in your Geldtasche.

#### Jost at a glance:

Primo estate with impeccable reputation for top-flight Rieslings. Wines emphasize beauty of fruit rather than mineral.

#### how the wines taste:

It is the quality of fruit you look for here, and this is about as lovely as it gets; a delicate melange of sweet-apple, white peach, honeysuckle, expressed in a resplendent elegance, always stopping short of mere sultriness.

#### GTJ-045 2001 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett

Let us study this phenomenon; we have a Kabinett with 88 Oechsle, which means it's really either big-ass Spätlese or the lightest of the Auslesen. As such, it needs a sweetness commensurate with its ripeness. But, if it has that sweetness it will then taste most unlike what the drinker is expecting. What to do? Tiptoe through the fructose and try to finesse it, I suppose. This wine is quite a bruiser by Jost's standards. A smoky-yeasty nose, lime and apple, leads to a palate that's racy and a little brusque. The finish is a bit phenolic, and it seems Halbtrocken despite **40 g.l.** residual sugar. One of several things could happen. The wine could tame and consolidate and I'll feel foolish for thinking it disharmonious. It could go the other way. Around our table we had quite a range of opinions about this wine, so I know there are palates for whom it's a gorgeous thing. Taste and decide. SOS: 1 (???)

#### GTJ-046 2001 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese

60 g.l. residual sugar (do you discern a pattern? The Kabinett had 40) and this really shows how sweetness supports and underscores mineral and causes the structure to dance. Glow-y Auslese style, ripe nectarine, complex, even granular (like great Comté); has power and muscle to spare but enough polish and length to bring it off. SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)

#### GTJ-047H 2001 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml

Malt and passion fruit, the Goldtröpfchen style but with more body. "Terry, if you'd seen the grapes you'd have wanted to eat them in big bites," said Linde. The most succulent Jost wine since the '89s, but with more spice and viscera. Obdurately long, but it's pure substance; the acid's not spiky though it smoulders through. SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty five years)

#### GTJ-048H 2001 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling TBA, 12/375ml

Takes the malty peachy fruit and turns it into pure honey, showing a refined, heavenly botrytis; though it's smoky and shows youthful turbulence, it's fully redeemed by its tenderness and the ambrosial passion-fruity satin bath of richness. SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)

# florian weingart

## mittelrhein • boppard-spay

These are very happy visits. The wines are full of melody, and Florian's kids keep coming into the room, shyly at first and then like wound-up little sprites. I like tasting wine with young vintners whose kids are sitting in his lap. It stops me from getting too precious about the wines. It puts the work in context. Context is good. It helps me define a thing I need to remember: the connection of the family, the land, and the wine. Somehow I doubt I'd be tasting with Mr. Kendall or Mr. Jackson in a little living room with kids peering shyly around the corner and the simmer-fragrance of lunch cooking. One year both girls seized upon my Karen Odessa, who amused them for two hours with her laptop. She recorded the two girls very shyly singing "Ten Little Indians" and every time she played it later I felt happy.

Seeing a vintner once a year is like a time-lapse picture. This year Florian had somehow filled out, and looked more like *Le Patron*. He's really catapulted his estate to the summit of the Mittelrhein in his three years at the helm. A leading wine-pundit placed him on par with Jost. We speak as always about the vicissitudes of the latest vintage. Florian had lower yields in 2001 than in 2000 (40 hl/ha) because of green-harvesting and rigorous selection to avoid negative botrytis. He's had to raise prices as a matter of financial survival, after two small crops and many one-time expenses associated with the changes he's making, but bless him, he's apologetic. He even swears he'll lower prices as soon as he can.

Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It's such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

This is another estate which is worked by the whole family. I was there the day of bottling; Papa only emerged at the end to greet me, Mama came and went, and Florian's missus mostly tried to keep the kids out of our way (with mixed success, I noted happily).



Florian Weingart

I brought my June 1999 group to Weingart but Florian was in Wiesbaden receiving the Federal Prize of Honor for his wines and we were fêted by Adolf and Helga like in the old days. Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine exam-

ple of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenerative nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on

- Vineyard area: 9 hectares
- Annual production: 7,500 cases
- Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg, Feuerlay, Engelstein and Mandelstein
- Soil types: Weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% other varieties

steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheerful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines are more green-fruity than they have been, more explicitly slatey, more Mosel-like. Florian ascribes this to colder fermentations. He also suggests that the big tropical-fruit flavors of earlier Weingart wines resulted to some extent from nitrogen fermentations. He's also leaving his wines longer on their lees, "partly to compensate for the loss of body resulting from our colder fermentation temperatures." And this gives them another dimension of complexity.

But you can't do away entirely with those tropical flavors; they are written into the soil. There's a vein of volcanic residue from eruptions in the old Eifel mountains in the soils of the Bopparder Hamm, and it's (presumably) this soil which accounts for the bigger sweet-fruit expression in these wines. The Ohlenberg has a deeper soil, giving more robust wines, more likely to come from physiologically ripe fruit and therefore better suited to Trocken styling. (Florian's one of the few to make this intuitive connection.)

**Weingart at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

**GAW-056 2001 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Long enough name for ya, stud? Fragrances of vanilla, tapioca, and rocks. Strong but polished; enough body and tropical bada-bing to pass for Lingenfelder(!), tangy and minerally with wonderful length.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (from three to thirteen years)

**GAW-057 2001 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Kabinett**

A lime-parfait with slate and a little sassafrass; seems to combine Würzgarten and Berg Rottland; has clarity and density and 15% of an Auslese with 97 Oechsle as a blending partner! Big stuff for Kabinett.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

**GAW-058 2001 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese**

Riotously tropical aromas; fabulous grip and berried length; raspberries and greengages; power and torque here, impressive wine.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty one years)

**GAW-059 2001 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese**

"Spätlese" my fat white ass! This is serious Auslese in any other vintage; 90 Oechsle with some botrytis; classical slate and quartzite aromas, also a little cidery; it wants to be a 70s-style "sweet" Spätlese but keeps being pulled down into its primordial rocky depths. This is from a leased vineyard down near Josts, by the way, with quite dissimilar conditions to the Bopparder Hamm.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty five years)

**GAW-060 2001 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Auslese**

Ohlenberg compares to Feuerlay as Chambertin compares to Musigny. This is stunning wine. Brilliant spicy nose, talc, malt, clean botrytis, honeysuckle; shimmering high-tones over smouldering rocky depths. Spectral rivulets of salt and honey. A great 2001!

SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty seven years)

**GAW-061 2001 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Auslese**

Jungfernewein (virgin-crop of exceptional concentration); wild lavender aromas, wonderfully spicy and bright, almost minty; sweet-forest and spring-sappy. Less depth than Ohlenberg but, oh, that superficial flavor sure tastes good! **Extremely limited!**

SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty five years)



# why does place-specificity matter?

Once upon a time I sat on a panel discussing spirit-of-place, and a native-American woman to my left said something that lodged on my heart and has not moved since.

The salmon do not only return to the stream, she said, in order to spawn; they also return in order to respond to the prayers and hopes of the people who love them.

That assumption of a unity of living things underlies my own assumption that places have spirit, and wine is one of the ways places convey their spirits to us, and this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we claim that wine is an important part of life then wine must be bound into and among the filaments by which we are connected to all things. Wines which simply exist as products to be sold must take their places alongside all such commodities, soda, breakfast cereal, vacuum-cleaner bags. They can be enjoyable and useful, but they don't matter.

Spirit-of-place is a concept that's like really good soap; it's lovely, it feels good when it touches you, and it's slippery as hell.

Big chalk cliffs on a walk in Champagne. I'd been tasting five days and needed a walk to shake out the bubbles. I had one of those accumulated-finish tastes in my mouth that you get when you've been tasting one type of wine for many days. It was September, a week or so till harvest. A little fissure in the hills through which I walked revealed the cliffs, a chalk so white it shrank my retinas. I had a little walking-daydream in which I remembered a producer of California sparkling wine telling me years ago, "You know, we have the exact-same degree-days they have in Épernay," and he was very proud of this, as it showed he had studied the question, done his due diligence, and found the perfect spot to grow grapes for sparkling wine.

I had one of my Moments: in my fantasy I took the hapless chap by the face and pressed him right up against the chalk . . . "But ya don't have this, do ya buster!" I cried, mashing his pitiful face against the powdery rock. "It's the SOIL, stupid!" I added. "Now go clean yourself up."

Later, and calmer, I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and

the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still wines are not vivid in the way that young Riesling or Muscat is. They are pastel, aquarelle, restrained, gauzy. Add bubbles and they get frisky. But they aren't born that way. Didier Gimonnet told me he'd been pestered by an English wine writer to produce a tiny amount of super-cuvee from an 80-year old vineyard he owns . . . "I'll never do it," he insisted, "because the wine would be too powerful." But isn't that the point, I thought? Isn't that what wine's supposed to do in our skewered age? Density, concentration, power, flavor that can break bricks with its head! "I think Champagne needs to have a certain transparency in order to be elegant," he continued. And then it came to me.

Here was the Aesthetic to correspond with the gentleness of the Champagne landscape. A pays of low hills, forested summits and plain sleepy villages isn't destined to produce powerful wines. We have become so besotted by our demand for **impact** that we've forgotten how to discern beauty. And who among us ever tilts a listening ear to hear the hum of the land.

One reason the old world calls to us is that these lands do hum, a low subterranean vibration you feel in your bones. It has existed for centuries before you were born. It isn't meant to be fathomed. It is mysterious, and you are temporary, but hearing it, you are connected to great currents of time. And you are tickled by a sense of significance you cannot quite touch. It cannot be the same here. Each of us Americans is the crown of creation. We invented humanity. Nothing happened before us, or in any case, nothing worth remembering. Memory is a burden in any case. We turn to the world like a playground bully looking to pick a fight. Waddaya got TODAY to amuse me, pal? How ya gonna IMPRESS me?" How many POINTS will this day be worth? Maybe our little slice of earth rumbles with its own hum, but if it does, not many Americans want to know how to hear it, and most are suspicious of the value of listening at all.

Does spirit-of-place reside integrally within the place, or do we read it in? The answer is: YES. We are a part of all we touch, see, taste, experience. If we glean the presence of spirit-of-place, then it's there because we glean it, because we are not separate from the things we experience.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? Romantic notions aside, we need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at home. It says this is

where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste “flourish” when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those who are persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can “exist” elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

But the same grape will be mute on “foreign” soil. Try planting Riesling where it’s too warm or the soil’s too rich, and it becomes a blatant, fruit-salady wine which most people correctly write off as dull and cloying. Has Chenin Blanc ever made great wine outside Anjou or Touraine? Nebbiolo doesn’t seem to flourish outside Piemonte. I’d even argue that Chardonnay is strictly at home in Chablis and Champagne, since these are the only places where its inherent flavors are complex and interesting; it does easily without the pancake-makeup of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We “hear” these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. Indeed Riesling seems to frolic when it’s at home, it is so playful and expressive. And so we see the lovely phenomenon of detailed and distinct flavors coming from contiguous plots of land. Vineyard flavors are consistent, specific, and repeated year after year, varied only by the weather in which that year’s grapes ripened. Graacher Himmelreich and Graacher Domprobst are useful cases in point. Domprobst lies right above the village, and is uniformly steep and very stony. Mosel slate can either be bluish-grey, battleship grey or rusty-grey according to other trace minerals which may be present. Some soils are more weathered than others. The harder the rock, the harder the wine. (The locals tell you the very best wines grow on *feinerd*, or fine-earth, a slate already pre-crumbled. But such soils often settle at the bottoms of hills, where sun-exposure can be less than optimal. The parameters are complex.) Domprobst always gives thrilling wines, with “signature” flavors of cassis, pecans and granny-apples. I get Domprobst from three different growers, and its particular fingerprint is absolutely consistent whichever the cellar.

Right next door to the southeast is Himmelreich. This is an undulating hillside with sections of varying steepness. In Domprobst you hit rock six inches below the surface; in Himmelreich

it’s often a foot or more. This gives the wines more fruit, and makes them less adamantly fibrous and mineral, more forthcoming, and just a little less superb. If you’re a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don’t have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the grapes.

You wouldn’t have to sermonize to these people about spirit-of-place. They are steeped within that spirit as a condition of life. Their inchoate assumption that Place contains Spirit is part of that spirit.

Let’s step back a little. The Mosel, that limpid little river, flows through a gorge it has created, amidst impossibly steep mountainsides. Its people are conservative and they approach the sweaty work on the steep slopes with humility and good cheer. They are people of the North, accustomed to a bracing and taut way of life. Is it an accident that their wines, too, are bracing and taut? Show me someone who is determined to prove otherwise, and I’ll show you someone who has never been there.

I’ll go further. I believe the Catholic culture of the Mosel produces wines themselves catholically mystic. You see it in the wines when they are mature; sublime, uncanny flavors which seem to arise from a source not-of-this-earth.

I need wines which tell me in no uncertain terms: “I hail from THIS place and this place alone, not from any other place, only here, where I am at home.” Because such wines take us to those places. If we are already there, they cement the reality of our being there. We need to know where we are. If we do not, we are: lost.

I don’t have the time to waste on processed wines that taste like they could have come from anywhere, because in fact they come from nowhere and have no place to take me. We crave spirit of place because we need to be reassured we belong in the universe. And we want our bearings. We want to know where home is. We can deny or ignore this longing, but we will grow old wondering at the ceaseless scraping nail of anxiety that never lets us feel whole. Or we can claim this world of places.

And when we do, we claim the love that lives in hills and vines, in trees and birds and smells, in buildings and ovens and human eyes, of everything in our world that makes itself at home and calls on us to do the same. The value of wine, beyond the sensual joy it gives us, lies in the things it tells us, not only its own hills and rivers, but the road home.

Now, I have no objection to this at all. Sweetness is your friend! I know the purists yearn for a return to the old style Alsace wines; dry, manly, stern. I have a suggestion for them.

In the last generation there's been a 180-degree about-face in these two close-by regions. Today it is PFALZ WINE that will satisfy the demand for uncompromisingly dry wine in the Rhineland style. There is, however, one small problem. Most dry Pfalz wine absolutely and totally sucks.

Thus we have the amazingly talented Ernie Loosen, who's made so many masterpieces at his Mosel estate, falling prey to the specious logic which claims that because Pfalz Rieslings are riper, have more body and more alcohol than Mosel wines, they are better suited to being dry. It makes perfect sense until you start tasting.

I don't know why the wines don't work. I drink plenty of honestly dry Riesling from Austria and Alsace. Indeed, I like dry Riesling. I'm not sure why a wine with 13% alcohol would taste thin and fruitless; I only know that almost all of them do. I have tried and tried to like them. It's tiresome and frustrating to kvetch.

Another lamentable tendency in my beloved and endangered Pfalz is to plant more and more Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris (and Chardonnay, for which they will writhe eternally), the better to produce (mostly) neutral and softer dry wines. A lot of old dubious vines have been hacked up—Optima, Siegerrebe, Ortega, Morio-Muscat - and one is duly grateful; that land was probably unsuitable for Riesling.

These days it's likely to be used for (sigh) red varieties, since the Germans are convinced they'll keel over from heart attacks unless they slam down the vino rosso. The waiting list for Dornfelder clippings is two to three years. You see Cabernet and Merlot crawling like a plague over the land. The Pfalz seriously wishes to establish itself as a red-wine region. Yes, several among the red wines are very tasty – I sell a couple of them with great pride – but let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

Sadly though, the great and wonderful Scheurebe has been lumped together with a genre of vine to which it is



manifestly superior, and there's less Scheu every year. I'm not sure I see the logic of yanking out potentially great Scheurebe in order to grow mediocre Pinot Blanc. But logical perversity is the wisdom of the day. All I can say is, be still my Haardt.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of all this is the truly ghastly set of rules applying to the "Erstes Gewächs" (Grand Cru) program. Everything is perfectly enlightened—low yields, old vines, hand-harvesting, minimum necessary ripeness—until the ideologues began vomiting their ghastly ideas and insisted the wines must either be DRY (up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar) or "NOBLY" SWEET (above 50 grams per liter). It is distressing to be asked to accept these (mostly) brutally hot and bitter wines as arguments for Grand Cru status. It is distressing to see an entire community of wines strait-jacketed to squeeze into a marketing person's little convenience. If anyone knows a stealthy little munchkin who needs a job I'd like to hire him to break into all these deluded wineries and drop Süssreserve into the tanks.

And yet . . . and yet! When Pfalz wines are good, they're uniquely good. And there are so many ways for them to be good. When you think of the sheer number of interesting people in the Pfalz, it makes other regions (like the ossified Rheingau?) seem like backwaters. Nobody knows why, but the Pfalz is home to a thriving community of idiot-fringe experimenters who are real wine nuts, who collect it, talk about it, read about it, probably even dream about it. And these are the **least** snobby of any wine people you can imagine; people who really know how to tuck in and live, with the quality the Germans call "Lebenlust," a gargantuan appetite for life. And where else could you find such a prolific mix of temperaments? And so many great growers? To spend the morning at, say, Koehler-Ruprecht, and the afternoon, at, say, Müller-

Catoir, is to taste two amazingly great but COMPLETELY MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE families of wines. How, then, do we determine what real Pfalz wine is like?

Well, we need a definition broad enough to encompass most of the various styles, but more important we need to isolate what the wines have in common. Let's start with this: Pfalz wine shows a unique marriage of generosity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The idea of "class" usually suggests a certain reserve: NOT HERE! The typical Pfalz wine has big, ripe

**The wines have a great affinity for food—  
certainly the most versatile of all German  
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elegance.**

fruit, lots of literal spice (cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg), a kind of lush savor, a keen tang of pineapple, a splendid tautness of acidity under that frothing stock pot of fruit. The wines have a great affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

From this point the ways diverge. In what other region could you superimpose the laser-etching of a Darting with the big burly power of a Koehler-Ruprecht, with the fiery-yet-satiny persistence of an Eugen-Müller with the tingly mineral gleam of a Messmer with the leesy chewiness and compactness of a Minges with the sheer stunning **expression** of fruit of a Lingenfelder with the little-bit-of- all-of-those-high-flying-you'll-break-your-crazy-neck-daredevil-glee of a Biffar? NFW, that's where!



Pfalz

For more than twenty years I have believed Müller-Catoir is the greatest winery in Germany, and further, that it occupies (or shares with very few others) the white-wine summit of the world. You may or may not agree, but I believe it in my very bones, and I don't need to convince you. Perhaps the 2001 vintage will speak to you. Up through Spätlese it is the greatest vintage in the estate's proud history. Let's let the cellarmaster Hans-Günter Schwarz say why.

"After the fine weather began, we waited to pick because acids were still quite high," he said. "We had about seven to eight days of fine warm weather but must-weights didn't increase, which I still can't explain. I think perhaps the vines were too active, and too much energy went to things other than building sugars. Then suddenly must-weights shot up like a rocket and we started harvesting

in earnest. By the end of October we had sensational must-weights but also a diminishment of acids. I love our Auslesen, but compared to the '98s, let's say, they average 1.5 g.l. less acidity."

We had gathered on a Sunday afternoon in fine early-Spring weather to review the new vintage. Karen Odessa sat to my right (unaware she was to experience her date-with-destiny courtesy of a wild boar, just a few hours later), and Hans-Günter occupied the head of the table immediately to my left. Kevin Pike and Anthony Austin, my beloved colleagues were there. Johannes and Barbara Selbach drove down from Zeltingen with their cellarmaster candidate. Heinrich Catoir sat at the far side of the table with his son, whom he hopes will take control of the winery. A new cellarmaster, freshly arrived from Von Buhl, rounded out the group.

As I sat I felt pulling tides of time below me. Hans-Günter Schwarz had revolutionized German wine; he will someday be seen as the author of a great movement, as the dividing line between old and new. Very few of today's great German wines are entirely without his spirit. Yet like many prophets he is personally gentle and unassuming. Proud of his wines, to be sure, but the very antonym of the hot-shot "winemaker" who so often and so fatuously

- Vineyard area: 20 hectares
- Annual production: 11,250 cases
- Top sites: Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog, Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten, Mussbacher Eselshaut
- Soil types: Loamy gravel, clay
- Grape varieties: 58% Riesling, 13% Rieslaner, 9% Scheurebe, 8% Weissburgunder, 4% Muskateller, 3% Grauburgunder and Spätburgunder, 2% other varieties

claims our queasy worship.

His is a capacious and generous spirit, but it has its rigors and its standards. Everyone I know who knows Hans-Günter either loves him or is in awe of him, or sometimes both. I find it best not to fixate on what he's achieved—except now—because I don't want to ever lose him as a total swell-guy. That said, there are things needing to be told.

Until very recently Schwarz has led a retiring life making his wines. There is little interest in making the scene. You won't find them at VINEXPO. This gives the winery something of the mien of a secular monastery—a self-contained world in which vines are tended and wine made with mystic dedication.

So many of us affect a stoic temperament as a means of avoiding experience. But Hans-Günter is anchored to reality—years of tending vines have perhaps attuned him to the more deliberate rhythms of the world. When I taste with Hans-Günter, he talks about his wines and the harvests which produced them in a way that tethers them to something huge and continual. We tend to think of wine as ephemeral. For Hans-Günter, individual wines may be ephemeral: wine is eternal. And the loyalty he feels for his vineyards expresses an eternal truth of tending, of caring



Hans-Günter Schwarz

for the earth. This, he seems to say, is our human business, to care as best we can for this world we have been given.

The “reward” for that caring can be tasted in the wines, which respond with pure, celestial flavors. The greater reward, though, is the leading of a fulfilled and integrated life. I long to do the same.

“I am delighted with every good glass of wine, wherever it comes from, my own cellar or someone else’s. And I am distressed with any bad glass of wine because I know what it might have been if the raw material had been respected,” says Hans-Günter. That is Müller-Catoir in a nutshell. These are wines that **respect the raw material**. One wonders if anyone has ever approached the windy summits on which this winery frequently stands. Müller-Catoir’s wines are unique. No other wines attain such a lofty common denominator of clarity, intensity, polish, and elegance. NO other wines.

They first came to me in 1980. I gathered some friends to run through the mixed case I’d been sent. Well, there was no running through these wines. Every single one of them was a heart-stopper, from the smallest Kabinett to the grandest TBA. They left your soul shaking, and your mind groping. Later I found these sentiments echoed elsewhere. A writer used the phrase “every bottle is an experience,” and Stuart Pigott describes the frustration of confronting a wine that had “almost more depth, fruit, extract and nuances of flavor than the senses can take in.” Oh, I think the senses can take it in; that isn’t the problem. The wine RUSHES AT YOU SO FAST AND WITH SUCH A MULTIPLICITY OF NUANCES THAT THE BRAIN CANNOT ORGANIZE THE FRANTIC JUMBLE OF SIGNALS THE SENSES ARE SENDING. That’s when you just have to laugh (or cry) or spend an hour with the wine painstakingly delineating each flavor and threading them into the whole.

Two gentlemen are responsible. The estate’s owner Mr. Heinrich Catoir was barely a “Mr.” When he met a fellow student at viticultural school named Hans-Günter Schwarz. The two talk as students do, and some of the ideas they exchange sound appealingly radical and dangerous. Catoir persuades his mother to hire Schwarz as cellarmaster. But Mrs. Catoir has a habit of replacing cellarmasters every ten years, to prevent them from making themselves too much at home! Schwarz is in his seventh year when young Heinrich arrives to assume management of the estate. Mama is still in the background pulling the strings, however, and in three years she expects Schwarz to be dismissed. She does not reckon on a sudden stubborn streak in her hitherto docile Heinrich. Schwarz stays on.

During Hans-Günter Schwarz’s own apprenticeship, he spent a year at the Stumpf-Fitz Annaberg estate in Kallstadt, which was famous a generation ago for its Scheurebe. Schwarz learned to know and love this variety, taking it with him to Müller-Catoir. Now he is making the best Scheurebe in Germany. But we are ahead of ourselves.

The spirit of those days was technological. When young Hans-Günter emerged from viticultural school, the postwar economical miracle had given the Germans a sense of pride in their technological accomplishments. There was no question that modern grape breeding could

give novel varieties that would ripen each vintage. The newest clones of Riesling would produce huge yields without sacrificing quality. The latest machinery would take every risk out of vinification. Hans-Günter Schwarz came along determined to smash this icon of technology.

“We understand winemaking this way,” he says. “You watch over, you guide, you preserve, but you never alter. We place the highest emphasis on the inner material of the wine; this means that our wines experience no clarification or fining. We have never, in all my years here, had a wine that needed it. If you take care in the vineyards and during the harvest you can bring in healthy, high-acid fruit which clarifies itself. The first racking from the yeast in the only handling of the wine until bottling. The reasons: to preserve the natural freshness of the wine, to allow the particular varietal aromas and flavors to express themselves, and to use the minimum SO<sub>2</sub>.”

There’s more: extremely late harvesting, often into December. This means a naturally cold fermentation, with natural yeasts of course. No de-acidification: “Acidity is the fundament of fruit and must not be lost,” says Schwarz. There is no second racking. The wines are bottled sur-lie, giving most of them a fine, natural spritziness. There’s virtually no wood-aging, except in very cold vintages when the wines are too acid-stubborn to take a fully reductive handling. Süßreserve could be used, (though it’s well over ten years since it was) “provided it is very ripe, at least 90 degrees Oechsle, of the same variety as the base wine, and that it is made and kept by the cold-sterile method. No heating, no sorbic acid, no killer-yeasts.”

“Every time you handle a wine you take something out of it which you can never put back . . . we want to make wines which are **incomparable** in fragrance, flavor and varietal expression. As long as I’m responsible for what goes on in these vineyards and this cellar, there will be no compromises.”

If Schwarz were American, we’d be subjecting him to all sorts of hype and accolades: A MAGICIAN or A WIZARD IN THE CELLAR. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hans-Günter Schwarz is a decent man who loves his work, who has found his calling, who is whole and fulfilled. His touch is not magical: it is healing, like that of a good doctor (or a good masseur, for that matter). Everything he does expresses a core life value: love your work and let that love show in the work.

How does love show in the work of making wines? Corrie was sitting to my right last year, making her first visit to Müller-Catoir. As wine followed wine she grew very still. She rose abruptly from the table at one point and walked over to the window. I knew she was weeping. I’d stood at that very window with my eyes streaming. It isn’t only the accumulation of beauty that’s so moving, but the sense of its binding in human enterprise. As one work of loveliness follows another we sense the guidance of a loving heart. And then we go through that portal and into the mystery. We are not who we thought we were.

Hans-Günter loves grapes. As more vintners adopt his cellar methods it grows ever more apparent that Schwarz distinguishes himself most of all as a **grape grower**. Apprentices who’ve worked with him will tell you: “It’s

incredible! NOBODY grows better grapes or harvests more selectively than Schwarz.” He wants his wines to be as vividly grapey as they can be. He appreciates winier wines, but says, “This is our way here at this winery. We think German wine is unique in this capability, and we want to bring it to its full potential.”

Every one of Catoir’s wines will give you an intensity of specific varietality such as you have never seen. To call them “generous” isn’t enough. They seem to pulse with an inner soul, and with a quality of ecstasy I’ve felt in no other wines. They are a kind of Tantra of the palate. You feel “I had no idea my sensorium could register such things.” It’s akin to a keen hallucination, except that it’s real. You realize what you miss in other wines. It is all you can do to meet them. The concentration you need to apprehend their intensity and complexity is more than you summon for everyday experience. You realize how deeply you can go. The experience is akin to an uncanny harmony of opposites, at once sensually ecstatic and emotionally meditative.

Finally it is not merely the clarity, complexity and intensity of these wines which makes us love them so. Something must exist at a deeper level than mere excitement, and it does. In the best of these there is a quality of tenderness and refinement that finally melts our hearts.

One year before we sat down to taste we took a walk into Hans-Günter’s new dream-project. “There’s a beautiful parcel of 3.5 hectares directly across the street from the winery which we’ve been eyeing for years,” he said. “Two years ago when it came up for lease we made sure to outbid everyone just to be certain we’d get it. We probably paid too much for it, but Terry, I tell you, this is among the absolute best vineyards in the Pfalz. No other vineyard, not Forster Kirchenstück, nothing in Deidesheim or anywhere else, is any better than this.” As we walked through the vineyard I began to see why. It is surrounded on three sides by walls and buildings—in fact we laughingly named it “Clos du Bürgergarten”—giving it both protection from wind and a heat-island radiance of warmth. The exposure

is due south; it will receive fourteen hours of sunlight on a sunny Summer day. The soil is “perfect.”

So many memories . . . you know, if poltergeists are the ethereal remnants of tormented people, why can’t they also be the residue of souls in delight? The ghosts within these walls must be the happiest in creation. The sum of gratitude I alone have spent here would guarantee the presence of many kind and protective spirits for a hundred years.

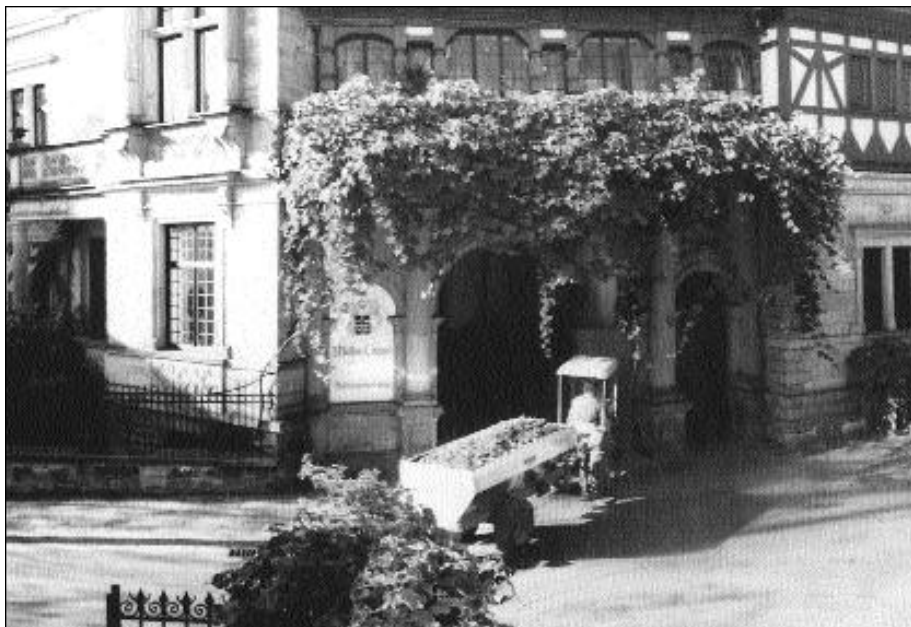
Do you discern a valedictory tone to this writing? I have two pieces of news, one of them happy and the other sad.

The happy news is that Hans-Günter Schwarz will leave the winery Müller-Catoir on June 30, 2002. He won’t exactly “retire,” but instead will devote himself to a variety of consulting projects and generally call his own shots. He’d like to travel while his health is still ruddy. He’s eagerly looking forward to his new life, and I am very happy for him.

The sad news is that Hans-Günter Schwarz will leave the winery Müller-Catoir on June 30, 2002. He’s hand-picked his successor, who’ll have worked at his side for several months before The Day. He will of course be available for an interim period to give all possible aid and advice. As Heinrich Catoir hands over the reins to his son, there shall be a new regime at Müller-Catoir, the results of which are impossible to determine.

One hopes! But that new cellar master will need the hide of a rhinoceros and the nerves of a lion. All eyes will be upon him, and tout le monde will expect the wines to decline. We shall see. Me, I shall sniff the air for miracles.

My seat faced the window. The wines of 2001 were, even by Schwarz’s exalted standards, sublime. I had tasted with him below this roof for fifteen years, and this was the last time. He had taught me, in a fundamental way, what wine was capable of, and how deeply one could love it, he in his way, me in mine. A dove sat on a wire across the street outside, alert yet somehow pensive, benign and tolerant. Hans-Günter doesn’t see her, but I do. Go in peace, old friend. The world is glad of you.



Müller-Catoir Estate

As some of you know, this is a restricted offering. That's why many of you have never seen it. I used to send it out separately to certain customers to express my gratitude for their loyalty. I'm still grateful! But it has occurred to me that I have Schaefer, Dönnhoff, Christoffel among others within this offering even though I'm forced to allocate their wines. It is perhaps unjust to Catoir's legacy to exclude this story from the book. But there still isn't enough wine to offer to everyone.

There is seldom a second chance at these. The winery allocates also. Sometimes other customers don't buy as much as was planned, and I get another crack, but you can't depend on it.

I'm disgusted that there could possibly be sticker-shock at Catoir's prices. This estate belongs with the ELITE white wine producers on earth: the great Burgundy domains, the great Alsations, the great Austrian—you name it. AND AMONG THOSE PRODUCERS, CATOIR

IS THE LEAST EXPENSIVE! This would seem to create a sales opportunity: "The best value in the world for absolutely stellar white wine," or something along those lines. People are paying **much** more than this for wines that aren't this good. It's frankly baffling.

Maybe it's partly a German label thing—the "What??? \$18 for a KABINETT???" syndrome. And if such a wine doesn't have 96-point scores floating around all over the place it could well be a hard commodity to sell. But only if one is limited to selling commodities.

This is a winery in which virtually every wine is a masterpiece. I am trying to confine my offering to only those wines most useful to you. I leave a lot of gems behind. Go ahead, pull a cork and get turned on by wine again! Maybe you'll feel as I do: **people have to know these wines, to see the possibilities of wine! Hard sell? FUGEDDABOUTT!**

### The Wines:

#### GMC-033 1999 Spätburgunder

+

In the early days Hans-Günter tried to make Pinot Noir as though it were white wine. Impressive as those early efforts were, they didn't quite work. The current "regime" for Pinot Noir is about 60% second-year barrique and 40% new, malo in cuve. The past several vintages have been various degrees of fascinating, but this 1999 heralds a new era of possibility for this grape in Germany. This isn't only their best, it is the best Pinot Noir ever made in Germany. Yields of 30 hectoliters per hectare (reduced by hail), "but one basket more beautiful than the next," said Hans-Günter. It has a color of deep crimson and a gorgeous, complex perfume of tobacco, damson, violet and spice-box. Lovely cut and richness here and an endless finish. Intense and cling-y but not heavy. Superlative Pinot Noir.

#### GMC-040 2001 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Kabinett Trocken

++

Müller-Catoir makes the best Muscat in Germany, though one has one's eyes on young Minges! The two styles are disparate: Minges is more stabbingly varietal, Catoir's is more herbal and mineral. In fact I'd put the best of these alongside the VERY best there is; that is, Boxler's Brand, Zind-Humbrecht's Goldert, Sorg, Rolly Gassmann. This is another of those varieties one only grows if one's a bit of a nut. It's a fiend in the vineyard and some years it barely yields, but keep your eye on the prize: when it works, watch out! This wine actually made my hand tremble, it's so gorgeous. I love it best of any Muscat I've ever tasted; it can't be any more sublime. 90 Oechsle. Basil and lime-blossom. The palate is as filigree and concentrated as many Rieslings. The finish is saturated with lime and tilleul. "Muscat embodies the Pfalz mentality perfectly," saus Hans-Günter: "It says goodbye and doesn't leave!" Indeed, this is insanely long.

SOS: 0 (from immediately to seven years intact: Muscat doesn't so much develop as preserve with age.)

#### GMC-041 2001 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Kabinett Trocken

This is a Grand Cru, but – hooray – Catoir doesn't participate in the Erstes Gewächs system. These are still young vines post-flurbereinigung, and still the one site in which only Rheingau clones are planted. But before we get to it, one needs to remark on the odd fact that Riesling, the world's greatest white grape actually lives in the shadow of the Scheurebe and Rieslaner here. 2001 should change that! Recent vintages have displayed a searching minerality, making these as intricate as any Rieslings in existence. This shows its terroir-signature flavors of bouquet-garni, garrigue, wild plum and mineral (they do in fact have wild herbs growing between the vines). Wonderful complexity. My favorite of many dry Kabinetts, though the word itself is a misnomer; Johannes Selbach remarked upon "Kabinett with 97 grams total alcohol!" and Hans-Günter merely shrugged: "There wasn't anything lighter!"

SOS: 0 (between three and eleven years)

- GMC-042 **2001 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +  
 Now we're into the famous Pfalz clone 90, which gives Riesling dressed up in Scheurebe's clothes, all citric and tropical fruit extravagance. Yet Schwarz's wines have always – especially in the last eight or nine vintages – showed trenchant minerality and searching intricacy. This was the most mineral of all the dry Rieslings; brings a cool chalky iridescence, really ultra-violet fruit and mineral penetration; the flavor plays a note only dogs can hear. Very dry but cries to be swallowed. Jasmine and peony. There are two tanks, of which 2113 is firmer and 2112 is even more citric and barely less explicitly complex. 2113 comes first.  
 SOS: 0 (between three and fifteen years)
- GMC-043 **2001 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** ++  
 This recalls the miraculous '98, possibly with even more density. You eat this wine. A riotously citric nose leads to a profoundly mineral palate. The body screams swallow me! Look, it's been twenty years since I first tasted Catoir's wines, and I remain quite serenely convinced white wine reaches an apotheosis with wines like this sizzling temptress who's begging me to suck her down.  
 SOMMELLIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)
- GMC-044 **2001 Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This is all cherries and berries; powder-puffy perfume – if it were perfume you'd read about how they blended 237 different fragrances to create it – just ungodly inner substance here. I've always loved the cool chalky character of this site.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)
- GMC-045 **2001 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 (#2133) “well well well,” I wrote, “so this is the view from the summit.” Inconceivably exquisite. Plum essence in a perfect duck consommé. Spice spice spice. Mineral sings “Honey, I'm home!”  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty three years)
- GMC-046 **2001 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** +++  
 (#2134) I hadn't known this was coming. How do you get higher than the summit? Stand on tippy-toes. Now comes the salt to shimmy into the sweetness and glide in an itchy, urgent gorgeousness over the palate. Profound, magnificent without opacity, rather delineated to the last molecule of detail. It tastes this way for the same reason blossoms open—for the bees to be useful, for the plant to live and make new plants, for a few human passersby to pause, sniff, delight, and feel a strange longing, almost sad, wanting to touch another warm skin, oddly happy and alone in the odd lonely world.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GMC-050H **2001 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**  
 Baby-BA . . . well not really “baby” since it's well into BA-ripeness, but very rich and concentrated, pure pêche-de-vignes and orange-blossom all the way through; tangy, seductive and wonderful.  
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty seven years)
- GMC-051H **2001 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++  
 This has all the best possible Eiswein flavor with none of the forbidding spikiness; high tones, cool and bouyant, yet so sleek and papaya-like; even a kind of frivolity, as if an irrepressible loveliness. Certainly makes the case that great Eiswein is the greatest of all dessert wines.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GMC-048 **2001 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese** +++  
 Hans-Günter Schwarz is the arch-mage of Scheu, possessing all its wizardly mysteries, able to conjure the gods with it. His Scheurebe is unsentimental and powerful, replete with esoteric secrets, deadly sharp and cunning. But oh, you haven't lived til you've died this little death. An immediately fabulous Scheu nose. Sage, pink grapefruit, mango, peach; from 35-year vines, and man just a sizzling palate; this wine plays the music of the spheres, gets deeper and deeper, more essentially peachy; even more lift than the legendary '98. The nth degree of penetration and exotic complexity, but as vivid as ice-cold mountain water. No other wine on earth like it.  
 SOS: 3 (between three and thirteen years)

GMC-047 **2001 Gimmeldinger Schlössel Rieslaner Spätlese**

Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anywhere else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Schwarz loves it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives more acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. In Schwarz's hands it produces the most singular great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. "One of the nicest things about a Rieslaner," says Schwarz, "is that the berries will shrivel and dry out without any fungus. Our very best Beerenauslesen are from such fruit." Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would never himself do such a thing . . . ANY RIESLANER FROM THIS ESTATE IS WORTH YOUR UTMOST ATTENTION AND CONSIDERATION. Consider the amazing collection of wines from this estate from this grape over the last ten years, surely one of the great testaments to greatness of any wines on earth. To the matter at hand: this is a frisky little fiend with a blowtorch of varietal scritchiness; the Catoir detractors will point to it and say "See? Overdone, hot, garish!" and I know, I understand. I disagree, but O.K.! I see this as Rieslaner in a sort of fascinating tantrum. It could have used more sweetness, but there are others to come, and Schwarz didn't want them too close in profile.

SOS: 2 (between ten and twenty five years)

GMC-049H **2001 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml**

+

I almost didn't dare lift the glass. When I did I reared back as if I couldn't bear it. The nose recalls '98 and '92, the two Greats. Exotic, soursop, implacable. Hmmm; you'll meet this wine on its terms, it appears. The palate is thick, a lavender scented lamb jus; wonderfully expressive yet hasn't quite the iridescent brilliance of '98. Monumental, to be sure, and just a little heavy. Youthful ungainliness? We'll see.

SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty seven years)

GMC-052H **2001 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner TBA, 12/375ml**

++

This is a molten yet tender mass of vinosity. Nearly 200 degrees Oechsle (with 13.4 g.l. acidity), it's intensely sweet and white-raising; almost suggests those monster Petit Mansengs they're making in Jurançon, though this has more iron and less banana, more strawberry and wild herb. This one does break through the density, though it needs some time yet to assume its final form. If you enjoy German wine, spare a thought for Hans-Günter Schwarz's legacy the next time you're drinking something you especially love. There's barely a great contemporary producer who's untouched by Schwarz's work.



# koehler-ruprecht

## pfalz • kallstadt

I remember when I started to “get” the dry wines. Not how or why, but certainly when, and when it happened it was both thrilling and disconcerting. I have strong opinions about certain things but I really try not to be pulled around by them. So I didn’t used to like Bernd Philippi’s Trocken wines, but now I did, some of them at least, and maybe we were just ready for each other. That, or I used to be a doofus. This amazing winery’s production rhythms don’t, alas, congrue with my commercial rhythms, and so I never really get to show you a vintage the way I’d like. Business is brisk at this very trendy winery, and Bernd Philippi doesn’t bottle many “sweet” wines any more. His dry wines are surely among the best in Germany . . . but really. Don’t even get me started again.

After all the commotion over Bernd’s legendary dog, I make haste to inquire after the lil’ fella’s

wellbeing upon my arrival. I get an exegesis on the animal’s every habit, thought and digestive function. “Oh, he’s getting fat, the little bastard,” said Bernd. “It doesn’t help that I feed him everything. He eats better than I do.” Evidently Bernd took his little friend to dine at Germany’s pre-eminent three-star restaurant where the chef (a chum of his, as is, apparently, tout le monde) seems to have cooked a three-course meal for the animal, which I’m told was served in three consecutive silver doggie-bowls on the kitchen floor. I still haven’t been properly introduced to the pampered tyke, as it happens. I did, however, have a remarkable encounter with Lui, the dog belonging to Bernd’s brother-in-law, who owns a hotel-restaurant astride the winery. Lui is a Bernese Sennhound, and he is indeed quite zen. As a puppy he was apt to be, um, amorous, but he’s a big ol’ grownup now and I figured not so frisky.

I figured wrong. Now Lui is a very large dog but he seemed gentle enough just schlumping there at the base of the stairs, so I went over to pet him. I like dogs under any circumstances, but when I’m apart from my loved ones and homesick I find dogs very soothing. So I murmured little

affectionate things to Lui about what a good dog he was which he apparently took to be foreplay, because the next thing I know a creature almost larger than I am was thrusting his massive haunches



es against my spindly little leg. Of course just at that moment one of the other hotel guests had to appear from out of the breakfast room. I smiled feebly and shrugged my shoulders “Dogs like me.” “Indeed!”

Bernd-Philippi—pardon me: The LEGENDARY Bernd-Philippi—is the master of this establishment and lord of all he surveys. He has taken what was always a

- Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares
- Annual production: 8,400 cases
- Top sites: Kallstadter Saumagen, Steinacker and Kronenberg
- Soil types: Limestone detritus, sandy loam, partly with gravel
- Grape varieties: 56% Riesling, 19% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% each of Chardonnay and Grauburgunder, 2% of each Dornfelder and Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% other varieties

successful estate and turned it into one of THE estates in Germany. His wines, like his own Falstaffian persona, are larger-than-life. He’s been allocating for years now; he’s been raising his prices consistently with nary a murmur of protest from his loyal clientele, who are happy just to obtain the wines and who know the value they (still) represent; he’s been a wine writer’s **dream**, such is the dimension of his character and his readiness with a maverick opinion. He probably stops bullets in his **teeth** for all I know.

Bernd is the archetypal Pfalzer lion. He’s one of those guys you can really **capture** in a photograph, as his every expression and gesture is imbued with Bernd-ness. He’s become aware that it’s his experimenter persona that’s most appealing to journalists, and he’s seen the need to stress his role as Keeper of the Saumagen. “Eighty percent of what I do is Saumagen, O.K.?—that’s my main thing. The other twenty percent is my games, you know, the stuff I do for fun.”

There probably isn’t another great vineyard in Germany as unknown over here as the Saumagen. It’s a



limestony, rocky soil in a bowl-shaped heat trap that gives some of the ripest Riesling grapes in Europe.

But all its parcels are not created equal. Used to be there were three small sites (Nill, Kirchenstück and Horn) which made up a GROSSLAGE called Saumagen. Now it's the single-site name, encompassing a fair range of exposures and soils. Bernd's parcel is probably the finest, south-facing terraces right in the heart of the bowl. Bernd has never failed to harvest Spätlese from this site, even in the wettest, most miserable years. I'm sure that a ready supply of ripe fruit contributes to Philippi's serenity as a vintner. But don't let that calm exterior fool you; this man is as proud and dedicated as they come.

I remember an old Charlie Parkerism (when asked how to go about being a great jazz musician): "First master your instrument," he said. "Then forget about all that shit and just PLAY." There you go! Bernd makes his way through the cellar like a virtuoso who no longer has to think about technique. And his wines are saturated with personal expression. His "voice," deep, resonant, gravelly, comes through in all his wines. Often remarkable, sometimes astonishing, sometimes **undrinkable** but always original, these wines are not for the faint of palate, and no one feels lukewarm about them. They represent the purity of an old style you almost don't see anymore.

Bernd has no fear of oxygen; indeed, these wines' profound acid-extract structure seem to relish extended aging on the lees, frequent rackings, and lengthy storage in wood. I've known cellar-rats here who've told me privately that Bernd's winemaking breaks most of the modern rules, that by all reckoning they shouldn't work at all. Well, guess again. Other Philippi principles include no cultured yeasts, and none but the "classical" Geisenheim clones of Riesling. He likes alcohol and body and Nietzschean thunder in his wines. He doesn't like sweetness, and even his wines with residual sugar are on the dry side. Left to his own devices he'd drink nothing but dry wines.

Which is a pity, at least to me, because good though many of the dry wines are, even a modicum of sweetness often elevates them; really **profound** now, not just voluminous, with gut-grabbing flavors of ginger, dough and maize. These stand as the antonym of the current trend toward reductive vinification which—you may have noticed—I happen to like. But the world would be a much poorer place without wines like these, great charging bears, with all manner of woodsy, animal secondary flavors, yet supported by a rigid acid skeleton and capable of amazing aging.

I don't think Bernd would quarrel with any of that, yet I do detect a change of sorts in these wines, and I don't know if it's the recent vintages, the current cellar-master or a change Bernd himself desires and has brought about. The wines have all the **weight** they always did, yet they seem silkier somehow, less rugged. Even as Bernd himself continues to chart new territory in egregious debauchery his wines become more and more refined. When I was with my colleagues at Haus Skurnik being dragged yelping and bellowing into computer-land, we decided to celebrate my grudging survival by opening a couple Auslesen from 1998, a Lingenfelder and a Koehler-Ruprecht. The wizard of reductiveness and the sorcerer of casks lined up—and Philippi's wine was the more piquant, the more playful, the more buoyant. I like to tease Bernd—he's such an easy target—but in fact I respect him hugely for not becoming his own caricature, and for steering his wines to ever-deepening finesse.

I'm happy to offer some SPECIAL LIBRARY-RELEASES. This program is an effort to show German wine beyond the most infantile stage of its development. We're specifically targeting sommeliers now, as you are the group who most need to have these lovely wines at or near the apex of their drinkability. In most cases the wines sell for their original prices, i.e. you pay no upcharge for having them stored perfectly and offered to you in mint condition. You're welcome!

#### Koehler-Ruprecht at a glance:

In many opinions the leading estate of the Pfalz - certainly among the top five. Of those estates, these are the biggest, most massively scaled wines. Extraordinarily old-style approach to vinification: no stainless steel. On an incredible roll the past several vintages, and currently making some of the best dry Rieslings in Europe.

#### how the wines taste:

They are uncompromisingly stony-gingery, dense, wine-y, not at all grapey. They tend to polarize tasters; if you love them they give you something you almost can't get anywhere else: a warmly satisfying old-fashioned bigness of flavor that's masculine and lusty. Other tasters just don't "see" them, as they lack the modern steely brilliance. Bernd's grudgingly willing to concede that the reductive style makes friends but in his heart he finds that type of wine too sterile and simple, and lacking the capacity to age. That being said, in recent vintages I sense a slow movement toward a more classical profile for many of Bernd's wines, perhaps as his own palate becomes more demanding. Bernd routinely makes elite-quality wines; in most tastings of Pfalz wines his are in the top group. I myself reach for them frequently and find they give that little **extra** that great wines give. If you don't know these you owe it to yourself to check them out, **ESPECIALLY IF YOU BUY FOR A RESTAURANT**, as these are among the most food-friendly wines of any in this vast universe of possibility.

- GKR-075 **2001 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett** +  
 This tastes like many other growers' Auslese; a wonderful nose, jasmine, tapioca, semolina; unheard-of density and solidity and delightful charm, a kind of lovely dense cloud of vinosity.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)
- GKR-076 **2001 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese**  
 Tasted from a cloudy cask sample scheduled for its first racking the following day, so no verb-o-goobers outta my pen, pal. But, a perennial Great in an especially great year. I buy, you buy. No buy, it be gone bye bye.
- GKR-65 **1992 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 LIBRARY RELEASE: This is simply a fantastically juicy and powerful mouthful of grown-up Riesling.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 0 (drink now and for another two to three years)
- GKR-077 **1998 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese "R"** +  
 "R" is Bernd's reserve designation. First offering. When has there ever been a Riesling that tasted like this? Like brioche and pumpkin! Super-fine fruit, perfect botrytis, none too sweet, fine length; wonderful food-wine. I couldn't help myself: swallowed! (one of just three times during the entire trip)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty five years)

#### THE DRY WINES

- GKR-073 **2000 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 An incredible wine from 2000; grip and fruit and mineral, and a fennel-frond aroma, and clean fruit, and sinewy-spicy but not sauvage, and perfectly dry. All of its generous volume of flavor derives from fruit, which is what so many dry German wines are disastrously missing.  
 SOS: 0 (now to two years, or again from eight to fifteen years)
- GKR-68 **1991 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Trocken "R"**  
 This is a stunning, dry Riesling that could easily be a mature Smaragd from Nikolaihof. Flinty-crackery-mineral fragrance of the 1991 vintage; it shows what y'all call "petrol" (where d'ya go for gas, anyways??); DRY, frisky, lots of spiel, woodsy, lush and dense, glycerin and extract. Has only 11.8% Alcohol but I can't remember a Wachau Federspiel in its class.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: -1
- GKR-074 **1997 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese Trocken "R"**  
 First offering. If you like F.X. (and who doesn't!) you'll fle-e-ep over this; a big doughy power-pack of intensity here, and an ore-like intensity and sweet-veggie undertones. A kick of sternness on the finish, a kind of "so there!" As masculine as Riesling gets; rolls over the palate like a double-decker bus.  
 SOS: 0 (now to thirteen years)

You gotta live this guy. A few months ago he replied to an email from someone who'd seen his website, and who was inquiring about Pinot Noir. Rainer was arguably the first to make serious Pinot Noir in the Pfalz, perhaps in Germany. He wrote: I want to emphasize that I don't want to make a 'Burgundian style' nor a 'New World style.' I want to 'help deliver' what 'naturally grows' in our Burgweg vineyard and what also reflects at least in part our history, our tradition and our heritage. I acknowledge that wine is not all nature (probably never really has been) – the vine, I am sure, is one of the oldest 'domesticated' plants we have – wine is nurtured no doubt, but it depends how far you are prepared to 'break it in'. I find a bronco more admirable than a Lipizzaner . . . a Lipizzaner is not a horse, it's a court-fool! Do you understand what I mean to say?"

I do. And I know these aren't mere words to Rainer Lingenfelder. They sometimes cost. They all-but-ruined two of his past ten vintages, when intervention to avoid mildews was urgently needed. But Rainer would rather not intervene, and if this principle costs him from time to time, so be it. He's printed up some nifty black tees saying "Lingenfelder: the Age of Post-Chardonnism" but when he does the next run I want to suggest putting "Walking The Walk" on the back.

The other good news is we have a deliriously pretty vintage in 2001. It is, however, rather a departure for Lingenfelder—the wines are both sweeter and higher in acidity than his norm—yet it signals a new maturity and flexibility, to surf the particular wave of a vintage.

Rainer Lingenfelder's "tasting" room is actually in the dining room of his and Elisabeth's house. It's one of the best places I know to taste wine. There's a pure, creamy light napped over everything, thanks to the north exposure. The walls are pearly-opaline in color, the tablecloth is white, the curtains are magenta—as though to refer to the red wines you're also given to taste. It's peaceful enough to hear a sparrow clear her throat outside the window, but it's not one of those stifling Temples of Tasting where all you want to do is giggle. It is typical of the care taken by Rainer, a care that goes beyond simple diligence.

Everything Rainer does is undertaken with fastidious thought and care. Everything he thinks and feels also; when you speak with him there aren't any knee-jerk opinions



Rainer Lingenfelder

casually tossed off (except mine, if I happen to be in the vicinity). One year we were talking about the influence of yield-restrictions on wine quality. Rainer's cousin happens to be the vineyard manager at Chalk Hill, and he's been able to increase yields with no diminishment of wine quality **by any objective standard of measurement**. "This is a favorite hobbyhorse

- Vineyard area: 15 hectares
- Annual production: 11,700 cases
- Top sites: Grosskarlbacher Burgweg and Osterberg, Freinsheimer Goldberg
- Soil types: calcareous soil over limestone, loess, sand
- Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 20% Spätburgunder, 10% Scheurebe, 10% Dornfelder, 5% Silvaner, 15% other varieties

for wine journalists," says Rainer, "because it's simple and dramatic; low yields equals high quality, and if you're any good you must be working with low yields." But surely there's a great deal of truth in this, isn't there? Oversimplified as it might be? Of course there is, says Rainer, but it isn't the whole truth; it is only the truth if **all other things are equal**. A vineyard well-cared for will give the highest possible yield consistent with quality and with the long-term health of the vine. The next guy's yields might be lower on paper, but that could well be due to sloppy vineyard management and poor husbandry; HIS WINES WON'T NECESSARILY BE BETTER. Not a very sexy opinion, but it has the texture of verisimilitude: things aren't, after all, reducible to ironclad formulas.

And it would be one thing if Rainer's wines were run-of-the-mill and all this was nothing more than an elegant rationalization after the fact. Well, most of you have tasted Rainer's wines; what do you think? I'll tell you what I think: I think Mr. Lingenfelder is capable of making some of the very best wines in the Pfalz and indeed all of Germany.

His wines always have something EXTRA: more concentration, more drive and purpose, more **expressiveness**. When Rainer talks, I listen and shut the hell up. His perspective is so practical and international, and his English so idiomatically fluent, I can often forget just how EURO-PEAN he actually is. The Europeans are citizens of a large

er world than we Americans. Their perspectives are both broader and reach deeper into the past.

Rainer got around in his wild heedless youth; he migrated to Australia to get work as a bush pilot, he says, but ended up in a winery. He moved to New Zealand and California, to the Médoc, to EGYPT, where he consulted at a winery—the winery—then back to Germany where he made the wines at Sichel for several years; yes, Rainer made BLUE NUN for a living. Finally he realized he couldn't do the justice he wanted to do to his own wines, and returned to Grosskarlbach full time.

"The quality of our wine is determined in the vineyards; one cannot make outstanding wine in the cellar," says Rainer. "The vineyard factor is especially important when one talks about the grape grower's wines such as Riesling, Pinot Noir, Scheurebe, etc. versus the winemaker's wines such as Chardonnay. I am interested in primary, grape-borne flavors, not so much in secondary flavors introduced by man such as oak or yeast. We don't ben-tonite fine because it strips too much away, not just protein but also color and flavor. You probably noticed our wines are deeper in color than the wines of many other grow-

ers. We'd rather leave all the natural components in the wine, the proteins, the minerals, the acidity, the tannin. We don't want to 'polish' or 'style' a wine; we want to allow its original, natural character to shine through."

Rainer is equally cogent on the contentious subject of Süssreserve: "It's perfectly O.K. to use Süssreserve. It's no more 'unnatural' to add grape juice to a wine than to stop it from fermenting dry by 'artificial' means such as refrigeration, centrifuging or the addition of sulfur dioxide. I'm not much in favor of sulfur dioxide, and wines whose fermentations were stopped bind much more sulfur dioxide than wines where Süssreserve was added." Rainer's yields are low and he uses natural yeasts to ferment. He's a believer in the Neustadt Clone 90 for regionally typical Rieslings. His Pinot Noir goes through malolactic fermentation and spends about eighteen months in barriques of varying type and age.

"I look for expression of character [his emphasis]. Character could be many things depending on the style; it could be depth of flavor, or complexity, or fruit, or elegance, or lightness or richness, etc. It is not so important which character it is; the importance is whether the character is clearly expressed."

#### Lingenfelder at a glance:

Sensational expressiveness of fruit.

A consistent standout in this portfolio. Perfect pivot-wines away from creamy-Chardonnay types.

#### how the wines taste:

Lingenfelder's wines have a unique and magical harmony of elements: superb clarity of flavor with distinctly aristocratic fullness of expression. "An advantage we have with German wines is that you feel the **power**, the intensity of flavor, but you don't feel the heat," he says. That's part of it. Rainer's wines sometimes show a pleasing hint of earthiness which supports their fluted brilliance. If Catoir's wines sing in a pure, piping soprano, Lingenfelder's are a mellow alto. His Scheurebe, on which he lavishes so much tender affection, is a riot of tropical opulence yet somehow contained within a disciplined clarity.

#### GLI-073 2000 Spätburgunder

There's only one in 2000 (no reserve "Ganymed"), and it was racked the day before my visit from many casks into a makeshift assemblage, but it's tender and winsome, albeit light; but true. The sandalwood-soy side of Pinot Noir (not to be confused with soy-rebe); charming, with a hint of Pernand violets. Won't make old bones but will charm with its grace and length within the 2-4 years it should be drunk.

#### GLI-65 1999 Spätburgunder "Ganymed"

Rainer's taken to calling his "reserve" cuvée "Ganymed" after the god of legend. The original label depicts the Pompeian chap in a state of, how to say this, anatomical correctness, which would run afoul of the BATF if we ever let them see it. I tried to explain this to Rainer. "You'd first have to tell them it is a bona-fide (no pun intended) work of art, hung (again no pun intended) in a museum somewhere." Too much trouble, he agreed. "Why not put a little sticker over the naughty bits?" he offered. I like this idea! In fact, we could have one in, say, 500 labels depicting our hero in a condition of tumescence, and the lucky recipient could win a prize! Joe Marketing. Or we could lop off the offending member. "Then he'd be pee-no-more!" I said with a shriek of glee. I love it when I pun. The schlong is gone but the melody lingers on . . . The '99 is in rather an ungainly funk at the moment. It's showing some heat and overripeness, yet Pinot is notoriously fickle (with or without its pickle!) and I'm willing to gamble the basic four-square chunkiness of the wine will win the day. The '99 is a Statement, but I'd rather drink the 2000. Thanks to all of you, by the way, for making this wine a success. There was, one might say, some residual skepticism back when I first introduced a "serious" German Pinot Noir, and now everyone's making them. Some are good. Others are dreadful, overwrought, over-oaked, astringent, inky and ratty and vulgar. You sometimes feel each guy is trying to out-extract his neighbor. Lingenfelder keeps steering his steady course through it all, making his moderate, elegant adult red wines. Yay on him.

- GLI-068 **2001 Lingenfelder “Bird Label” Riesling** +  
 This is a merchant-bottling, partly from Lingenfelder fruit and partly purchased fruit. The label, “which was expensive,” is absolutely wonderful, droll and dear and full of whimsy. It started as an experiment for Oddbins, and the wine was well received and Rainer thought—knew!—I’d like it. Why wouldn’t I like it? It tastes like a LINGENFELDER wine in miniature, and I’ll tell you right now THERE ISN’T ANOTHER RIESLING ON THE MARKET WITHIN MILES OF THIS QUALITY AT ITS PRICE. With all my love and esteem for the good Herr Graham, look the hell out. There’s just a surmise of sweetness, but man it’s juicy and complex; stylish, great fruit, wonderful yin-yang of salty mineral and perfectly poised sweetness. A wisp sleeker than ’99—as it would be—but more piquant and animated. The only danger is it’s TOO GOOD for its market “echelon,” but this doesn’t seem to bother y’all since we’re selling the huevos out of this Bird. Why? Because it’s cheep cheep cheep.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (now to four years)
- GLI-071 **2001 Scheurebe Kabinett Halbtrocken (Grosskarlbacher Burgweg)**  
 Ultra-fine cassis and mandarin-soy nose; palate shows gorgeous spice and salty-curranty tang. All the 2001 length and inner meatiness. Personally I think it should be illegal to eat Asiatic food without it, and I’m writing my congressman.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (now to five years)
- GLI-072 **2001 Scheurebe Spätlese old vines (Freinsheimer Goldberg)** +  
 Prepare for a little untamed Scheu-weasel action here, cuz this critter is feral and deranged. Infra-red varietal expression; cherry-smoky char of botrytis, and undeflected spicy attack. As subtle as a swamp adder, but just as mysterious.  
 SOS: 2 (now to eight years)
- GLI-069 **2001 Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg)** +  
 The first of the 2001s to show the silky, more filigree face of Lingenfelder, whose wines are commonly juicy and yielding, but who wisely went with the flow in ’01 and made these sprightly charmers. This Riesling is just so vigorous and animated; beautifully piquant, with an operatic dialog of fruits and salts. Almost haunting. Has flavors so elegantly draped over its structure, with such supple assuredness. More than mere wine. Bird-song, skater-grace, melody.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)
- GLI-070 **2001 Riesling Spätlese Old Vines (Freinsheimer Goldberg)**  
 We kept blending this sweeter and sweeter until the sweetness disappeared. Much more muscle than the Osterberg, with correspondingly less transparency. The nose is all bergamot and tangelo and tropical razzmatazz; palate is on a bigger frame, turkey versus chicken if you will. Still wonderful grip and great roasty ripeness—essentially a dryish Auslese. A very long wine with plenty of plenty.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)
- GLI-64 **1994 Sekt Riesling “Satyr” (Brut)** +  
 Rainer and his Greeks! But hoo boy, take one taste of this gorgeousness and you’ll agree he mythed his calling. This takes Riesling fizz to a new level. It’s made from 1994 Kabinett-level juice, five years on the lees, and was made WITHOUT SUGAR. In fact, three times without sugar. No chaptalization. No sugar used in the prise du mousse (he used fresh must instead) and no sugar in the dosage (must once again). It’s stylish, delineated, complex, racy, vigorous and fine. Like a cross of Avize Blanc de Blancs and Aubry’s Nombre D’Or. Although this is clearly Riesling—Lingenfelder Riesling—it’s as good in its way as most NV Champagnes. It fully merits its price. This is one Satyr you shouldn’t pass over.

Inside Germany they sometimes sniff huffily that Darting makes little sweet-ums for the export markets but cannot be taken deeply seriously as a fine producer, blah-de-blah. Me, I mutter to myself several times a day, thank God for Darting, thank God for Darting . . .

I do believe the estate tends to ride the vintage, i.e. they are spectacular in years which suit them ('94, '96, '98, 2001) and sometimes withdrawn in vintages which don't suit them—the soft ones like '99 and '97 or the dubious ones like the rot-compromised '95s and 2000s. That we sell them marvelously regardless testifies to their drinkability and basic lip-smack-o-rama. The 2001s will flip you out, jefe.

It's like a runaway train, this agency. When things work this well it always seems so easy; why

can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it. Even with the growers, I'm never entirely sure how much of my heart to reveal when I taste their wines, but with Helmut Darting I can giggle or weep or dance the shimmy.

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local co-op. With Helmut Darting's arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official "Meisterbetrieb" meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn't be possible (theoretically!) to track down all the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. "Actually, no," he said, "because I don't always develop a rapport or sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!" With Helmut Darting it appears to have been a case of simpatico profundo instantaneo. Schwarz even gave permission for his price list text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting's list, I knew that Something Was Up.

If you're unfamiliar with the reductivist's creed, it goes a little like this: every time you handle a wine, you diminish it; therefore minimal "winemaking" above all! The most important thing is to grow superb grapes and let their flavors sing out in the wine. You ferment as slow and cold as possible, with natural yeasts. You rack once and once only, after fermentation. You keep the wine away from oxygen at all costs. After the first racking, the next time you handle the wine is to bottle it.

- Vineyard area: 17 hectares
- Annual production: 12,500 cases
- Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg
- Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam
- Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4 % each of Portugieser, Muskateller and Ortega, 3% each of Chardonnay and Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties

No fining, no clarification, no de-acidification, Süsreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süsreserve, itself made reductively. All of this results in wine in which the original grape character is preserved with an almost unreal clarity. These compare to "normal" wines as compact discs compare to LPs. Which is why certain people don't like this style. They find it too digitally clear and somehow lacking in "warmth." I can appreciate that view, but I don't agree with it. These are strikingly exciting wines and the world's a better place for them.

Darting has arrived among the "classified" estates in Germany, yet as wonderful as this is, I can't help but wonder what kind of wines they'd make if they owned land in the classic sites of Deidesheim, Forst and Wachenheim. We need someone sensible there to yawp against the dry-at-all-costs insanity.

**Darting at a glance:**

The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made reductively brilliant wines. Great 2001s.

**how the wines taste:**

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-pollenly with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting's wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal. They're kind of like rookie Catoirs (I know tasters who prefer them, but I wouldn't go quite that far) with a frisky mischievous charm.

**GDR-104L 2001 Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter**

In ripe vintages with good substance this can be addictive stuff, and this is sure a purty lil' thang. It's darling. Winning. Charming. Fruity. Fresh. Tail-wagging, eyelid-batting loveable. You do know that it's pink wine, right?  
SOS: 2 (between immediately and eighteen months)

**GDR-095L 2001 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

We just can't seem to keep this boy in stock! It'll be in the market by the time you read this, and man is it tasty. Orange-blossom and peachy; peony-hyacinth undertones; spicy, citric (pink grapefruit); honeyed yet fresh and bouyant. It is, as always, absurd value.  
SOS: 2 (between one and five years)

**GDR-096 2001 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**

You'll see I offer three Riesling Kabinetts. I hesitated to confuse you with too many choices, but none of these is exactly plentiful and we need Kabinett. Hochbenn is always the sultry one, and this year it shows passion fruit and potpourri; there's a hint of something-resembling botrytis which isn't botrytis; it's the apparent-driest of the three Kabs, and has a white-raisin and caramel profile. Quite the diva, this one.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 2 (I wrote "a weak 2") (between two and eight years)

**GDR-097 2001 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**

This "Kabinett" has . . . 100 degrees Oechsle Auslese. Look at its price. No, you are not hallucinating. (Well you might be, but not about this.) It has the freshest, most pure-riesling fragrance of the 3; vigorous, wet-hay, but that ripeness accounts for a martial power and sweet-lime bite on the finish. In fact the most "serious" and demanding of the 3.  
SOS: 2 (between six and fourteen years)

**GDR-098 2001 Ungsteiner Bettelhaus Riesling Kabinett**

Tangy-salty; high polleny almost beeswax notes along with a kind of bergamot flan. Meyer-lemon, and a big splash of crazy-ripe fruit.  
SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

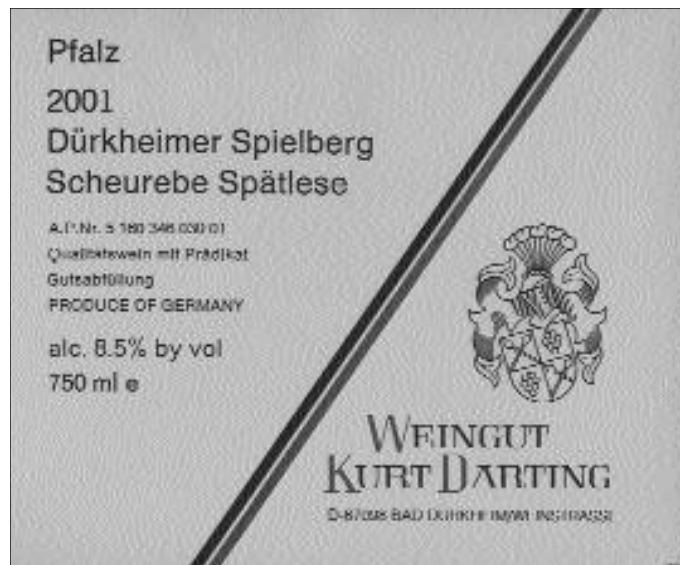
**GDR-102 2001 Dürkheimer Steinberg Muskateller Kabinett**

Melon-y nose, kiwi; tastes for all the world Halbtrocken (with 40 g.l. of sugar, I just don't get it), varietally true if "impure" i.e. all the exotic fruits, but still snappy and spearminty.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (from immediately to four years)

**GDR-099 2001 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

104 Oechsle. We worked like a fiend on this one before finally arriving at 70 g.l. sweetness with Spätlese dosage. This is important; Auslese dosage was too rich, made the wine too somber. Now it's anything but somber; allspice, jasmine and coconut aromas; nice piquant complexity, almost tensile; spicy finish. A fine old-style Spätlese, like a 1975; charming and ladylike.

- GDR-100 **2001 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese** +  
 Um, check out the price. A steal. You'll be stealin' Spielberg. "Spätlese" with 115 degrees Oechsle, at this price; close encounters of the absurd kind. A classic lavender-cassis and blackberry Scheu expression. Fabulously direct and sizzingly spicy. I mean, this is honey-moon make-up sex during Mardi Gras with the Rayettes providing background moans. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
 SOS: 2 (between one and seven years)
- GDR-101 **20001 Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Auslese** +  
 120 Oechsle now. Bigger, more brooding; all cassis, dense and meaty; tangy, salty and gorgeous. Most impressive wine!  
 SOS: 3 (between three and fifteen years)
- GDR-103 **2001 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** ++  
 The shining hour of Darting? Could very well be. Perfection of varietal nose. Monumental solidity, implacable (bit not opaque) density, thunderous complexity; look, this is nearly the apex of possibility for this supernally great variety. It's almost more than you can absorb. Like magma, or some kind of volcanic salt. 130 Oechsle. They trumped the master at Müller-Catoir in this vintage!  
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty seven years)
- GDR-84H **1999 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Eiswein, 12/500ml**  
 There's an '01 still fermenting and too embryonic to assess. Then there's this! Again, just sheer flavor-bliss. Creamy and delicious, firm but not stern, and far from impossibly acidic. Beguiling wine!  
 SOS: 4 (between five and fifteen years)





# neckerauer

## pfalz • weisenheim am sand

Between June 1st and August 31st not a single drop of rain fell in Weisenheim am Sand. “Storms everywhere but not here,” lamented Arnd Neckerauer.

This has been an estate-in-transition for some time now, and I’ve been gamely trying to stay the course. First there was the Uncle who died and left his five hectares—but not the people to work them. Many corners needed to be cut simply in order to cope.

Then there’s a problem only now being solved: Arnd will officially assume proprietorship of the wines this year. That isn’t a slam against his father Klaus, who made many outstanding wines through the years. But sometimes you have to get—as my wife would say—pregnant with the

winery. Otherwise your vision is obscured and your mission diluted.

Arnd’s intention is to divide his production in two parts; the simple wines will be bottled in Liters, from vineyards a friend of his will work. This will leave Arnd free to concentrate his best efforts on his best sites, from which he hopes to hand-craft outstanding wines again.

I can’t wait. I know the history and I know the potential, and I also know (and am fond of) the family. They are the easiest possible people with whom to work. “Five years from now,” I told Arnd, “I want to be sitting here together with several great vintages behind us, feeling good that we were loyal to each other during the difficult years.”

Meanwhile, 2001 is a small vintage here. There’s only so much you can do when it doesn’t rain. Arnd has offered

- Vineyard area: 16 hectares
- Annual production: 8,400 cases
- Top sites: Hahnen, Hasenzile, Halde
- Soil types: Sandy soil with clay, chalky soil with sand
- Grape varieties: 32% Riesling, 28% Portugieser, 11% Dornfelder, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 4% Spätburgunder, 3% each of Kerner and Scheurebe, 16% other varieties



Arnd Neckerauer

the wines at knock-down prices. We worked on them together. My tasting notes are honest. The wines deliver value at the prices asked. You might very well find them useful. Certainly they are all tasty.

Here’s hoping that next year we can trumpet the **comeback-performance** of our old favorite Neckerauer, complete with my zany antic text.

### Neckerauer at a glance:

The latest several vintages show the eccentric side of Pfalz wine. Low yields from sandy soils give concentrated wines, regionally exemplary and superb with food.

### how the wines taste:

Well, for me they can be the most practical wines in the Pfalz. They're superb with food. They're not as full-bodied as Koehler-Ruprecht, but they share a similar earthy-spicy profile. They're rather more "rural" than the elegant ladies of the classic Mittelhaardt from Forst, Wachenheim and Deidesheim.

**GNE-079 2001 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

92 Oechsle, with 7.2 g.l. acidity, i.e. a gentle, easy and ripe Kabinett; freesia and coconutty fragrances; the wine is tender and yet complex in its way. It's demure and considerate but has something to say.

SOS: 1 (between two to six years)

**GNE-080 2001 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Kabinett**

Spice-cake fragrances; charming coconutty palate; spicy and slightly phenolic.

SOS: 2 (between three and nine years)

**GNE-081 2001 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Had nine grams of its own residual sugar, which we boosted, which made the wine taste drier. Still gentle—these are atypical 2001s—nose of red beets and allspice; good length, juicy and satisfying.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to four years)

**GNE-082 2001 Weisenheimer Rosenbühl Portugieser Trocken**

The best Neckerauer reds are forthright tasty gulpers. This one's perfect; tender, fragrant, sappy and long.



# weingut kassner-simon

## pfalz freinsheim

I saw the name constantly on the wine list at Luther, probably my favorite restaurant in Germany, down the street in Freinsheim.

Johannes Selbach had tasted the wines and was impressed. Was I interested? Yes I was, but I couldn't find a moment on the schedule to make a visit.

Luther had a half-bottle of a Trocken Riesling Spätlese from the 1999 vintage on his list. We ordered it.

And I could not believe what I was tasting. Here was a perfect dry Riesling—not a perfect dry “German” Riesling, but a perfect dry Riesling period—superbly balanced, jammed with fruit, utterly

delicious. Utterly unexpected!

I found time in the schedule for a visit.

I doubt if I've been as excited by a new discovery since Darting, all those years ago. Kassner-Simon is the work of two generations, parents Willi and Rosemarie, and son and heir-apparent Thomas, who—inevitably—spent a year at Müller-Catoir.

The estate is 14 hectares, with Riesling comprising between 30-40%. The nearest comparison stylistically might be Lingenfelder—they have sites in common—but these wines seem silkier than Rainer's, more lissome in body, rather more in a Wachenheim direction.

The cellar-work is unsurprising in the modern idioms of the conscientious, especially among the Schwarz acolytes. When I asked Thomas Simon if he did anything particular or unusual in the winery he answered “Yes; the avoidance of any unnecessary handling of the young wines, and temperature-controlled fermentations.” These occur exclusively with cultured yeasts.

“What's most important for us is that regardless of which terms are on the label, Trocken or Halbtrocken or otherwise, the wine tastes harmonious, that is to say it has a balance of acidity, alcohol and residual sugar . . .”

Most white grapes (including Riesling) are whole-

- Vineyard area: 14 hectares
- Annual production: 11,500 cases
- Top sites: Freinsheimer Schwarzes Kreuz, Goldberg & Musikantenbuckel
- Soil types: Loamy sand
- Grape varieties: 36% Riesling, 17% Portugieser, 10% Spätburgunder, 8% Dornfelder, 6% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 5% Scheurebe & Kerner, 7% other varieties

cluster pressed, with the exception of the aromatic sorts Gewurztraminer and Scheurebe, which have 2-6 hours on the skins. White musts are chilled, filtered and fermented. All the whites are reductively made in stainless steel, and lie on their lees “according to taste” between two and five months.

The peak-site is the Oschelskopf.

### Kassner-Simon at a glance:

Wonderful new discovery in a mid-sized estate with two generations working together and a young man with every hope of a glittering career.

### how the wines taste:

Above all, full of fruit, silky, complex, stylish, refined, and harmonious regardless of the amount of sweetness.

- GKS-001 **2001 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**  
 Malt, talc, mango and apple fragrances. Ripe but with good grip and a crystalline, granular texture. Balanced and lovely. This, like all the wines, was tasted (hastily and delightedly) at the winery, and two weeks later at leisure (and still delightedly) in Zeltingen; it's good to taste a new guy out of the context of his region. If he's still good to my moselfied palate, then he's good.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between three and ten years)
- GKS-002 **2001 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Kabinett**  
 This is a special bottling for us, signifying A) their willingness to work with a persnickety export customer, and B) the bizarreness of the domestic German market in believing it has no place for wines like this. We gave it 24 g.l. residual sugar—"feinherb"—but all it tastes is balanced just like all Simons' wines. This has an amazing vanilla-papaya fragrance, really powder-puffy; fabulously pretty fruit, silky texture, still on the dry side, but sweetly so; long, fastidious delineation.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GKS-003 **2001 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Scheurebe Spätlese** +  
 Scheurebe needs all the cham-peens it can score, and this is a winning performance—one of Simons' wines of which he's proudest—a zowie-Scheu nose, a riot of sage and grapefruit, spicy and clear and jam-packed with kilotons of Scheu charm. Virtually perfect Pfalz Scheu; great length; soy and tarragon.  
 SOS: 2 (between one and eight years)
- GKS-004 **1990 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Auslese** +  
 So! How 'bout this still being available!! Don't, I mean DO NOT miss this; it's a downright steal for gorgeous mature riesling. Estery nose, peach, maize, lime, fresh-cut wood; palate is wonderfully precise, virtually dry and prismatically broken down into little silken filaments of nuance. Long and lovely.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (hmm! Between nine and seventeen years. Eleven gone already).
- GKS-005 **2000 Freinsheimer Schwarzes Kreuz Spätburgunder Trocken**  
 Creditable lil' monkey, this. Has plenty fruit and a smoky, plummy, tobacco-ey depth; stylish, not "sweet" (a function of the vintage) but very long and great value. Can't wait to see what a ripe year brings!



# herbert messmer

## pfalz • burrweiler

Well now. My friend Gregor Messmer (or “Meßmer” if you’re a purist) has ascended to the level of buzz, even, dare I say, of scuttlebutt. No fewer than three people, none of whom knew I represented the wines, offered spontaneously their belief that Meßmer had ascended to the top rank, one of the best three of four in the entire Pfalz.

And my unassuming yet confident friend did this in his discreet and sinuous way, like some silent meteor floating across the skies. As I sat tasting through the 2001s I had an unmistakable sense of experiencing the superlative.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That’s O.K., but our reasons for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he’s lauded for his

dry wines. He sells them like loco, and this year I really thought I’d like ‘em; 2001 being as dense and rich as it is. I also wanted to prove to Gregor that I wasn’t reflexively anti-trocken. Sadly, I couldn’t. But Gregor appeared to want to meet me half-way; just wait till you see what’s offered here.

Perhaps it was the euphoria of showing 2001— if you’re a vintner this has to be some kinda apex-o-fun— but my often-earnest friend Gregor was about as droll as a guy can be, revealing a sense of humor as wickedly incisive as his wines. I’ve represented this estate since almost the very beginning, and nothing would please me more than to get chummier and to keep showing you wines like these. Gregor Messmer is an almost comically serious man. He would be comic if he didn’t conduct himself with such quiet dignity, but really, you want to tickle him! I’ll bet he’d tickle you back. But first he’d have studied *The Tickle Points Of The Human Body* and he’d be deadily accurate. He’s now at the helm of the best estate in Burrweiler and one of the best in all the Pfalz.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It’s pronounced like (electric) shaver. It’s a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Rheinpfalz; practically the only slate vineyard



Gregor & Linde Messmer

between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you’re a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slaty minerality. If not you’ll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the

- Vineyard area: 25 hectares
- Annual production: 17,500 cases
- Top sites: Burrweiler Schäwer, Schlossgarten and Altenforst
- Soil types: Slate, sandy loam loess, red sandstone and heavy chalky clay and loam
- Grape varieties: 45% Riesling, 13% Spätburgunder, 10% Weissburgunder, 6% St. Laurent, 5% Grauburgunder, 21% other varietals including Scheurebe

Schwarz connection. The legendary Hans-Günter Schwarz, winemaker at Müller-Catoir, hails from Gleisweiler, the neighboring village to Burrweiler. Schwarz and Messmer senior have been friends for years and young Gregor had the precious opportunity to form his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz view of the world is the love of completely reductive viticulture. “What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve,” says Gregor. “The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. “Our Süßreserve comes only from the healthiest grapes and we use no preservatives to treat it. We never de-acidify. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It’s also very important that the wine be pleasant and usable, wines for drinking.”

“The most beautiful wines are those which have had

the least 'winemaking'."

That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. You'll see me repeat it often because I'm in sympathy with it. It is very compatible with the style inherent in the Schäwer. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I

like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."

Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable purity. And Messmer's wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They're as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass, transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

#### Messmer at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GMS-074L 2001 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter

This is Halbtrocken. It shows the doughy cinnamon-cakey aspect of Schlossgarten, is quite long and substantive, with a powdery-tangy finish.

SOS: 0 (between one and six years)

#### GMS-075 2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

Just as you'd expect in 2001; long, solid, explicit mineral texture; detailed—his wines seem to want to explicate: "Do you understand? Can I make it any clearer?" never gaudy, they're always judiciously direct and explicit. Another wine whose flavors are etched in calligraphy. SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between three and eleven years)

#### GMS-076 2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett

I don't recall the last "regular" Kabinett from Gregor; perhaps he decided to soothe my soul from the dreadful blow of having pulled his Scheurebe out. Lime and banana aromas here, and it is tangy, pineapply and Scheu-like. Long, as all the 2001s are. Baked apple. Currant. Fine grip.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

#### GMS-078 2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller

96 Oechsle; he wasn't sure what to call it! Kabinett? Spätlese? Maybe nothing at all. It has wonderful Catoir-like fragrances of grape, stone and basil; the wine is big and heady—a V.T. style—and works just a little schnapps, but the purity of fruit is such that I can't resist. Get past a snap of heat on the finish and the tertiary flavors are like every herb you know, with a lingering farewell of pure wild lavender.

SOS: 1 (between one and four years)

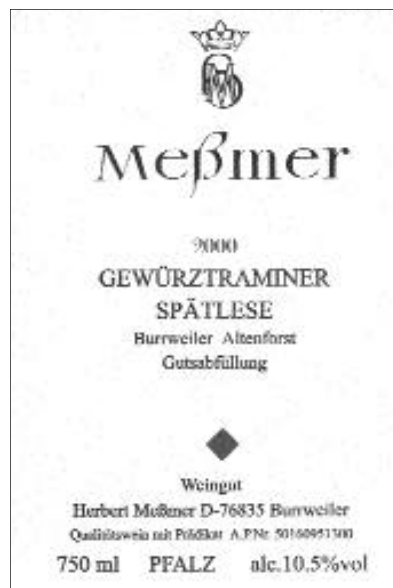
#### GMS-077 2001 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese

There's gotta be a hole in the ozone layer over Meßmer's house; a sweet Schäwer Spät? I have the impression this wine just stopped. "That's it, no more fermentation and you can't make me!" For at 100 degrees Oechsle and 8.5 g.l. acidity, this little dickens has 91 g.l. residual sugar. Gregor wanted us to guess. Mostly we guessed in the 30s-40s. That's rock and roll! It has ultra-clean, almost Eiswein flavors; smells like a Saar wine; has an iridescent interplay between salty mineral and piercing piquant fruit, lemon and freesia; plays a cymbal-crash of spice on the palate. This will go the distance.

SOS: 3 (but on the finish it dries to a low 2!)

(between nine and twenty seven years)

- GMS-079 **2001 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese** +  
 The only Gewürz in this offering, because every other one is held up to it, and if it ain't as good as Gregor's, it don't get in. 108 Oechsle. Why can't anyone else come remotely near this man's sure hand with Gewürz? Here it's all wild rose and lichi, sleek and deft and almost ladylike. Absolute varietal purity, and nothing crude or palling.  
 SOS: 3 (between now and four years)
- GMS-081H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller BA, 12/375ml** +  
 135 Oechsle. This has ravishing purity; picked November 10th from the fruit left hanging after the "little" Muscat was gathered. Riotous psychedelic flower-fragrance; seductive botrytis, quite sweet, but as pretty as a purple pony.  
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GMS-082H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Eiswein 12/375ml** ++  
 155 Oechsle. A bit of botrytis. And roses, my god what roses. Swallowed! As fine and charming as Eiswein can be, accepting the smooth caress of botrytis. **Extremely limited!** Don't miss it.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GMS-083H **2001 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** +  
 A patriarche; all smoke and slate char; smells like essence-of-Schäwer. Quite masculine after the BA and Eiswein, but will ultimately surpass them in sheer compelling breed and will. It's the most winey of them all, has uncanny balance and clarity, and you know, this is like Clos Ste.-Hune or Steiner Hund: Serious Business. Extremely limited.  
 SOS: 3
- GMS-080 **2000 Flemlinger Herrenbuckel St. Laurent Trocken**  
 This is one of my favorite red grapes, but it's hard to find because it's finicky and most growers don't like its uncertain yields and unstable genetic makeup. In a way, St. Laurent is the same kind of litmus test Rieslaner is; if a grower has it planted he's ipso facto a lunatic. My kinda guy, in other words. St. Laurent, at its best, tastes like really good Burgundy that has 15% Mourvèdre in it, a compelling mixture of signals that makes the wines haunting and complex. Gregor's bottling is always among the best German reds. This is why I continue to list it although it's a hard-sell at its (justifiably high) price; you should know that such reds can be made in Germany. Here is oak in service to fruit; the wine is stylish, avuncular and cedary; juicy and actually just wonderfully delicious. Fruit, man! Sweet tannins. Long finish. Sleek body but penetrating and elegant.  
 SOS: 4



Dirk Roth has gone off to Von Simmern, and the Biffar estate has a new cellarmaster, a Mr. Braun, who did great work for Christmann in Gimmeldingen. The critical truism on Biffar is that the wines fell off after Ulli Mell departed for Bassermann. I liked Ulli and I greatly respect his work, but he's not a miracle-worker, and I never remarked any decline in quality during Roth's era.

But cellarmasters have their habits and preferences, and Braun's regime will feature some changes; less green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight. Perhaps it was the 2001 vintage, or perhaps Braun's influence is already beginning to tell, but Biffar's wines were more filigree this year, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference. They seemed relatively introverted,

and I liked it; they looked inward because there's so much to see there.

Biffar's is a baronial place (I don't think there's any actual barons in residence but the mien suggests they're hiding away in a tower somewhere), certainly one of the Gentleman's Estates of the Mittelhaardt. They have marvelous land, with many of the greatest riesling sites in all of Germany. And they have an unusually flexible approach to cellar work. "We're not only reductive," says Braun; "We also have 1200 and 2400 liter casks, which we cal also chill. We ferment with cultured yeasts and we control temperature, but the wines get more oxygen, have fewer primary aromas; they're more baroque."

The harvest is also worked in various ways according to grape variety and to the condition of each picking. One absolute is long lees contact, up to three weeks on the gross lees and another 4-8 weeks on the fine lees. But apart from all this wine-geek stuff, I have always enjoyed my visits here emotionally, perhaps even spiritually.

At some point while we were tasting, a thrush started to sing its heart out near our window. The birds were very lusty this year. Usually they sing only mornings and evenings (their evening song can be quite haunting if the particular bird is an artist) but now they seemed to sing all the time. This one was really belting it out. Then the noon bells. In certain small villages they still ring the luncheon bells. A happy clamor of sound.

German Riesling should always be tasted within range of a singing bird, I think.

And verily the birds were singing while we tasted the 2001s. It was lovely to meet Mr. Braun and taste his careful, considerate and complex wines. As they accumulated, I gleaned the presence of a wise and guiding hand. As one



- Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares
- Annual production: 7,000 cases
- Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg and Mäushöhle, Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad, Wachenheimer Gerümpel
- Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and basalt or limestone
- Grape varieties: 17% Spätburgunder, 15% each of Riesling and Weissburgunder, 10% each of Grauburgunder and Portugieser, 8% Gewürztraminer, 5% each of Müller-Thurgau, Chardonnay and Silvaner, 10% other varieties

lovely wine follows another I feel a strange heart-link with the person who made them. He knew something. One great wine can happen by accident, but a great range results from a kind of wisdom, intuition.

What happens to you when you taste a series of wines from a winery, every one of which is a thing of rare beauty? I start to feel a sense of absurd privilege, that providence is showering beauty over me out of any proportion to whatever I may have done to "deserve" it. I also feel the futility of attempting to be discriminating; something is happening that's bigger than my little judgments. I also feel a distinct and positive **love** for each person who helped to bring such wines into existence. I also hear my heart being asked to open and expand, to relax its defenses, to melt away the crust inside which it usually sits. (This always seems to happen when you don't expect it, as though unpreparedness is a precondition for it happening.) Finally I become softened and reflective and want to speak warmly about things I'm usually too constrained to bring up. I'm not telling you this so you'll admire what a sensitive hombre I am, but only to suggest that wine wants something of us, wants us to become more of who we are, larger, less hidden, more grateful, kinder.



I see no reason, absolutely none, why I can't remember those things even as I swim in the waters of mercantilism. If this book—this work amounts to anything it isn't because it contains a few hundred good wines. It's because it insists on integrating the practical realities of earning a living with the

more abiding realities of being a full human being. And because it asks you to think about the people who make beautiful wines; they are your companions and neighbors on this little green world. They bless us with their work, and it's only fitting we bless them in return with our gratitude and kindness.

### Biffar at a glance:

Stellar, first-growth quality estate since the 1992 vintage. Excellent collection of many of the top vineyard sites of the Pfalz. Brilliantly fashioned wines with eye-popping clarity and penetration.

### how the wines taste:

The taste of these wines is incredibly rich in mineral complexity and incredibly specific in fruit and soil flavors. They are on the rich side. They're brilliant but not squeaky-reductive. They have a noble glow about them; they realize the greatness inherent in the superb vineyards from which they come.

#### GBR-061 2001 Sauvignon Blanc

A few interesting Sauvignons being made in the try-anything-once Pfalz, but none more interesting than this: the vines are older, the wine is deeper, the vintage is kickin' and screamin' and this stands with any Touraine Sauvignon, and Menetou and most any Sancerre. Classic gooseberry and cassis; lavish and juicy.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to two years)

#### GBR-062 2001 Wachenheimer Goldbächel Riesling Kabinett Trocken

Very Alsace in style, but cooler and finer than all but the very best—it is after all perhaps the single finest site in the Pfalz—remarkably mineral, assertively dry but not sharp; peach-pit; immediately refined and noble; recalls Nigl's Kremsleiten. An intricate Riesling that chooses its words carefully so as to speak with force.

SOS: 0

(now to two years; again between nine and thirteen years)

#### GBR-063 2001 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett

Here's one of the very few wines I'd ship blind if I had to. It has never not been outstanding; this year's isn't so tingly-detailed as 2000 or '98, but this is what the '99 might have been with even more fundament and grip. An apex of mineral and a riot of jasmine; piquant shimmer on the almost licoricey finish.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

#### GBR-064 2001 Wachenheimer Altenburg Riesling Spätlese

++

30-year vines, very low yields (30 hl/ha) from 95 Oechsle. They let me blend it to 40g/l. sweetness and man, this is drop-dead pretty; a thrilling, haunting perfume, essence of roses; the palate just dances, a whirling parabola of mineral, sweet herb, flower; the sweetness is elegant and demure, the wine is lilting and stylish, but anchored by that cool mineral kiss.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)



Kurt Müller is an extremely nice guy: hearty, generous and gregarious, as are his wines! They don't have the sheet-metal brilliance of someone like Biffar, but then I already have Biffar and don't need to repeat that style. I want this portfolio to be ecumenical. Plus I have a certain tender affection for a wee touch of the bumpkin in a wine. I respond to its honesty. A little earthiness is a good thing, sometimes. Nature's tooth and claw, that stuff.

Back when I first started doing this, I worked with a grower in Forst named Wilhelm Spindler. He had no descendants to whom to leave his winery, and he was getting on in years; quality started to suffer, and I had to drop the agency. Of course, even when coasting he was still making noteworthy wines, as he had an astonishingly fine collection of land in the best sites of Forst, which are believed to be the

best sites in the Pfalz. He also had the oldest stand in the very best site, the Forster Kirchenstück. Being somewhat detached from the vineyard "proper," it escaped the Flurbereinigung a few years ago, and is now the only stand of old vines in this site. But what has that to do with Eugen Müller?

Simple! Spindler sold or leased (I don't know which) all of his vineyards to Kurt Müller—and this is where I come in. I screened a few of Müller's wines one year and liked what I saw. I couldn't believe his prices. Müller is doing full justice, to his land.

Moreover, he has become an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück (average age of his parcel is 35 years), plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every

- Vineyard area: 17 hectares
- Annual production: 12,000 cases
- Top sites: Forster Kirchenstück, Jesuitengarten, Ungeheuer, Pechstein and Musenhang
- Soil types: Calcareous loam, sandstone detritus, partly with basalt and clay
- Grape varieties: 76% Riesling, 10% Grauer and Weissler Burgunder, 14% red varieties

great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

But back to the Kirchenstück for a moment. The official land assessment value of this site places it at the top of the pile, not just in the Pfalz, but in all of Germany! If you own land here, you are paying higher taxes than owners in Doktor or Marcobrunn or Baiken or Scharzhofberger. What is it about the Kirchenstück? As usual with great vineyards, the "what" isn't always so explicable, but let's try and explicate it!

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines. Still, not this kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I've never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems packed, as though it had been pounded together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive, yet, here's the genius of it: it's also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whipsawing back and forth between "ZOUNDS! This is spicy!" and "Oooooohh, this is gorgeous!"

The Jesuitengarten, in comparison, is quite a bit less high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy satin versus raw silk. What makes **Jesuitengarten** tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more **genius** in



Kurt Müller

it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a little less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it's more diplomatic.

Kurt Müller considers his wines run in a reductive direction, but I don't find them as explicitly grapey as that implies. He ferments with cultured yeasts and gets the crystalline polish he wants in his wines. He started whole-cluster pressing with the 1998 vintage but somehow his wines

don't have the sheen such vinification often produces. Otherwise the cellar work is run of the mill; what counts here is the sheer BREED of these wines at their best. This is benchmark Mittelhaardt Riesling at without-a-doubt the most REASONABLE prices you can possibly be asked to pay. Look at any of the three B's and then look at these!

**Eugen Müller at a glance:**

The best possible array of the top sites of the Pfalz, including the oldest vines in the very best vineyard. Mouth-filling, fruity wines, direct and approachable. Astoundingly reasonable prices for wines of such pedigree.

**how the wines taste:**

In two words: juicy and caramelly. They aren't "modern" in their insistence on vinosity, and they seem to aim for power rather than brilliance. I often underrate them because they need six to nine months after bottling to really come forward. These are showy wines, full of flavor, and they do stand out in tastings. There are—big surprise—plenty of stellar 2001s here.

**GEM-055 2001 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**

Actually from the "Grand Cru" Pechstein, one of the very greatest Pfalz vineyards, but Müller has brand recognition for the Grosslage name, though he kindly offered to get me a separate A.P. number if I wanted "Pechstein" on the label; THIS is a nice guy! He doesn't need the hassle, much as my purist heart prefers the single-site name. The wine is demure, piquant, lilacy, more yielding and discreet than the Ungeheuer below; a "nice" Kabinett with a winsome minty edge. My suggestion is you trade up to the Ungeheuer, but if it's price-point you're looking for, this wine offers excellent quality and value.

SOS: 2 (from three to twelve years)

**GEM-50 2000 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

Classically fiery vineyard nose; shiitakes; palate follows, not great penetration but a fine honeyed reach and capaciousness. I underrated this last year, as often happens at this address; the wine is quite detailed and many-layered.

SOS: 2 (between three and ten years)

**GEM-056 2001 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

Mouthfilling, juicy caramelly thing; generous, big-hearted with capacious length; a sort of golden-retriever of Riesling.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

**GEM-057 2001 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

As always, brooding and opaque in its first year; some chestnut, some spice, some peach, some honey. The 2000, inherently the lesser wine, is showing better. This has all the STUFF you could want. Just . . . wait.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

**GEM-058 2001 Forster Ungeheuer Scheurebe Spätlese**

No patience required here! A full-throttle, spicy grapefruity Scheu that's a fanfare of shimmering Scheu dee-lite. And if you find a quiet room off the general hilarity of fruit, you notice considerable intricacy of mints and spices and even mineral. Müller's best-ever Scheurebe.

SOS: 2 (between one and eight years)

GEM-054 **2000 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

If I can't get Boxler's Brand Riesling to sell, at least I get this. (In 2000 it's actually better than Boxler.) It is the winged messenger of Kirchenstück; black cherry and flint; palate is fervently spicy but texturally gentle and juicy; no sharp points at all. Its 11.5% alc prompts wondering whether many Alsace Rieslings wouldn't be more elegant without chaptalization . . .  
SOS: 0 (between two and seven years)

GEM-52H **2000 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** +

This merited my early faith. A true Grand Vin du Terroir, with all its flavors lit like little points like the sky on a clear winter night. Restrained (50 grams per liter) sweetness completely subdued by massive extract (33 grams!); a profound, spicy, spicy terroir statement with a warm lick of seductive honey and cherry, but none too sweet for the table; salty wash on the finish. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
SOS: 2 (between seven and seventeen years)

GEM-059H **1999 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** +

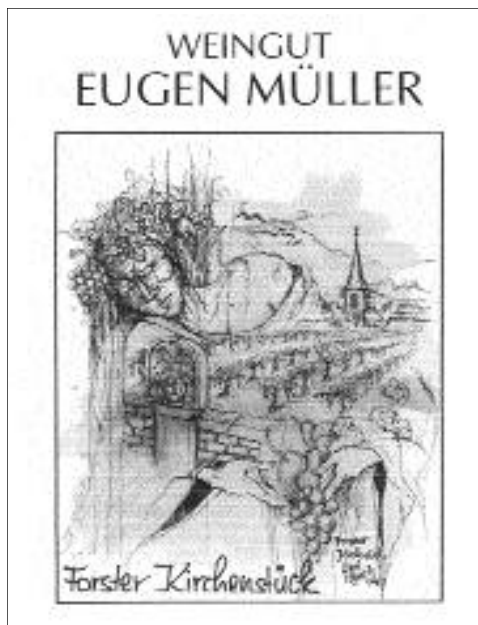
**First offering.** I held this back awhile, both to sell out the '98 and to give it the time to amalgamate its very large components; now fully ready, it's the Great One in a juicy, approachable rendition, all kirsch and carbon. Actually both delightful and interesting, and none too sweet. Finely chiseled, spicy finish. 108 Oechsle, 68 g.l. sweetness, 29.5 g.l. dry extract. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

GEM-060H **2001 Forster Stift Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

132 Oechsle. Gentle acids by Eiswein standards. It recalls the accessible '99. Very pretty, reasonably priced; lemon-crème; can be drunk young (but needn't be) and you'd be a fool to miss it. **SOMMELIERES! POUR THIS PUPPY!**  
SOS: 4 (from seven to eighteen years)

GEM-061H **2001 Forster Ungeheuer Scheurebe Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++

161 Oechsle. Great stiff acidity. Oh boy . . . do not, **not**, not miss this! Varietally true and even more lively and complex than the Riesling; fabulous salty-crazy interplay against the tangy-sagey sweetness. It's not ethereal but it is addictively drinkable and you will drink the whole bottle if you take even one sip. Two stars for sheer tastiness.  
SOS: 4 (from twelve to twenty seven years)



# SOS

## A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines. Interestingly though I posed the figure I selected no wines to which I actually gave the figure!

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!

# theo minges

## pfalz • flemlingen

You always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

I was and am interested in the southern Pfalz. It's the region with the smallest renown, though it's now considered "up and coming" among hipsters. Until twenty years ago it was certainly the most egregious overproducer in Germany, and most of the wine was Müller-Thurgau or other marginally awful new crossings. Most of the wines ranged from coarse to bizarre. All that started to change as the general level of wine-consciousness was raised, and now the region is full of freshness and new faces.

Minges, however, wasn't one of them! This estate was always considered remarkable, one of those exceptions-that-prove-the-rule. Theo Minges himself was "thrown in the cold water early" at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo's opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course, planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Flemlinger Zechpeter site is planted in Riesling from MOSEL clones, planted 38 years ago by Theo's father. Everything is hand-harvested—not a necessity here, as the land isn't steep—and many separate passes are made through the vineyards. The grapes are pressed in a pneumatic press with very little pressure. Musts are rarely centrifuged; Minges prefers to let them sit overnight to clarify. Natural yeasts are usually used,



Theo Minges

though Minges has no ideological objection to using cultured yeasts if necessary. Fermentations are quite slow, at least four weeks, and no wine is ever racked before

- Vineyard area: 15 hectares
- Annual production: 8,400 cases
- Top sites: Gleisweiler Hölle, Flemlinger Vogelsprung
- Soil types: Limestone, heavy chalky loam, loess and loam
- Grape varieties: 30% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 10% each of Grauer Burgunder and Dornfelder, 5% each of Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and St. Laurent, 20% other varieties

January; each wine spends at least a month on its primary lees to help them clarify and build complexity. "You have to leave the wines on their lees patiently," he says. "Otherwise, they become too reductive, too smooth; all their structure comes from acidity alone."

The more I get to know Minges the more I like him. He's bright and imaginative, a careful taster; indeed a WINE GUY, which isn't invariably the case among vintners. Many of them, you know, are essentially farmers, not aesthetes—nothing wrong with that! But it's unsafe to assume a grower has a "palate" as you and I use the term. Sometimes they only know their own wines, and don't always see those with great clarity. Sometimes it works, if the grower's talented and has integrity; I think of a Merkelbach for example. Theo Minges cares about wine in the abstract, likes to taste and describe and ruminate and I am always very, very happy to sit down with him.

This year too, though poor Theo had a cold and couldn't taste a thing (I teased him the wines weren't all that good and we'd need to beat the price down). His was the first visit kicking off a concentrated two weeks of tasting, and it works with these wines, they're so sprightly, with that sinewy gazelle-like dancing thing they do. I knew the 2001s would be good, and lo they are, yet what's amazing is it isn't a remarkable Minges vintage: they're ALL good.

**Minges at a glance:**

Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board The best, best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE. Superb Rieslings in a vintage like 2001 goes without saying!

**how the wines taste:**

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. The Muscats are laugh-out-load wonderful. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

GTM-061L **2001 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

"The liter wine should be fresh and light, spring-water with fruit," says Theo. And so it is, though I'm afraid to say the wine's often too interesting to be gulped down quite so casually. The '01 is piquant and yummy, vigorous and long, a little smoky, with a great mentholated finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (immediately to five years)

GTM-062L **2001 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Limey and pretty and lively and long, wonderfully tangy and animated. Big thrust of mid-palate density.

SOS: 2 (between one and nine years)

GTM-063 **2001 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

This is how Trocken should be! Laurel, jasmine, tilleul, almost smells like Cramant. Palate is dense, creamy, mineral, shimmering; the finish is striking, the balance is perfect, the apricot-y fruit is so attractive. Kudos! Volvos!

SOS: 2 (yes, here's a wine that tastes sweeter than it actually is)

GTM-064 **2001 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

+

Yes, this will do. Complex fruit in the kiwi-greengage direction; finely detailed palate, hyper with liveliness and an immense sinewy muscle in the middle; finish starts winter-green and stony, fades, then kicks back a honey-lick of fruit.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)

GTM-065 **2001 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese**

+

Actually sleeker and more filigree now, but still with a minty-chalky mass in the mid-palate and a zany-ass finish like some bouquet-garni of linden-tarragon-wintergreen sizzling in your mouth. Um, not till you taste it.

SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

GTM-066H **2001 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

+

Here's an example of fine clean botrytis; lightly honeyed, dried fruit; an explosion of shimmer and pulverized mineral, and as sweet as it begins, it ends serious and dry. Almost unheard-of to get such a contrast of suavity-of-fruit-sweetness and this stonehenge of structure.

SOMMELIER ALERT! (for Pac Rim and Island cuisines, and hard cheeses)

SOS: 2

GTM-067H **2001 Flemlinger Vogelsprung Scheurebe Auslese, 12/375ml**

"Too much alcohol and too dry for something so ripe," I wrote (122 Oechsle). He let me sweeten it by 22 g.l. Ah! Now it works! "It'll cost an extra \$20," he says. "After you subtract the \$18 I charge for the consultation," I answer. We laugh. Then hug. Then we buy each other a car. But yes, the wine is now all passion-fruit and queenly; a grand, regal Scheu. Gorgeous. These feckless peasants would be goners without me to come by and indiscriminantly muck around with their wines.

SOS: 3 (between five and fourteen years)

# POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. "Why isn't it enough," I asked, "to simply have groups, fair-good-very good-excellent-superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?" "Good question," answered Pierre. "So what you're proposing is a 5-point scale." Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that's all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that's where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score's the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this Weltanschauung, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It's all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn't matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many "points" to "give" it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don't, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the writer may have to use points but the reader doesn't? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that "scoring" wines is the sine qua non of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What's the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here's a quote I like:

"The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe." (John Berger, from "The White Bird")

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn't even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be available for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many points we're going to "give" or "award" the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: "We awarded Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale." That's nice. How many points did the wine give you, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat's ass how many "points" you gave a wine? That wine was a gift to you. And all you can do is "evaluate" it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentlemen with whom I debated this topic wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that he grew into using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's soliloquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin's confession (95), Levin's day with the threshers (97), Gerald's walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn't used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I'm constantly thinking "how many points is this scene worth?" I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drippage gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

"Was it good for you, baby . . . ?" Oh, 89 maybe 90."

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their extent on an absolute scale? What's 100-point joy all about? "I cannot possibly feel happier than this!" Really? How do you know?

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine's "stature," but I deliberately leave it loose because I don't want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of ignition: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to deepen our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he'll peer through Bob's valise, pull out the folder marked "The 100-point Scale" and say; "I'll just hold on to this; you won't be needing it here."



# rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s Wine Atlas. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Vollrads is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite a way to

go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclau

**Though things are discernibly better now,  
there’s still distressingly little buzz about  
the region.**

(erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough,

and the pathetic spectacle could no longer be ignored.

A certain prevailing hauteur may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, ahem “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard, greed



Berg Schlossberg



Berg Roseneck

must surely die hardest.

Though things are discernibly better now, there's still distressingly little *buzz* about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is still no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted concept of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a "true" Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent sense of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of fun here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rüdesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage like 2001, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Pfalz and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly different from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of them. Taste any of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is not: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence of

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

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

We're looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy. Johannes offered to scout for me. He found someone superb. You'll see!

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren't merely honorable, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn't punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. These growers, at least, deserve your support.

There is no single human being with whom I work who deserves your support more than Johannes Leitz. With each passing year I find him more remarkable. His 2000s, which were the very last wines I tasted, are beyond the pale. If you knew the conditions under which they were harvested you would probably shed tears. His 2001s stand with the absolute pinnacle in this great vintage. Johannes was almost comically torn early on; he knew how exceptional his wines were, but could he say it credibly? “Terry, you know I am honest,” he pleaded, “I wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true, and I know I have said this to you before, so I beg you to believe me, but I really think 2001 is my best vintage ever, please believe me . . . ”

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire. Johannes Leitz has visited us a few times now, and as often happens he is blown away by our market. “My god, such people; great palates, incredible cuisine, incessantly sexually active!”—well, I made up that last bit: Johannes didn’t say it. He was thrilled by you guys, though. And his sales took a sprightly leap forward, which made me very happy.

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz (10 years ago!) I found a sober young man still not out of his twenties, running a 5.8 hectare estate. His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to invest, soon, a lot. Johannes was determined to make great wine.



Johannes Leitz

He’s a man with a passion for **aroma**. “I almost prefer inhaling to actual tasting,” he says. “I can’t really love a wine regardless of how it tastes if it doesn’t excite me on

- Vineyard area: 5.5 hectares
- Annual production: 3,400 cases
- Top sites: Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Roseneck and Rottland
- Soil types: Weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 91% Riesling, 9% Spätburgunder

the nose. I want my own wines to seem more fragrant than the norm, fruitier and more harmonious. They should simply be better!” Leitz insists that “Wine grows in the vineyard; it isn’t made in the cellar. There’s no question that different soils give different flavors. Anyone who tastes a Berg Schlossberg, with its high proportion of slate, alongside a Bischofsberg, will taste the importance of soil in a hurry!”

It’s a reductive cellar, though most of the wines are held in casks. “I work very clean,” he says, echoing the one refrain you hear in every good estate. “My friends call me finicky about cleanliness,” he continues. “I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance.” On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the greatest dry German wines I have ever tasted. “I’m of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren’t in any way suited for dry wine. You really need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you’re honest about it, there’s probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness.” He also practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market. Leitz’s wines show us a maddening glimpse of what greatness we might find elsewhere if so many wines weren’t RAPED INTO DRYNESS.

One wonders how Leitz’s clear-headed honesty will sit with the high priests of the VDP. Yes, our hero is the newest member of this marketing organization, that has laudably

added several outstanding new names to their ranks in the past several years. I get the impression Johannes joined because he was flattered to have been asked. He sells all the small quantity of wine he makes quite easily, and has no wish to participate in any of the sundry tastings, auctions or marketing activities. We'll just get a black eagle somewhere on the label or capsule. But oh, I'd love to have been a fly on the wall the first general meeting Johannes attended. He has the gift of the wisely naïve, to see what others cannot see or will not acknowledge, and to express himself with no minced words.

His triumph in 2000 is virtually complete. The wines were indeed high-points of the vintage, and Leitz took his rightful place among the elite in the region. Many vintners

will make great wine in 2001, but the collection here at Leitz borders on the surreal. I loved every single wine I tasted. This almost never happens, and it only happened at Leitz this year.

And it makes me happy for a number of reasons. Johannes is nearly done with his various building projects; the press-house is finished, the tasting room's just about there (and I'm sure the jacuzzi and the twin skee-ball lanes won't be far behind), the family's out from under a range of health-related challenges . . . and then there's you, dear reader. You have been buying these wines with great vim, and this is a good thing! But careful, because it was a small crop here in 2001 and if you want some wine, let me suggest you take it without delay.

#### Leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three rising stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Small estate of 5.8 hectares. Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage. Way above-the-pack 1999s. On another PLANET in 2001!

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GJL-060 2001 Rudesheimer Drachenstein Riesling

There's Drachenstein and there's Drachenstein. Johannes' parcel is essentially an enclave of Berg Roseneck without the slate. I'm going to break my rule about quoting the press because this is just so juicy: "After three stellar vintages I would nominate Leit'z Drachenstein as the best riesling value anywhere" (my emphasis!) Thanks to David Schildknecht for the observation. And you can BLAME David for not being able to get the wine. Yes, by the time you read this, the 2001 will be sold out. We had to hasten its arrival to cover vast oversolds of the 2000 and now it's selling tres vite itself. But, if you own some (or if your wholesaler owns some and wants you to buy it), here's what it tastes like: 90 Oechsle (i.e. Spätlese quality) with tiny chaptalization; brilliant spice and sweet-salt, crazily vivid, cherry-redcurranty fruit, unusually long; insane quality. Will be plentiful NEXT year, we hope.

SOS: 2 (from five to thirteen years)

#### GJL-063 2001 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling

Great as Drachenstein is, in '01 this is a notch better. I swear! Taste them both if you don't believe me. Violet, lavender, crystalline nose; truly incredible palate; mineral, hawthorne, hyacinth, lovely silky texture—you'll swear this is a Spätlese; minty-spicy finish as if an Altoid were dissolved in it.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (from four to fifteen years)

#### GJL-064 2001 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Kabinett

Forthright apple-y nose; a fantasy of charm, animation and bracing dewy-apple crispness – so much apple it actually suggest slate, we taste them so often together in Mosel wines. As full-bodied (yet lithe) and sprightly as Rheingau Riesling can be. Perfect stony grin of finish. SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and sixteen years)

- GJL-061 2001 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +  
 By the way, do you know the skinny on the Rudesheimer Berg? They're the steepest slopes in the Rheingau "proper" and with Hochheim produce the Rheingau's highest must-weights unless there's drought. The wines are big and pulled tight. They're among the most minerally of Rheingauers, with slate flavors and stony quartzite grip. ROTT-LAND is the lowest down and gives the most adamant, powerful wines. It's the body-builder of the trio; ROSENECK, since it's higher, has a "keener" flavor, more appley, more aromatic. When it works, its head-shakingly vivid malic perfume conspires with a stony grip to give unforgettable wines. SCHLOSSBERG is the slatiest of the three, almost a breath of Mittelrhein coming into it now, but with more power. These are steep mountains falling directly into the Rhine; only a two-lane road and train tracks can squeeze along the riverbanks. Anyone who cares about Riesling should know these vineyards, and should see them if possible; they're quite spectacular to look upon and even more spectacular to hike through. This is a blend of two casks, one regular fuder and another 300-liter cask that's new enough to still impart a subtle woody flavor; it unites the kick of one with the mealy smoothness of the other; complex, meaty-crusty nose; ripe, smooth, mineral, dry but perfectly balanced. Chewy, big-boned serious Riesling.  
 SOS: 0 (now to two years, again between ten and fifteen years)
- GJL-062 2001 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +  
 Fabulously mineral, brilliant with endless skeins of flavor, more delineated than Rottland; slatey nose, wonderfully sprightly on the front, and here the finish is spicy and vigorous and long, but not at all rough or pointed. Easily Alsace Grand Cru quality, and from a great estate at that. Bravolungus, maestro!  
 SOS: 0 (between now and three years; again between ten and seventeen years)
- GJL-065 2001 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** +  
 It works Halbtrocken, and is entirely striking; nose is all mirabelle and roses with a penetrating note of terroir; palate shows almost unbelievable precision, and the most hauntingly complex finish. NO restaurant should miss this.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS:1 (between seven and twenty years)
- GJL-066 2001 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 Surrealistic nose. 104 Oechsle, with pure healthy botrytis. A stunning amalgam of mineral and malt; sensational length; kinetic, galvanically penetrating and precise; so intense you almost can't absorb the complexity. Only Catoir's and Dönnhoff's Rieslings have ever gone here. Stunningly great Rheingau wine.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)
- GJL-067H 2001 Rudesheimer Drachenstein Riesling BA, 12/375ml** ++  
 Sick sick sick! This is the ultimate reconciliation of the sensual, hedonistic and mystic. As perfect a botrytis wine as I can remember. Gorgeous. Grab it and run. Deranged sweet-salty complexity.  
 SOS: 4 (between seventeen and forty years)
- GJL-068H 2001 Rudesheimer Drachenstein Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +++  
 Picked December 19th at 165 Oechsle. Almost spearminty nose; clean, glorious, exquisite; spicy and precise; bracing but swooning honey-lick of thrall; endless suave length in a virtually perfect Eiswein.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty five years)
- GJL-069H 2001 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** ++  
 I never know why great TBA is so tender, a kind of melting caress of richness; it's all silk and cashmere; of the wine has diabolical intensity but expressed in a breathy flute-whisper. I could string together 50 flavor associations, but you'll have more fun if you do it.  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty five and sixty years)

Spreitzer was introduced last year to clamorous success, especially among my woman-customers, for reasons which will become apparent when you look at the picture. Gault-Millau discovery of the year, and now FEINSCHMECKER's newcomer of the year, and a new listing in DM-magazine's 100-best German vintners list. Yup yup yup; something sure be up. And don't you wish you were a "Feinschmecker"?

These were the first Rheingau wines I tasted from the 2001 vintage and they quite surprised me. I'd supposed Germany's firmest and most solid Rieslings would be ultra big boys in the firmest of all vintages, but Spreitzer's wines were positively svelte. I asked Bernd about it. "Our Polish guys were so

well trained to select during the 2000 harvest that they were relentless in 2001," he said. "So we got extremely clean grapes with almost no botrytis."

We'll have enough wines to really feature these this year, and I want to; they're worth it. It's a sweet family and these two young guys have a spectacular career ahead.

Here are the stats: 11.5 hectares, producing about 6,500 cases per year. 92% Riesling, 8% Pinot Noir. All harvesting is by hand. The must is cleaned by gravity for 24 hours before whole-cluster pressing. After fermentation (in wood or jacketed stainless steel, partly with ambient yeasts partly with cultured yeasts, depending on the vintage) the wines rest on their gross lees for some time before receiving their only filtration, with racking. They are bottled off the fine lees.

In 1997 Andreas and Bernd Spreitzer leased the estate from their father, who remains active. Johannes Leitz tipped me off. He's friendly with Andreas and wanted to help. I really don't think it crossed his mind he was creating a competitor. Leitz is a guy whose friends will also be sweethearts, and I was intrigued to taste Spreitzer's wines.



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

- Vineyard area: 11.5 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen
- Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess
- Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% Spätburgunder

I did, and liked what I saw. First opportunity, I was making the scene in Oestrich.

This commune seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the nervy vigor of other Rheingauers, and the keen finesse of spiciness is often absent here. Oestrich is about fruit. Fruit is about pleasure. Pleasure is about life.

**Spreitzer at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

**GSP-005 2001 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling**

82 degrees Oechsle, and unchaptalized. More people should do this! Cool lavender and smoky Keemun-tea aromas; fresh, bright, animated and sleeker than many '01s; delightfully piquant and with a spicy kind of "Bvlgari" finish. If you know the family of fragrances, my association isn't at all obscure!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

**GSP-006 2001 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett**

I usually found Lenchen the juicier of the Oestrichers; Doosberg was firmer and spicier, but Spreitzers believe the reverse. So much is determined by the particular parcels one has! Again the sleekness is remarkable—one of the first vintners about whom "filigree" can be written. Happy ripe apple, forthright fruit and excellent length; stony finish.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

**GSP-007 2001 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese**

+

Fine fragrances of maize and peach; wonderful precision and shimmery length; impressively fine cut and delineation; lovely salty depth.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)

**GSP-008 2001 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"**

It hails from a hillside separate from the rest of the vineyard, from which a legendary TBA with 303 degrees Oechsle was gathered in 1920, the highest-ever must weight for Rheingau Riesling. We got a wee bit more this year but certainly not a lot. Fewer than 303 bottles! But the wine is precious; 100 Oechsle with good firm acidity, certainly a grand Spätlese, and a little muted on the day from fresh-bottling. Nose like warm maize and apples sauteed in butter; again, as lavish as it is there's wonderful underlying firmness. I'll regret how mild my language is! We're seeing true Rheingau "reserve" and posture here.

SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty six years)



# claus odernheimer

## abteihof st. nicholas

### rheingau • johannisberg

We made our visit near the end, and I breezed merrily in with high expectations. But Odernheimer seemed subdued. “So! How are things?” I asked.

“Oh, fine, except for the vintage,” he replied. “The vintage?” This was most unusual. “Yes, we had hail. Twice!” And so to one of the stranger tales of 2001. Poor Claus lost 30 hectoliters to hail, thanks to two storms, the first in July—“That’s a blow but you can deal with it”—and the second, disastrously, at 3AM the morning of October 3rd. The latter storm seems to have been a massive brute with tornadic winds. (It evidently destroyed the entire crop at Vollrads, as

well as anything else in its path.) “It’s the worst weather I’ve ever experienced in my life. I don’t frighten easily but Terry, bathtubs were flying around, it was terrifying.”

He attempted to press from grapes showing signs of hail-damage, but ended up selling the results to Sekt-makers in bulk. Everywhere a great vintage, but here a calamity. Very sad. Odernheimer’s been waiting a long time for another great vintage.

This is an estate where you know where you are. There’s often a signature-flavor in the wines, something herbal or resinous. Interestingly, you don’t notice it so much while there, but it stands out in tastings with other wines. In great warm years it confers a profundity on the wines which can lift them to some exalted heights.

This was a winery I bought from when I lived in Germany. Some of the most memorable Rheingau Rieslings in all my experience came from here. Odernheimer is an intense but steady man, not easily blown by the prevailing breeze. His style hasn’t changed much in the past twenty-two years, and I like it just fine. The key to that style was found in Claus’s answer to a

- Vineyard area: 7 hectares
- Annual production: 4,600 cases
- Top sites: Johannisberger Vogelsang, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen
- Soil types: Loam, loess and sandy loam
- Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 17% Spätburgunder, 3% Müller-Thurgau

fairly innocuous question: when he tastes wine, are there attributes that consistently impress him? If so, what are they? “Yes, I like a fruit that’s still fresh even when the wine has become mature,” he said. Odernheimer accepts that texture and spice are givens in his soils (as they are), and will be present in the wines as a matter of course. He chooses to emphasize fruit, and in so doing gives us wines which unite Rheingau weight and profundity with remarkable body and succulence.

“Rheingau Riesling is a creature between 14 and 20 grams per liter of sugar, 8 and 9 grams of acidity, and three years old,” he says, only a little facetiously. Vigorous pruning gives him small yields but riper grapes than his neighbors in the same vineyards. He rather reluctantly believes in machine-harvesters: “Qualified harvesters are getting almost impossible to find, and the machine-harvester brings us higher must-weights by separating the stem-sick berries. They fall to the ground from the agitation of the machine,” he points out. Still, much of Odernheimer’s land is too steep for the machine, so hand-picking continues.

The goal is to make wines that are “typical and clean.” Every year there is something not only classical but wonderful here, and if I’m ever tempted to forget just what our hero can attain, he opens something like a Kabinett from the 1958 vintage, in perfect condition at thirty-eight years old—a Kabinett wine! Or a Müller-Thurgau QbA from 1963 (1963!) that was drinking like a dream.



Claus Odernheimer



**Odernheimer at a glance:**

Value, value, VALUE for big-flavored Rheingauers, only occasionally stellar, but always very GOOD. Plush, fruity style for drinkers who might find many Rheingauers too austere.

**how the wines taste:**

They're broader and more horizontal in structure, but with the underlying firmness of typical Rheingau Rieslings. Mouth-filling fruit they're sensual rather than cerebral wines. Odernheimer is a practical man, and he's conceded a great deal to make his wines attractively priced. If you're looking for healthy, clean, voluminous Rheingau wines at astounding prices, look no further.

**GOD-40L 2000 Rheingau Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

I have asked to have the Grosslage name (Johannisberger Erntebringer) removed from this, as I disapprove of Grosslagen on principle and wish to expunge them whenever possible. This wine is actually Johannisberger Vogelsang Kabinett. This is like Jaques Seysses offering a "jug" wine made from Gevrey "Les Gruenchers." It has a fragrance of warmed maize and sautéed apples; it's fruity and spicy, deft, and, as always, above its class. The 2001 will be available in around nine months, and it's even better.

SOS: 2 (between one and five)

**GOD-39 1999 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Kabinett "Feinherb"**

This smelled uncannily like Furmint, all that rosewater. It's juicy and gentle; I like it a lot. Exotic and quince-y. Look what I wrote last year: "soft and juicy with the violet and tarragon spice and his resinous house style. Almost an Austrian lilac-y note, as if you were chewing the petals." Ha. If I were really pompous I'd say "tasted twice; consistent notes."

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to five years)

**GOD-37 1999 Johannisberger Vogelsang Riesling Spätlese**

This is Odernheimer's best 1999: a remarkably tight, convincing core of Riesling flavor. Ripe, un-evolved nose of sourdough toast and maize; it's a little topky like many 1999s, but a suavely compact finish suggests a fine "career" for this Riesling.

SOS: 1

SOMMELIER ALERT! (between three and twelve years)

**GOD-042 2001 Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen Riesling Spätlese**

This escaped the hails. The malt and papaya nose is spot on. The palate is taut and spicy, with an exotic fruit and mineral finish. A meaty chunk of Riesling from a great site.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)



I've been writing "colorful prose" about Wolfgang for years now; he lends himself to it. He's his own caricature, with his elastic face, grand gestures, declamatory locution and brimming vitality. Eccentric perhaps! His wines, also, are eccentric, if not anachronistic. But the man and the culture from which he emerges are somehow both stunning and mystifying. There is a value here, something to which we must attend. Instinctively I know if I don't enter in to Riedel and his experience, I will squander something precious in my own soul.

His is a personality that could only exist in the old-world. It isn't that time has passed him by so much as he has passed through time, at least the kind of time we measure by the dross and ephemera of modern living. He's a creature of eternity. You can easily imagine him living in any historical epoch

without being different from the man in front of you. He's also funny, excitable, and grandly affectionate. I, in response am, oh so fond of him, but beyond my little sentiments I am just tickled that a man like Wolfgang exists at all!

Riedel's is a tiny estate, all of three hectares, parcelled out among the four important sites of Hallgarten. Wolfgang likes the Jungfer best, betraying his preference for adamant, stony wines. I'd vote for Schönhell, but Jungfer will do! Nothing but Riesling, natch. Reductive winemaking is the order of the day: the first racking is as early as possible. After a single egg-white fining the wines are bottled. Riedel is after clean, full-flavored wine of great intensity. He wants a big middle where the extract can be tasted. He intensely dislikes botrytis (and makes very few Auslese), saying the best wines come from "green, ripe grapes." He is a true Trocken freak, since long before Trocken was trendy.

Riedels sell their wines to private customers—98% of



whom they know personally. No wines are sent to competitions, nor do Riedels visit wine fairs or exhibitions. Wolfgang won't have it. "I'd feel like a whore on a street corner at one of those fairs," he says. "All we can do is offer our customers perfectly honest wines."

This is a man whose soul can still agonize; he makes me think of Ivan Karamazov, as every flicker of emotion passes across his mobile face I was not surprised to learn Wolfgang had studied for the priesthood. One sees that side of his spirit, the capacity to be devout, but his brimming delights and enthusiasms mandated an earthy path for this man.

Lately, though, Wolfgang seems ever more serious about returning to his first love, art history. As Riedels do not care to play the PR game, there are few opportunities to widen their base of private customers, and it's getting harder to make a living from one's old standbys. The new generation of wine buyers (assuming they buy German wine at all and not someone's mass-produced Pinot Grigio) aren't as brand-loyal as their parents were. They skip around, buy a little bit here and a little bit there. You need a lot of them to stay afloat if that's how you market your wines. Riedels, I sense, are paying a price for their purism, and Wolfgang's heart is divided.

The house containing the winery belongs to Wolfgang's mother Christine Riedel. She's quite a person - age in her own right. I have only heard sketchy details of her autobiography, but I gather she was widowed quite young and basically ran the winery and the household on her own. This amazingly resolute woman, who's lost none of her intransigent spirit and drive at eighty-plus was once regarded as "the best cellar master in the Rheingau" according to the administrator at one of the noblest of the noble estates. "The soul of the winery," said **Alles Über Wein**. A great story is told (and retold: Mrs. Riedel leaps at the chance to tell it). It seems there was a tasting to honor the old Count Matuschka-Greifenclo on the occasion of his birthday. Riedels were showing the then-young 1959 Beerenauslese, which attracted the notice of the birthday boy. Thinking, I am sure, that he was offering the most cordial remarks from a blue blood to a commoner, he permitted himself to observe to Frau Riedel how remarkable it was that a wine of such quality could come from a small vintner. Frau Riedel, whose entire life had been building to just such a moment, was having none of it. "You know, Count," she replied, "our vineyards are less than two kilometers apart. Do you imagine we receive the same sunshine, or does God in His wisdom hang a curtain between your vines and ours?" Ah, bless her!

These days she gets around on crutches; she has bad knees and a hip that's been broken a time or two. "Below the neck I'm a mess, but above I'm 110 per cent!" says she, adding: "Better that than the reverse." Still, it is hard for a

self-described “bundle of energy” to accept an infirmity, and I was touched by her self-deprecation. She seemed sure we wouldn’t want to be “bothered” by her joining us, but we practically begged her to stay! I later found out she had personally, without any help, boxed and labeled my most recent (and largest) order. “If I don’t pack, you don’t get any wine!” I’m not sure how to say how this makes me feel. We all live our busy lives, in our stores, or restaurants or offices, and it is easy to lapse into the fallacy of thinking our life is all of life. Yet by the time our orders get to Riedels, all of our clamor and noise reduces to an eighty-six year old woman, on crutches, hand-packing and labeling her family’s wines to send to America. I think of the things those hands have known. I think of the life that has passed across those girlish blue eyes, an entire human life.

A very tall dark-green bottle was brought out for us one year. **Heavy** thick glass. The cork was eased out of the bottle with great care. The wine was poured. Deep greeny-gold. Whatever it was, all that chlorophyll was still there. Oh, a great bouquet, enthralling, complex, orchids, leafy, tapioca, a cathedral of fragrance. As I was trying to imagine what it could possibly be, Wolfgang could no longer hold it in. It was a **1937 Jungfer Spätlese**, fermented dry as was the rule of the day. 1937. Christine was married that year. I couldn’t remove my eyes from her face. The wine was majestic, dignified, theologically mysterious. It had a sagey high note on the back of the palate, and a weeping evening of burning leaf. It had power and verve - still vigorous! It was full of ivy and grain. It told of a time when people dressed for dinner in their own homes. The room fell silent, as we all opened our hearts to this winged messenger of Time.

The wine qua wine was lovely enough, about as profound as wine can be. But the experience of drinking it with the woman who helped make it over sixty-one years ago, and her son, and my friends, was overwhelming. I felt as

though I’d received the tablets on which were carved the answer to every human riddle, but they were written in a language I did not speak. I heard the roar of an aircraft outside the window, on its takeoff climb out of Frankfurt, 20 miles to the east, flying over Hallgarten and our silent room where a wine older than any of us had been given to us to drink.

It feels jarring to return to the subject of wine strictly as wine, strange to think of wine as an isolate discreet thing again. Wine flows like blood through these lives. And that world is vanishing. We may be the last people who ever see it. What do any of us do that has a meaning so deep we don’t even see it as meaning? Why are we living so little of our lives?

We taste all the wines here at cool room temperature, in quiet, deliberately, against a white tablecloth; we peer into them with absorption, we have time to hear their secrets (and oh, what secrets they have.) I sometimes feel the only way to show these wines to you appropriately would be to invite you over for lunch and play Gregorian chant.

We were also treated to a spirited disquisition regarding what makes a vintage GREAT, the cause of which was the opening of a bottle of 1959 TBA. Wolfgang feels - and this is telling - that no vintage in which an Auslese is made by selective picking can ever be considered great. A truly great vintage is one in which all the force of nature is arrayed in each grape such that Auslese can be picked everywhere right off the vine. To do otherwise is an attempt to “outdo” nature, a kind of sleight of hand. This flies precisely in the face of the current wisdom, and I happen to disagree with Wolfgang, but most important this is a glimpse into his Weltanschauung, and thus, into him. His wines are so inseparable from Wolfgang the man, one suddenly understands why he often produces “only” QbA wines in years when others produce Auslesen. It isn’t mere laziness. It is a unison with nature he seems to be seeking.

#### Riedel at a glance:

This isn’t a winery that can be encapsulated into bite size wieners, so forgive me, but I won’t. Please read the text!

#### how the wines taste:

They’re adamant and resonant, with the specific stoniness of this site that is chiseled into the very face of the wine, a fast-disappearing style of pure dry white wine in which the signature of the land combines with the best expression of the human touch. Lately Wolfgang’s wines have consistently shown a kind of cherry-pit or almond tone reminiscent of Italian whites in the old style. This is rustic, but it’s redeemed by another waxy-quince-y almost Loire-Chenin profile. Each of the wines offered below share this character, the 2000 in a sleek style and the ‘99 in a fruitier rendition.

GRL-024 **2000 Riesling Halbtrocken**

GRL-025 **1999 Hallgartener Schönhell Riesling Halbtrocken**

# mosel-saar-ruwer



The green bottles. The wines we love with a special tenderness, for the essence of spring-time which pours out with each piercing greeny splash. There are as many ways to love them as there are people who love them. But for me, as a merchant, there is only one way to buy them.

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

You can buy softer and sweeter Mosels than the ones I sell. That style has every right to exist,

I suppose, but it goes against the regional grain. If you were a grower in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, why would you want to make a wine that tasted like Beaujolais? If you're looking for softish, sort of vaguely appley Riesling, buy it from some

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

other place and let the Mosel be its inimitable self.

The valley itself is gorgeous and it can also be cruel. It is spectacular but unforgiving; the very steepness of the vine-clad slopes suggest the precariousness of a vintner's existence there. The wines themselves, beneath their extroverted gaiety, have something quite rigid, unsentimental, as though of a flower-essence distilled to a point of almost unbearable clarity. It is so easy to be charmed into euphoria by these wines that I forget just how intricate and inscrutable they can be. Even the most rustic and uncomplicated among the vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly. But leave the best-known sites and drive just a few miles and there are seismic shudders of a dubious future. However searching the wines may be, the work of producing them is sweaty and brusque. You know, until you actually see these vineyards, you cannot imagine—even the best pictures cannot convey—just how steep this ground is. Our forbears were stoically accustomed to a certain physical travail as a condition of being. But not us. Sometimes you will look up there at little specks of people, pruning, binding, spraying, and you will wonder: “how do they keep from falling?” But even more

you will wonder: “who in his right mind would do such work?” Who indeed! The people who are willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much of the casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Finding labor and paying the laborer what he's worth are serious problems for a Mosel vintner. Yes, families undertake most of the work themselves, if they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable names are either up for sale, have already been sold, or are floundering. Vineyard land is available everywhere, giving an anguishing dilemma to those who can afford it. One wants the irresistible bargain, but who will work the land? Selbach-Oster, an estate whose size has nearly doubled in the past five years, faced mutiny from their vineyard workers if they added more land.

Yet they have added land, and will continue to, as

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

long as great land is available. For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

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

But this generation is aging. In many cases their chil-

dren have moved away to easier and more lucrative careers in the cities. That's why so much good land is available. But what's really shaking things up isn't the ones who left, but the ones who remained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for pfennigs (or cents in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his window at the perpendicular mountains I know he has to work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we're going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

Which means—now listen—that the **GREAT** 2001 vintage is an absolute bargain, a steal of the first order. It's

only a little more expensive but it's a LOT more amazing; easily the greatest Mosel vintage in at least 30 years.

But the Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking flood during the harvest of 1997. ("In the next life," Sigrid Selbach told me,

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

"I don't think I'd buy a house along the river.") On Christmas day 1993 the highest water in two hundred years poured through villages and into cellars. As it had ruptured several underground fuel-storage tanks, the floodwaters were also slick and smelly. You can't get insurance for flooding and the economic consequences of the flood of 1993 were devastating. The emotional consequences are still being played out. People will show you pictures, show you the water marks in their homes, tell you tales of heroic measures necessary to protect their young wines—most of which were miraculously, unharmed. And the following year saw equally remorseless flooding: how much can these people endure? The new-world wine-maker "lifestyle" is the heaven these Mosel vintners hope they'll go to someday.

You can't help but wonder why they do it, even if you love the wines, and the answer is elusive. It lives in a feeling that lies deeper than human eyes can see. It can be divined, perhaps, but never witnessed. Someday when my son is a little older I plan to take him to the Mosel, because I want to show him my heroes. If heroism is the heart's courage, then the fortitude of Mosel growers is one of the most meaningful declarations of love a person can ever see. And I call that heroism.

Which makes it all the more galling to see the stuff that masquerades as Mosel wine from some of the schlock merchants. I have nothing at all against regionals per se - far from it, if it's honest and respects the region. But most of it bears little resemblance to Mosel wine (hell, some of it is only remotely wine) and every cork that's pulled serves to cheapen something fine and fragile.



Erdener Prälät

# mosel regionals

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

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

with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. I've done everything in my power to abuse these wines; I've given them to customers from bottles opened for days and even weeks, I've stuck them in tastings among estate Mosel wines; they always shine! Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "Piesport customer" only wants a price. One thing I can promise you. He will never care about quality if you don't. Taste some of that cheap stuff some time, and see if you can look a customer in the eye as you take the money from his hand. Good luck.

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

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

And I give you an IMPROVED TJ Riesling! We have completely redesigned the packaging so as to confuse the unwary consumer into thinking it is a bottle of CALIFORNIA WINE, or maybe even ITALIAN wine. This is because, as you know, most people like the taste of Riesling, but they just don't like the thought of actually drinking this thing they think is "Riesling." Let me describe the bottle to you, in case you are one of the eleven Americans who haven't seen one: clear glass, Bordeaux shape, punted base. Rectangular label, two-thirds of the way up. Very clear graphics, highlighting the word RIESLING (I am honest to a fault, I guess), and spelling out who the "T" and "J" in "TJ" actually are. While this is far more conventional than a Randall Grahm label (though I

have better ties than Mr. Grahm, and not as many really bad hair days), it is buckets better than the old TJ label.

So take another gander at TJ. If it's done well for you, it'll probably do even better. If it hasn't done well I'll bet it will start. If you've never considered it—baby now's the time!

## The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

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

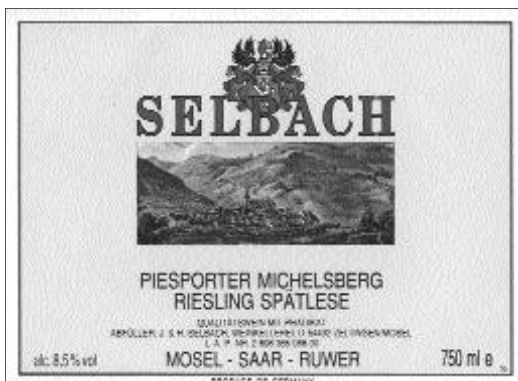
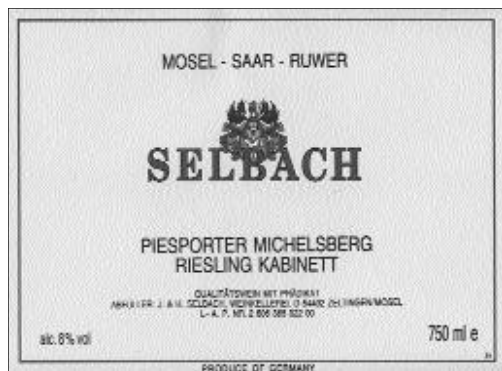
Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

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

Since the 1992 vintage, TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market. The 2001 vintage of TJ is considerably better than many estate-Mosel wines I tasted and rejected, and it's the driest blend we've ever produced, though it's addictively full-bodied and juicy.

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

- GSR-100 Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA
- GSR-200 Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA
- GSR-300 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA
- GSR-701 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett
- GSR-800 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese
- GSR-600 TJ Riesling



# selbach-oster

## mosel • zeltingen

### MOSEL WINES

There were a lot of Auslesen on the table. It's that kind of vintage. So much so that I asked Johannes Selbach if there was a 3-star in reserve, as I didn't see one.

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

Listen to this, people. This is what wine means, this and only this. The vineyards didn't create a

3-star Auslese in the 2001 vintage, so there isn't one. Simple. There's BA and TBA and no fewer than three Eisweins, but no 3-star Auslese.

It's easy to blather about terroir and facile to claim the vineyard makes the wine. Johannes has acted on a principle which will cost him valuable PR, but which is the only sustainable relationship a producer can truly have to wine. When after five days I finally drive away from the Mosel I am both roused to my core and seething with frustration. Frustration? Witness: a big-Cal-red first-release called . . . oh, I like the guy personally, and it doesn't matter what it's called; let's call it HUBRIS HILL . . . so Hubris Hill goes out for \$125 per bottle. The "producer" doesn't make the wine, doesn't even own a vine, but he's sure willing to stake a claim on your Buck-and-a-quarter because he knows the world's gone **mad** and a whole bunch of suckers'll pay it, especially if it has oodles of jammy hedonistic fruit erupting from the glass in sub-atomic orgasms of delirium: 90 points.

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

Wine: (n) anything anybody can contrive to make, detached from nature, detached from culture, connected to

nothing but our infantile need to be entertained and our adolescent need to be fashionably correct, to be sold at the highest price some desperate hipster can be horsewhipped into paying.

If this is the summit of wine's aspirations then it wouldn't hurt civilization if it disappeared. But I know better, and I want you to know better, and I know that we can, most



Johannes & Barbara Selbach

- Vineyard area: 11.9 hectares
- Annual production: 7,500 cases
- Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst
- Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

of us, return to the knowledge of wine's true claim on our hearts and bodies and souls. All of which is saturating the very filaments of air at Uferallee 23 in Zeltingen on the Mosel, where Selbach-Oster calls der schotz.

"You may have noticed our wines are a bit drier the last two vintages than they used to be," said Johannes Selbach. "We know how to make reductive fruit-bombs that get high scores and stand out in big tastings," he continued, "but the problem is everyone writes about those wines but nobody drinks them. We want to make wines for food, that people can use in their everyday lives."

The secret is lees. Please lees me, oh yeah, like I lees you. The other secret is casks, the old mellow 1000-Liter casks the Moselans call Fuders. When you ferment in cask and leave the wine in cask on its gross lees for a month or two after fermentation, your wines have wonderful plush texture and rich mid-palates and they need less sweetness. They also have what Johannes calls "soul."

I drink plenty of wine with my friend Johannes and I know his tastes are broad. He likes those reductive fruit-brilliant wines. He simply prefers not to make them. He wants his wines more imbued.

Selbach's wines need a lot of time. Oh they're tasty enough young, but they reward patience with a panoply of flavors only incipient in the early days. I have them in my cellar but don't often reach for them, since I'm always thinking: "Wait for it, wait for it," but one night I just didn't give a shit. I **wanted** A Selbach wine and that was all there was to it. I found a bottle of 1989 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Spätlese with a slightly bulging cork, and fig-



ured that was all the excuse I needed.

1989 was Johannes' breakthrough vintage in many ways; it was the first young vintage I tasted thinking "What's going on here?" God, what a joy it was to drink this Wehlener. So expressive and so impeccable.

The tasting of the young vintage of Selbach-Oster is a workmanlike half-day's task. There are a lot of wines, and damn it, they're all good. You yearn for a dud once in awhile, a wine you don't have to concentrate on, something you can spit and forget. Not at Uferallee 23! Toward the end of the tasting I slow down, partly from ordinary fatigue, partly because I become aware of something significant taking place. A group of wines like these accumulates and creates a crescendo of meaning. It doesn't want to be grasped and apprehended, but I stubbornly try to explain it to you. I must be an epiphany-junkie.

Many of you have met Johannes on his travels. He's always on the road with his wares! Yet for me, his winery is perhaps the fundamental example of the difficulty of removing wine from its contexts of family and locality. From the very first, the Mosel makes an impression on you; it's so improbable and so beautiful. And from the very first, the Selbach family made an impression on me, as they do on everyone.

In my case I fell rather dazedly in love with them, or at least with an aura I had some role in reading into them. In the years that followed I have tried to reduce that infatuation to whatever unblinking truth lies beneath it. It isn't easy.

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

It's more than wonderful. It literally amazes me that people would cheerfully agree to get out of their warm beds before dawn on Christmas morning, leaving their families, to go out and gather enough fruit for a few cases of wine that nobody makes any money on. Can you hear such a story and still doubt that angels walk among us?

Here's why I insist in capturing and conveying the experience of meaning I feel in this house: the Selbachs are part of a way of life one encounters far too rarely in our hyped-up cyberworld. Stories like the Eiswein harvest signify more than neighborliness, or even esprit de corps among fellow vintners. It is simply taken for granted that certain traditions are ennobled by observing them with love and good cheer. When you have a chance to gather an Eiswein it is beneficence from heaven; you seize the opportunity, you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

I recall also a time a few years ago when I was tasting at Merkelbach. I had someone with me who hadn't been to Germany before, and when we were done with the new vin-

tage we tasted a few older wines, as is the local custom. Hearing the way Merkelbachs recalled each aspect of each wine's story—when it was picked, from which parcel, in which condition, aged in which cask—our new arrival remarked upon this remarkable recall. And Sigrid said, "Yes: can you see what wine means to these people?" And I felt a sap rise in my soul. Yes, I think I see what wine means to these people, and also I see how it moves Sigrid and how tenderly she wants me to see it.

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

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

Don't forget to distinguish between J. & H. Selbach, which is the *négociant* arm of the business, and **Selbach-Oster**, the estate. Though both businesses are imbued with the same soul, and both sets of wines express a certain aesthetic. Part of that aesthetic is the eschewing of anything confected in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its internal skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured, detailed, and defined, and the overall effect of the wines should be as bracing as a leap into a cold pond on a hot day. Hans Selbach once advised a colleague not to select too stringently at harvest. Better to leave a few of the underripe grapes in the bunches. They give structure to the wine.

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

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

Tact and love are in this family's blood.

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

Few wines—few things—take us to such places of faith. Selbach's wines take me there frequently. You can't identify that slippery little thing soul in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they peal and echo. It is how quickly they leave

themselves behind and lead you elsewhere away from “wine.” Johannes told me that he wants “soul” in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a value in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.

I knew Johannes was happy with his 2001s, and tasting them it was easy to see why. It's not just their innate quality—it's clearly a great vintage from a great producer—but it's also a rare alignment of character between vintage and producer. Selbachs were made for a year like 2001. These are full-bodied wines (as theirs are) with splendid but not aggressive acidity (as theirs are) with clean ripe fruit with only healthy botrytis if any (as theirs are) with multi-layered depth and classical rendering of flavor (as theirs are). The vintage was so synchronous with Selbach's house-style that the few wines made in stainless steel were conspicuous and generally less thrilling.

I have written before about the self-consciousness that visits me when I return to the site of an experience that moved me. I've often been put into a kind of trance after

tasting Selbach's vintage, and often been moved to tears. Now I am so hyper-aware that a Great Experience is about to take place that it can't take place. Which, I think, is good. Now I'm just calmly receiving the wines and what happens happens. And so about 75% of the way through these 2001s I started to feel very lucky. I realized “I am in the very beating heart of what I do, this is what wine means to me, and all around me are people I love and respect who embody every core value I hold dear.” Months later I'll be ripping through the pages of some magazine to see what “scores” these wines got (such are the duties of what we call the “real world”), but now I'm here.

To some extent I have always taken Johannes Selbach's guiding intelligence as a given. Yet over the years I have come to consciously admire it. He knows just what he wants to do, and knows what to do to make it happen. Few vintners have such precise vision. But more than that — and yes, I'm writing this for Jo's eyes, the spirit which guides him, the thing he is trying to serve, is valuable and beautiful, and for this I don't admire him; I love him.

### Helping With The Harvest at Selbach-Oster

- by Siobhan Thomas

*Typically, most days we traveled as a group from vineyard to vineyard, and the instructions were usually to take 2 buckets, and in varying degrees, pick selectively. Johannes gave instructions at the winery, and also in the field. Otherwise, Philipp told us what to do in the vineyards. At first, and in some vineyards later, J. or P. would show us the difference in the grapes we were selecting- Botrytis being the main thing. For any of us neophytes, stem rot, etc. was explained. The Poles know exactly what they are looking for, so I looked to them with a ? when Philipp wasn't near. Many vineyards had the same instructions, so it wasn't necessary to demonstrate the selection each time.*

*There were plenty of vineyards we went through more than once. We usually were preselecting the botrytis grapes, often separating them out individually, and leaving the clean grapes to ripen further. We cleaned dead leaves when it frosted, and made sure there was ventilation for the remaining grapes. We also cleaned the vines for eiswein this way, and the grapes and vines were kept immaculate in those vineyards. I believe there were places we covered at least twice, though I can't be sure, as the geography of the vineyards is pretty insane in places.*

*We were very very selective in most vineyards. Often, a crew of the Poles, who have been doing this for 10 yrs+, went ahead to select the total botrytis bunches, and the rest of us broke the remaining bunches into our 2 buckets, one for clean, one for botrytis. This often required splitting the individual bunches to be sure. In the evening we would stand around great barrels of botrytis grapes, scoop them into smaller buckets, and pick out each of the not-botrytis-enough grapes, until we had barrels of only beautiful mold.*

*One of the quintessential experiences to understand the amount of care that goes into these wines, is to spend the evening separating the botrytis. It is amazing to me how many times how many pairs of discerning eyes select and reselect for the various wines. Clinging to the slopes like a mountain goat all day is definitely an integral part of the Mosel experience! Working the presses also gives one an appreciation for the quality of the grapes, as batches are determined and selected. You also realize how much of the work continues in the dark, still with a sense of urgency. And it is cold, hard work, forking grapes into the crusher, piling them into the press, cleaning the press, doing it all again, and then again, and to top off the night, taking the wagon load of stems and skins out the the field, and forking it back out to store for mulch. I'd be willing to pay much more for these wines, now that I know what all is involved in the making. and I've got to say, on the romantic artistic side, the view from the top of the vineyards when the sun finally breaks through the clouds is enough to make your feet warm again!*

### A Look At The Vineyards:

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

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

**ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG** is mineral to the MAX! Now back in production after the catastrophic hail of 1997, I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: I think it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Selbachs have shown time and again the potential of the site. Flavors are a borealis of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cussed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

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

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

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

#### Selbach-Oster at a glance:

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection, and 2001 is no exception.

#### how the wines taste:

There is a striking conciliation between brilliant acids and a kind of leesy plushness. There's plenty of minerality, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

#### GSO-175 2000 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinet

This I tasted at the breakfast table! It went good with rolls and ham. It's just about a perfect "entry-level" Selbach-Oster: robust, leesy and tasty. A happy price-point item here. SOS: 2 (between one and eight years)

- GSO-179 **2001 Zeltinger Himmreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**  
 Zeltingen's Himmreich is a site with variable exposures and steepness, but the best of it offers "1er Cru" quality in a green-apple and kiwi style, more fruit driven than mineral. Often Johannes sacrifices it into estate-blends, but in 2001 a couple casks were just too precious; this is smooth, slaty and gently dry, a perfect wine of its type.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS:0 (between now and three years; again between ten and fifteen)
- GSO-177 **2001 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**  
 GSO-177H **2001 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**  
 The whole estate-Riesling thing has many advantages: 1) to remove two superfluous words from the label, 2) to give latitude in blending, i.e. to be flexible in choosing which parcels of wine will make up this one, and 3) to provide continuity for a market that asks for it (you'd have to be an even bigger fusspot than I actually am to object to this little concession to commercialism). The 2001 is bright and limey, wintergreen; absurdly ripe but with a stolid, almost grassy underflavor.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (from four to sixteen years)
- GSO-194 **2001 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 I only wish there were more of this; the downside of 2001 is the paucity of Kabinett but the upside is the willingness of the growers to bottle Kabinett from wines they could easily have sold (at higher prices) as Spätlese. Like this critter; Kabinett in name only (85 Oechsle), it tastes like generous Spätlese, wonderfully lush and delineated.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS:1 (five to eighteen years)
- GSO-181 **2001 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Kabinett**  
 3/4ths stainless steel now; I tasted an unfinished version that will be a touch sweeter than what I sampled. But wow, the basic material is here. Marvelously stiff and flinty, ripe and big-boned.  
 SOS: 1 (from five to seventeen years)
- GSO-182 **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** ++  
 For me the best Kabinett I tasted in the 2001 vintage. Johannes forgot to bring it out until we were knee-deep in Spätlese. Tasted alongside its big brothers this just shone and shone. It's a fruit-bomb; roses and lime-parfait, clear and sleek despite its mass; immense charm despite its fervent mineral density. A masterpiece. One fuder: 110 cases. Hurry.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty years)
- GSO-183 **2001 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**  
 GSO-183H **2001 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
 Like the Kabinett this is slightly grassy, limey, on the dry side but also dense, fleshy and mineral; key-lime.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)
- GSO-184 **2001 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 The Selbach-Oster paradigm. Complex melange of fruit and herbs and slate; rich and limey middle; dryish; long clean finish. Like all the best 2001s, so generous and yet so scintillating and filigree.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GSO-185 **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Extraordinary sappy-mineral savor in this full-bodied beauty. Haunting, exquisite finish.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GSO-186 **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese \*** +  
 Bigger and more imposing now, very long, even for 2001; a real terroir STATEMENT, majestic and amazingly salty and mineral.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty seven years)

- GSO-187 **2001 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Auslese \***  
 Good ol' Johannes; he couldn't bear to blend this away, whatever the commercial logic. I wonder if you know what this feels like. Imagine him standing in the cellar, tasting the wine, remembering everything about the site and the growing season and the harvest, and then tasting something not just good but characterful, unique. Something with personality. And he responds to it with a particular type of pleasure, akin to the joy of seeing a beloved face. So this wine exists. The fruit is more forthright in the Himmelreich manner, and the fact it was done in steel makes it bright and primary, but there's all the '01 mineral you could desire and it's just way fun Auslese at an entry-level price; **so** charming.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty seven years)
- GSO-188 **2001 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese** +  
 This is huge and dense with magnificent salty mineral, almost a pine-resin sappiness; exquisitely unfolding delineation and great length.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GSO-189 **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** ++  
 Perfect Mosel wine—nothing left to say! Mealy-woody undertones to the most sublime imaginable lime-apple-slate expression. Ladylike. Picked the 2nd day of harvest, from the old "Rotlay" section of Sonnenuhr, en bloc.  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty three years)
- GSO-190 **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese \***  
 GSO-190H **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese \*, 12/375ml**  
 More mineral resonance; speaks Mosel in a deeper, more gravelly voice; you need faith here; this is almost Rheingau-serious (and bottle-sick on the day I tasted it) but every ingredient is here.  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty three years)
- GSO-191 **2001 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese \*\*** +  
 Silken vivid interplay; more polish than the 1-star; "cashmere" says Johannes. From the oldest ungrafted vines in the best part of Sonnenuhr. "The most Mosel-typical great Auslese we've made since 1976," says Johannes. Here's where I glean a kinship to 1971, in fact. **Limited!**  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty five years)
- GSO-192 **2001 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein "Junior"**  
 GSO-192H **2001 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein "Junior," 12/375ml** ++  
 The label will actually say Junior. Nearly at the end of my journey, this was the most perfect Eiswein fragrance I'd yet inhaled. Archetypal, serene, slatey, drinkable, piquant; this crazily concentrated thing that plucks little harpsichord-notes of flavor. Profundity comes in many sizes. . .  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty five years)
- GSO-193 **2001 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Eiswein**  
 GSO-193H **2001 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +++  
 Here goes . . . this is riper than "Junior." Ethereally sublime fruit and focus; crystalline, high-pitched but not screechy; haunting otherworldly clarity; endless, soaring contrails of fruit. It tastes like Badstube; a masterpiece of the highest order, and very moving, taking you to that sweetest, pensive, wondering place. One of the great wines of my life.  
 SOS: 4 (between eighteen and forty seven years)



This is Johannes' newest project, in effect a 2nd-label Selbach-Oster. You see the label is quite different. Please "position" this line as a 2nd-label or even as a négociant line under Johannes Selbach's guidance.

The wines are made by Johannes Selbach, but until a new winery is built they are not made under the same roof as Selbach-Oster. Even when that day comes, do not confuse the two; Selbach-Oster will always be the premium range, exclusively estate-bottled from vineyards owned and worked by Selbach.

"Selbach" tout court will be made from leased vineyards, supplemented when necessary from purchased grapes. Never purchased wine; Johannes wants to make the wine and be responsible for it.

Nor is it to be confused with ordinary Selbach regionals. These are either regional or brand-name Grosslage blends, but the Selbach line will be single-site wines standing below the level of the Selbach-Oster estate wines.

Why?

The Mosel regionals market is starting to unravel. Many of the vineyards from which the wines come were planted on unsuitable land in the wine-craze of the 50s, and in some cases the vineyards are being abandoned, while in other cases the growers are starting to bottle and sell their own wines. In short, there's reason to question the long-term survival of the bulk market. Nose ever to the wind, Johannes is starting to feel the need to gradually morph the J & H Selbach business in a new direction.

Most important, I tasted the first wines from the fledgling business and was most impressed and delighted. They have completely realized Johannes' desire to offer honest single-site Mosel Rieslings bearing the Selbach stamp at highly attractive prices.

So, once more to repeat and clarify: the SELBACH world consists of three entities, all under the executive direction of Grand-Master Johannes "Killer Joe" Selbach (or "cell-block"), and these entities are:

### 1) J & H Selbach

For Mosel-regionals at their most honorable, made from riesling, bottled and labelled by Selbach. Includes our TJ-Riesling.

### 2) Selbach

For single-site Mosel rieslings from leased vineyards worked under Selbach supervision, producing in effect a 2nd label or négociant line with the Selbach imprimatur. The wines are made by Johannes Selbach.

### 3) Selbach-Oster

The estate, from which the Grand Vins come; the pinnacle of the company's production.

### The Wines:

#### GSZ-001 Selbach Riesling Dry

#### GSZ-002 2001 Zeltinger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

A darling wine; needly and licorice-y; sleek, clean and dry; intensely stony, green-apple. 87 degrees Oechsle (!); what brilliance and spring-water freshness.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (between now and two years; again between twelve and sixteen)

#### GSZ-003 2001 Zeltinger Riesling Kabinett

This is not estate-bottled (as some of the grapes were purchased), but the wine is seven-teen yum's worth of pure Mosel f-u-nnnn. Lady-apple dee-lish-niss!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)

#### GSZ-004 2001 Zeltinger Riesling Spätlese

This will be the best of each particular year, from whichever site happened to provide it. This year it's my old favorite Schlossberg. The wine is prototypical; herbal, woodruffy, rich, with the solid fluffiness of 01; key-lime, just a grin of richness but solid and long.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)

# freiherr von schleinitz

mosel • kobern

Finally, a good vintage!

Not without problems though. This seems to have been the one corner of Germany which had significant botrytis with which to contend (see Weingart too), and the resulting selectivity made for a small crop even by 2001 standards.

Perhaps we got lulled into complacency with the string of fine vintages starting in 1988. For awhile it looked like I'd found a motherlode of reliably superb Mosel wine, and then it didn't want to rain any more, and then it rained too much. Nature needs to be much kinder to these people, because they care and you can't conceive of how hard they work in these austere terraces.

Konrad Hähn and his estate have garnered a following over here. I don't really need to tell the

"how-I-ended-up-in-this-east-b.f.-place" story any more, now that y'all know they make good wine this far down-river. But viticulture along the lower Mosel has challenges of its own, and it's worth at least a cursory glance at this sub-district.

The first challenge is the sheer ridiculous steepness of most of these sites. They put the perp in perpendicular! Plus they're on centuries-old terraces and can never be flurbereinigt. The local expedient has been to build the **monorack**, which is basically a little set of wagons run by a diesel engine mounted to a rack, which coughs and sputters its way up the vertiginous slopes. You ride facing down (i.e. backwards as you ascend) so you can buttress your feet against the back of the cart. When the rack traverses a wall the angle is nearly vertical and your heart is in your shoes. You wonder (when you're not gawking at the views) why did our forbears decide to grow grapes in such forbidding conditions when it would seem to have been equally plausible to plant vines on the valley floor. Probably because they didn't have TV.

These are the furthest downstream of all Mosel vineyards. Any further and you're in the suburbs of Koblenz. It may be the heat-island effect from the nearby city that



Konrad Hähn

makes these the warmest vineyards on the Mosel. The average must-weights are higher here, and regional co-ops pay a premium for these grapes. Or it may be that only the best sites are tilled anymore, and most of the vines are ungrafted. It's worth the journey just to see the terraces. The wines from these sites taste inimitably like great Mosel wines, with an

- Vineyard area: 7.5 hectares
- Annual production: 4,200 cases
- Top sites: Koberner Weissenberg and Uhlen
- Soil types: Slate and Rotliegend
- Grape varieties: 97% Riesling, 3% Spätburgunder

extra expression of minerality that recalls licorice or lemon-grass. There's a vein of red clay running through the Uhlen vineyard, giving those wines a redcurranty, earthy richness. The Weissenberg site produces the ballerinas.

Konrad Hähn is a serious, thoughtful man. He seems to take little for granted, doesn't do things merely because that's how Things Are Done. His fruit is cleaned and gently pressed, then fermented with cultured yeasts and vitamin B, in order to keep sulfur levels down later on. Fermentation is as slow as possible: "High temperatures destroy aroma molecules," say Konrad. Also, "if you have too much carbonate evaporation you take aroma out of the wine. We never bottle with sorbic acid. First you don't need to do it if your vivification is clean; second, we feel that despite all advertising you do taste it." Konrad's also evolving away from his early aversion to wines with stopped fermentations. With the ultra-ripe 2001s, he was willing to leave unfermented sugar in the wines because it would have taken too much dosage to give them the sweetness they needed. The wines seem to be snappy enough to appease him! He's still 100% stainless steel.

I liked the vintage. I even liked the Slatestone this year, and am glad of its success even though I chose not to be involved.

**von Schleinitz at a glance:**

Unique yet classic Mosel wines from impossibly steep slopes and the warmest vineyards along the entire river. Especially lemon-grassy, Granny-apple flavors. Excellent value for steep-slope wines.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste subtly of licorice and spiced apples. Lemon-grass also. Acids tend to taste brilliant and iridescent without being analytically exceptional. The wines are almost always spritzy, and are piquantly charming; very easy wines to snuggle up to!

**GFS-044 2001 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett**

Pure, wonderful nose; apple, fennel, wintergreen; palate is 2001 all the way, vividness and mass and salty mineral. The best wine from here in years.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between four to twelve years)

**GFS-043 2001 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Piquant and slinky; lemon-grassy and gently dry, any sharpness washed over by the vintage's richness, but it's still got that fennel-frond lemon-grass jazz, and it's zesty as an otter.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to two years; again from eight to eleven)

**GFS-045 2001 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese**

+

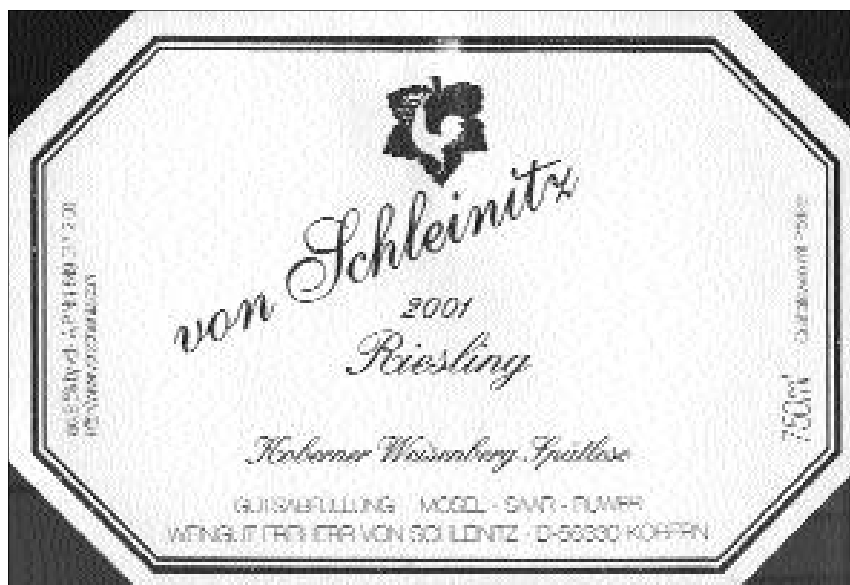
Botrytis shows up (with a pizza!), but this is big, serious wine, fervidly spicy and gorgeously mineral, with racy tangy fruit and dense rocky power.

SOS: 2 (between six to fifteen years)

**GFS-041 1999 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Auslese**

Odd to even taste a '99 in the context of the 2001s; this is big and brassy with brazen fruit and red-zone ripeness. That said, the wine works in its peculiar way; it has fine true Weisenberg flavors, it's none too sweet (given its relatively low acidity) and it's impressive in a Baywatch-babe kind of way. Not that I've ever watched that awful show . . .

SOS: 2 (between four and ten years)





Each year we taste a large range of “various vintners” wines at Selbach; it’s part of their function as commissionaires to scour the region looking for the next new superstars. Plus I do my own sleuthing and send them names from time to time. We always put Erich’s wines among the fracas, just to see if he stands out. AND EVERY YEAR HE DOES. It’s uncanny. His wines are brighter, livelier, more animated, more flavory: if this goes on, Erich can’t possibly continue to sell them so cheap. But the getting is good, really good right now.

Erich Jakoby started working for the Selbach family at the age of fourteen. He began as a cellar-rat and worked his way up to cellar-master at the tender age of 24; the youngest cellar-master in the state of Rheinland-Pfalz at that time. A grand old man of 40 now, he has had to leave Selbach in order to spend

more time at his own winery; his father is in failing health.

Selbach buys and offers Erich’s wines as part of their estate-bottled program. Normally these carry a J. & H. Selbach label (though estate-bottling is indicated) but as a gesture of respect to Erich he keeps his family’s label. Erich struggled to convince his family to adopt Selbach methods, specifically selective harvesting. The Jakobys appear to have been quite skeptical until they tasted the results! All of which is another way of saying we have a Selbach-trained vintner here, applying what he’s learned to wines which rarely are treated so well.

Kinheim is something on the order of an insider’s

- Vineyard area: 3.6 hectares
- Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

Mosel wine. The natives hold it in high regard, though adding the cautionary note that you have to know your grower and that some parcels are much better than others.

### Jakoby-Mathy at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

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

#### GJM-035 2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett

Just a wonderful lime-slate-apple critter with all the depth and body of 2001. Class class class! The best-ever Kabinett from Jakoby. Insane bargain!  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)

#### GJM-036 2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese

More rugged and rich than the Kabinett, with wonderful slaty depth.  
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

#### GJM-037 2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese #2

Even more body, almost burly; it could easily be a Justen wine; sauteed apples (in salted butter!) and a mineral sauna of richness.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)

#### GJM-038H 2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese #1, 12/500ml

This is the botrytis wine, and it’s a dead ringer for the all-time-great Mosel vintage 1975; really dreamy fruit, pure clean balanced botrytis; noble and very fine.  
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty five years)

# A Primer on Terroir

Why on earth does this self-evident truth need to be defended?

First, a definition. “Terroir”, as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, beginning with soil, and then beginning with soil’s components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn’t come first. What the soil consists of comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they’d wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of terroir is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I’m calling “proof”? It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors for which no other explanation is possible.

Even those willing to consider the truth of terroir might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said “I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of caillou and cram it in my mouth, but I can’t taste that flavor in the wine.” But this is not what I argue. I don’t know of any place where you can literally “taste the soil” (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can taste what the soil does.

I’ve been challenged that soil’s expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine’s DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine’s identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was some-

times drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it’s safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

I’ve also heard it said the notion of terroir has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. “A great winemaker will make better wine from “ordinary” soil than a lazy winemaker makes from “great” soil”. Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that terroir was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn’t. For when Dönnhoff obtained the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggle of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that terroir is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the first among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I’m alert, some days I’m dozy, sometimes I’m tender and sometimes I’m gruff, but I am always....fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the

January 2000 issue of Science News, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

"German researchers recently studied 165 wines from six grape-growing regions. The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy. (my emphasis) testing for just three elements – barium, silicon and vanadium – and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested."

A little further down the page: "From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different terroir, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to terroir."

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. "The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage", the argument goes. "They have something we don't have and can never get," it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motiva-

tion to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of terroir is afraid he doesn't have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound terroir do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of terroir, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. "If a crappy grower can waste a great terroir," they say, "then what good is it to me?"

No good at all, if you're looking to terroir as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won't do that. Not because it doesn't like you, or because it's just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn't understand our need to avoid disappointment. Wine, or the soil, or the earth, something somewhere has a thing it has to say, or else why would flavors arise so? Why else would nature have contrived this way for the earth to be tasted? We are meant to hear something, to know something. Wines of terroir may be portals into the mysteries of Place, its meaning and spirit. Even more inscrutable, wines of terroir are portals into the fundamental Mystery.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don't buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn't care. It just invites. And the soil remains.



# meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

## mosel • erden

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

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

Then all hell breaks loose. The first honeysuckle opens, and the stately, lissome dogwoods, and the silly, gaudy azaleas, and the air is emphatically warm, and the trees open their sticky new leaves,

and everything sprays upward in a whistling clamor of life.

This is the season of Justen.

These may not be the most mysterious or intricate Mosel wines I offer, but they are certainly the most gregarious and extroverted. Hey, glad to see ya! And yet they have virtues deeper than simple winning personality; they are true-blue Mosels, and I often thought that you, and I, neglected them. In the past three vintages Stefan Justen has made such gorgeous Mosel wines that none of us could neglect them!

I had failed to take into account the amount of time these wines need. I can be forgiven for having been seduced by their youthful veneer of charm. At least I think I can!

I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE, not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.

The great site here is the Erdener Treppchen. The estate has a good parcel in the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, part of Frau Justen's dowry, from which they make periodically outstanding wine, but Treppchen is identified as the giver of the estate's peak wine. And rightly so. There is a piece of the newly enlarged Prälät, for which a higher price is asked. Justen's piece of Treppchen contains very old vines on their own rootstocks, or did until these venerable vines were cruelly uprooted for Flurbereinigung.

In common with most Mosel vintners, the Justens frown on the use of Süssreserve. "Wines made with Süssreserve are often uniform, not distinct from one another," they say. (True enough, but one mustn't forget the many estates that produce a Süssreserve for each parcel



Stefan Justen

- Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares
- Annual production: 3,000 cases
- Top sites: Erdener Prälät and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr
- Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend
- Grape varieties: 78% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 9% Kerner

they harvest.) And in opposition to the prevailing fashion, most of this grower's wines have residual sugar. The dry wines are nearly always unsuccessful; his heart isn't in them. His heart leaps, though, at wines of differentiation, interplay of flavors, fruity and full of nuance, and individuality. Learn the wine that makes a vintner excited and you begin to understand the vision he has for his own wines.

Heinz Justen's wines were always, in his own image, discreet, elegant and mannerly, especially in their youth. I often underrated them out of cask; they gained in flavor and authority their first year in bottle. When son Stefan took over the winemaking, the young 1990s were brash and aggressive, and I wondered at the change and wondered how the wines would evolve. Interestingly enough, they lost much of that youthful ungainliness and developed into typical Justen wines; father's and son's wines started from opposite corners and met in the middle.

At the end of the last two years' tastings, I've wanted to hug Stefan Justen. He really understood the 1999 vintage. He didn't try to outdo or undo it. He relaxed his desire for extravagant fruit and made a range of fine gentle wines, drier than usual, with surprisingly explicit minerality. His 2000s were equally deft and fine, and included one bona-fide masterpiece

I had high hopes for the 2001s but never expected the glories Stefan arrayed for us; up through Auslese it's certainly the best vintage he's made and the best since I've come-a-callin'. There are a few very sweet wines which

were too stormy and unevolved to judge. But when we were tasting through the Kabinetts and Spätlesen I wanted to dance the shimmy they were just so screaming good.

Often after making the rounds through the new vintage, a Mosel grower will bring out a few wormy-looking bottles from his Sanctorum. These are always given to taste blind, and one is encouraged to guess the vintage and quality level, all in a spirit of fun. Protocol requires one to make suitably delighted noises, but that rarely presents a problem! No, where I'm concerned the problem is usually how to prevent Terry from being mawkish and babbling like a besotted galoot. This year we had two wines, a lively and intricate 1979 Spätlese which was sensually all kinds of fun. The second wine, though, had us all silenced with perplexity and awe.

It wasn't a vintage whose signature I knew. I eliminated a range of unlikely choices and finally wrote a plausible guess. I thought it might be a light, atypically firm 1959. Stefan finally said "This wine is exactly fifty years old, a 1951 Auslese," and we were melted with wonder. This is what I wrote in my notebook: "This 1951 Auslese is flashing a shiny green tooth of acidity and freshness and is gleaming and mysterious and haunting. It's like a shirt that's hung in a fragrant wooden closet, not worn for years, your father's perhaps, and one day you put it on and there it all is, him, his body, the time when he was alive, the boy you were then. We swim without cease in a strange bright ether. Light is gleaming and swaying always near us. If we breathe too deep we will die of a joy we aren't built to bear. Just a tiny gasp."

Before we arrived we heard the somber news that Heinz Justen had passed away two weeks earlier, after a

long bout with emphesyma. Stefan's demeanor was implacable; the Moselaners are unfailingly correct except with intimates. But when he brought out the old wine, just one this time, he told us it was in tribute to his father.

Usually I sniff the wine for clues, but this was like nothing I'd ever tasted. The color was deep but not at all golden; rather a chlorophyll-saturated thick green. The fragrance was sappy, verdant, boxwoody, forest-floor. The palate was gorgeously confusing; full of old-wine mystery but still stiff and crazily fresh. It was dry—Stefan thought perhaps 30 g.l. of sweetness; in those days a wine fermented till it felt like stopping. It was one of his final three, he said, and he himself was tasting it for the first time. Were we ready to know what it was?

A 1945, one of only three wines made by Justens in that great vintage. The wines were made by widows and children in the settling dust of the cataclysm. This wine was hidden from the occupying French until they withdrew in 1948. It was my first '45 too, and I was muted, flattened. I caught Anthony Austin's eye and saw that he was roused to his very depths. It was too sudden and too unreal for me; I needed this wine at the end of an evening of intimate conversation with beloved friends, when I was ready to receive its full pulsing reality. So I concentrated on the wine itself, which was enthralling, and thought of the sweet green sap running like blood down all the years.

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

### Meulenhof at a glance:

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moderate for impeccable quality. **Outstanding success in 2001.**

### how the wines taste:

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They are comparatively straightforward and "easy" to understand

because the fruit is overt and in-your-face. Even a cursory glance into that fruit, though, will reveal the proverbial Coat of Many Colors: interplays of flavor and texture that can be absorbing and rewarding. And the wines both keep and age.

#### GJU-063 2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

Unsurprisingly perfect. Sip = happy!  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

#### GJU-064 2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

I love the Mosel! Stefan is an Erdener, and although he produces Wehlener Sonnenuhr he seems to view it as a "foreign" terroir. Hans-Leo Christoffel is the same way about his Uerzigers; he's an Uerziger and therefore he prefers those wines to his own (incredibly good) Erdeners. Stefan told us he gets higher must-weights from Erden and also wines with more depth, and he's right, but I had to point out there was a little matter about how the wines tasted. Their actual flavors. And one had to treasure Sonnenuhr on that basis, without insisting on preferring it to his beloved Treppchen. All well and good, but this does have more body and length than its brother from Wehlen. It's the green-apple walnutty fibrous side of Treppchen. Shows fine dark slate tones, smoky, and fiendishly long.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)

- GJU-065 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
 A poem of slate, yet a stern poem, not a lyric. Beautifully smoky, all the facets of the great site, but not gorgeous, unless you go deeper than merely wanting to be delighted. You have to want to be stirred.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)
- GJU-066 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Like the Treppchen Kabinett but more peche-de-vignes, more middle-ripeness and length; bigger and more "important" than the Wehlener. Stefan said it was one of the first wines he picked. We were impressed.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty seven years)
- GJU-067 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** ++  
 More heat now; not alcoholic, but it smoulders like something primordial, like magma. Again so pure and undeflected, pure Sonnenuhr; racy and glorious.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJU-068 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese #13** +  
 Brilliant and dramatic; peaches and slate; tremendous mid-palate of miasmic density, remarkably complex fruit-slate melange in a finish that clings for dear life.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJU-069 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**  
 This is a blend of two casks, nos. 18 and 15; not sure how he'll designate it. It's surely Goldkapsel quality, a supersized version of the above. I admire its torque, capaciousness and extravagance, and concede its power to WOW—I'm a little wowed myself, and though I suspect young 1971s were like this in its hard-candy sting, I also suspect this will develop into a stunning wine over time. Thus I leap over my own purist preferences into the drooling maw of uncertainly and timorous faith.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty three years)



# alfred merkelbach

## mosel • ürzig

Last night I was at the ball park. I'm a purist; I like to arrive early and watch the guys take batting practice and shag fly balls while the stands slowly fill up and the players pause to sign autographs. So there I was watching some rookie who barely had a beard take b.p. and he was really **whack-ing** the ball, line-drive after line-drive, just sizzling bullets hitting the outfield fences, slapped to all fields with a satisfying crack! And I was reminded of something . . . but what?

And then I opened this text in the computer and there it was: Merkelbach's 2001s! Not a towering home-run in the bunch, but screaming line-drives that'd take your freakin' head off and bruise your hand through your glove if you were lucky enough to spear one.

For this is THE great Merkelbach vintage since I've been representing the wines; better fruit and

more balanced acids than 1990 or 1996, riper than 1985 or 1998; no, you have to go back to 1975 to find anything of this quality. And it's consistent; there wasn't a dud in the bunch. And it was utter Merkelbach—that ur-Mosel character that both defines the genre and typifies exactly what we most love about it.

What it is not, this great young vintage, is a year with Kabinett wines.

Which puts me in rather a quandry, as I need Kabinett wines because they're what you mostly buy. So I walked into Merkelbach's presuming I'd insist on declassifying a few of the lighter casks of Spätlese, and I'd beat the price down to "Kabinett" levels.

But I changed my mind. A vintage like this one comes along once every 15-20 years, maybe. I would not ask them to empty their pockets so I could get the word "Kabinett" on a label. Nor would I insist on downgrading a drop of this harvest even if the price remained the same, just so I could create a commodity to flog. The wines are what they are and shall remain so. They continue to be INCREDIBLE bargains. And I am going to plead with you to buy the **WINE** and not the word on the freakin' label.

Every now and again I'll get a little stab of pleasure that good things happen by dint of my labors. I was talking about Merkelbach with another grower, and was told



Rolf & Alfred Merkelbach

"You know Terry, your business is really a significant part of their total existence. Without you they'd be selling 75% of their wines in bulk." At this news I was both elated and chastened. I'm glad that many dozens of glorious wines exist because I was there to love and receive them. But Ulp! I'd better look both ways whenever I cross.

But the wines, you see, they provoke such giggling lunacy. They have to be the most absurdly VITAL and

- Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares
- Annual production: 1,500 cases
- Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen, Kinheimer Rosenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

clear of any wines I know on the Mosel. These are the best-loved of any wines I sell. It's all here: a pretty label, a style of wine that gushes charm enough to enthrall even the casual drinker, but contains more than enough cut and complexity to engage the wine lover, all that plus reasonable prices. No wonder they do so well for us all.

Rolf and Alfred Merkelbach must wonder at how a big giggling dope like me can sell the quantity of wine I do. I wonder it myself, actually. But the brothers M. are in a more-or-less constant state of vague wonder about the big world. Old Europe flows through their very veins.

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

Something sweet happened during our visit one year. Rolf and Alfred had a lady come in to cook us a little soup for our lunch, and this lady had a small child with her.

This curly-haired little sprite gurgled in and out of the room chirping her little-kid nonsense and flirting with her “uncles,” whom I had never seen with a kid before. This was a new perspective (I think if I were a little kid again I’d want an uncle like Rolf and Alfred). I asked her at one point if she liked wine. “Of **course!**” came her piping reply. Would she like to taste something? “No! It’s too early.” All right, sweetheart. Bye! (as she vanished off into the kitchen). It couldn’t have been FIVE MINUTES before she reappeared, “O.K., I’ll have some wine now!”

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

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

It seems logical to arrange this offering by site instead of pradikat, so that the basic style of each site can be described, and I won’t need to repeat the same stale adjectives in each tasting note. “But we love your stale adjectives,

Terry!” Oh right, like I believe that.

**KINHEIMER ROSENBERG:** this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It’s the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg’s wines often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years—remember the superb 1990s?—hey can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

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

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

### Merkelbach at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of electric, splashing acidity supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! How many wines have ever just made you LAUGH OUT LOUD, they were so happy and irrepressibly gorgeous? Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there’s someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he’s closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I’ve poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.

#### GME-94 2000 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett (Fuder #18)

I’m very happy a few of the excellent 2000 Kabinetts remain. We retasted them alongside the ’01s and they held up superbly. This has mineral old-vines density and the most physiological ripeness of the Kinheimers from 2000.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (between four and fifteen years)

#### GME-95 2000 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

Two Fuders: numbers 21 and 19. Pure, true Treppchen in both casks. Number 19 had slightly less focus. You could teach a terroir class with these three sites Rosenberg-Treppchen-Würzgarten. P’raps I will!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (between four and fifteen years)

#### GME-97 2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

Number 9 was the first cask to jump ahead of the pack. More whey in it, more core of ripeness. Number 23 was similarly juicy but snappier and had a longer finish. Again, both are . . .

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (between four and sixteen years)



- GME-104 **2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #7)** +  
 Friend, it's all here. This is what Mosel is. And I dare you to try and stifle your sheer ban-shee delight when you drink it.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)
- GME-101 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #5)**  
 The words were pouring out: "super-clean fruit, brisk, snappy, slate, marvelous charm and vitality, lime, salt, on and on . . ."
- GME-102 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #11)** +  
 Appreciably riper and creamier now; true Würzgarten fruit, and really sensational stuff!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)
- GME-103 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #12)**  
 This one's about fruit and ladylike charm. Fraise and lime underpinned by slate; finesse and elegance here in place of the coltish irrepressibility of the others.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty one years)
- GME-105 **2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese (Fuder #1)** +  
 Grandiose; a cymbal-crash of slate; long, extroverted and pupil-shrinking brilliance. The best since the great 1990—and this is better. Blown clear away.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! (FORGET that word "Auslese"; this is food-wine.)  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GME-106 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese (Fuder #10)** +  
 Glorious pearsy nose; streamlined fruit of surreal clarity leads to a spicy mineral-drenched finish. Limey, shimmer and again, brilliant; there's no other word.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty seven years)
- GME-107 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (Fuder #20)** +  
 This recalls the style of Christoffel's 2-star; rich and jellied-strawberried, densely vinous, quite amazing. Old vines, I asked? "They're all old!" came the response.  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)
- GME-108 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (Fuder #15)** +  
 This departs from Ürziger-specificity and becomes a kind of Mosel basis—as if Mosel-DNA were isolated inside it. Long, elegant, tensile; pole-vaulting lift and torque.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GME-109 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (Fuder #16)**  
 This one's rather more **limited** thanks to the predations of a greedy English woman named Lucy who buys for a U.K. importer, and who beat me to the punch by two days. Rest assured Ms. F.; my revenge shall be fiendish and dastardly. This recalls Christoffel's 1-star (my long-time favorite); more transparency, flavors really etched into skeins of nuance; amazing perfume, resplendent; true "Auslese" now; all the spice and strawberry parfait you could desire.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty five years)



You lost your chance to acquire a winery in Ürzig. I would have helped. You'd have been introduced to Hans Leo Christoffel's daughter (who speaks English) and done your queasy little number. But no, you thought you had better things to do. You missed the chance to have the coolest father-in-law. Hans Leo's as droll as Winnie the Pooh.

He's also been visited by Mortality in the form of some chest pains lately, and has wondered for some time if the taxing life on the steep slopes was sustainable. Having no heirs on the horizon, he has leased his vineyards and winery to Robert Eymael (from Mönchhof). This does not signal the demise of Weingut Joh. Jos. Christoffel. Eymael intends to keep the two sets of wines strictly separate, harvested separately (even pressed in Christoffel's press and vinified in his casks) and

marketed under the current label to me, with Hans Leo as consulting something-or-other! We sat together just the two of us and Hans Leo told me "Terry, you have absolutely nothing to worry about; this is a good thing." And I believe him.

Fast-forward a year. Now I am sitting with my obsequious entourage in the rococo splendor of Mönchhof in Ürzig, having just met for the first time the wonderfully droll Mr Eymael, whose sense of humor should be licensed as a potentially lethal weapon, and Hans-Leo is there showing his wines and wisecracking as he always does. As was guaranteed last year (and subsequently ignored by many onlookers who insisted Joh. Jos. Christoffel had ceased to exist regardless of the actual facts) the wines were Hans-Leo's wines, from the same vineyards they'd always hailed from. They were (and shall deliberately remain) stylistically different from the more opulent style of Mönchhof—indeed together they make a symmetrical pistil-stamen kind of tandem—because Eymael sensibly discerns the advantage of having them thus. Why be redundant? And why mess with a good thing?



Hans Leo Christoffel

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

Still, our dinner that evening did have a valedictory air. Hans-Leo made a short and bashful speech to mark the end of an era. We have all loved doing business with one another. It's been perfect, a model for how business relationships should be, and can be. It is significant, to be sure, to change from being a proprietor to a lessor; even if the wines are still your wines aesthetically, they are someone else's wines commercially. That has to feel peculiar after so many years.

But I simply couldn't feel melancholy. This was partly because each time I gazed over at Robert Eymael I knew I was going to enjoy knowing this man! But more importantly, earlier that afternoon, a fine thing had occurred:

I had tasted the vintage of a lifetime, the single finest collection of wines of any one year I had ever tasted at a Mosel estate.

If you do not buy the absolute living you-know-what out of these wines, then you'd walk past a diamond on the sidewalk because it's too much trouble to bend down.

It's always a challenge to taste here, especially if it's the final appointment that day. There are simply too many great wines. Early in the sequence the palate becomes alert; it sniffs beauty in the air. Later as you ascend through realms of richness, the sensitized palate feels as if its nerve-endings are tingling. Suddenly it isn't just wine anymore. It's as though ALL OF BEAUTY is flooding into your heart. You start thinking of music, poetry, love;

you're softened, roused, grateful. It feels larger to be human. You feel the breeze of an unseen grace. As you grope for words to convey this strange experience you find the only words are mushy, and maybe you feel a little embarrassed. But don't. There's a rigor beneath all that showering loveliness that you can trust. Beauty is real, and has nothing to do with sentiment.

Tasting them young these days, it doesn't take long before you realize the futility of attempting to be "discriminating." O.K., I GIVE UP! you think to yourself, as one masterpiece after another washes over your now-helpless palate. And he is pouring the wine casually, cracking jokes with us, a mild serenity reposing over his fine features.

The press has noticed also. And here is a fine irony; Stuart Pigott wrote that it was like a composer who's been writing great music all his life, suddenly "discovered" at the age of sixty. Christoffel was also invited to join the VDP, another symbol of recognition (and a pain in the ass for me, as they have their silly auction system which renders some of the best wines egregiously expensive).

Christoffel's and Merkelbach's are two almost diametrically opposed renderings of Ürziger/Erden. Merkelbach is slicing and sleek, Christoffel is profound, serious, more opulent, polished—bigger wine. Simply more vinous. Certainly more temperamental and more mysterious. I love them both dearly and differently.

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

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

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

Apropos old wines: Hans-Leo drolly asked if we wouldn't "mind" tasting something back a few years, having worked so hard to essay his new vintage. We could be persuaded, we supposed. The wine had a greeny nose with gold glints; I thought it couldn't be more than 25-30 years old, with that color. A quite heavenly, mature Mosel fragrance that grew smoky as it sat in the glass. The palate was long and dry with delicate smoke in the finish; just lovely in a calm, meditative way. Guessing the vintage

would be difficult, but the balance of probability pointed me toward 1966. Wrong. The wine was a 1959, an Auslesen, not one of the huge ones for which the vintage is famous, but from the parcel that the current three-star hails from. I had never tasted such a youthful and pensive 1959, and while I was wondering at the beauty of this thing, I glanced over at Sigrid Selbach, who was with us for this visit. She was chuckling with Hans-Leo, just as these two friends have done since the first time I saw them together, twelve years ago. Sigrid first brought me here, and now here we were again, drinking this 1959. The year Johannes, her eldest, was born. I started to cry because I didn't deserve to be there. I had too many hands in too many cookie jars in my life. I didn't belong there. Silly, isn't it. In order to try and be worthy, and because I felt so sentimental, I rather ceremonially thanked Sigrid for bringing me here and for all the things that led to this moment, trying desperately to keep my voice from breaking. "Oh, now; it's too early in the day for such compliments!" she sang out. And, perfectly, the moment dissolved.

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

For many of us this presents a problem. As soon as you establish a hierarchy you inadvertently push people toward the "best," or the perceived-best. That's because we seem to see things from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Nobody wants to tell his customers "I have the second-best cask!" No, you can't hold your head up unless you have the big kahoona. It's a truly shitty way to look at wine. It has in fact nothing to do with wine, only with a commodity that happens to be wine.

Do me a favor and set up another paradigm, just for a moment. Start from the BOTTOM, and observe that the first Auslese is a **beautiful** wine that is **worth its price**. Then the one-star is a different, in some ways even more beautiful wine that sells at a higher price, but is worth it. And then the three-star wine is a really exalted wine that costs so much more it's really best reserved for very special occasions. This paradigm doesn't deny the hierarchy, but it puts the wines on a **level table**, each is a valid experience WITHIN ITS LEVEL AND AT ITS PRICE, and it's fatuous and irrelevant to think in terms of having to grab the BEST. EVERYTHING'S THE BEST: the no-star is the best \$20 Auslese, the one-star is the best \$26 Auslese, and so on.

**Christoffel at a glance:**

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the “big three” among the Mosels I offer Christoffel has been constantly stellar, not just “often” or “regularly,” but EVERY SINGLE TIME, EVERY SINGLE WINE stellar since the 1992 vintage. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty. The more I get, the more you want; sorry, but I still must allocate. The estate is tiny, and has been discovered!

**how the wines taste:**

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

- GJC-94 **2000 Estate Riesling**  
Honey I'm home! Key-lime pie on a coulis of fraise des bois.  
SOS: 2(between three and eleven years)
- GJC-101 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett** +  
In a year where the lowest must-weight was 87 Oechsle, you don't need me to tell you there's no “real” Kabinett, right? But whatever this is, it's remarkable; soaked with walnut, kirsch, empire apple and, ah, slate. Profound, salty, deep, serious, thick, endless. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty one years)
- GJC-102 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**  
Hans-Leo's sure I'm mistaken in liking this a smi-d-g-e-o-n less than the Erdener; “Ürzig always needs more time, Terry, you know that.” But I love this wine; glorious, exquisite fragrance; palate is high-bred and racy, spicy, and a little more imperious; raw silk versus suede, one might say.  
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)
- GJC-103 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +  
An impenetrably dense power-pack, yet astoundingly transparent given its mass. Primordial fruit and mineral; profound but not remotely solemn; salty and glycerine-y.  
SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty eight years)
- GJC-104 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +  
Truly haunting, ethereal scents; if it wafted across your face you'd become Yeats' wandering Aengus and spend the rest of your life pursuing its mystic perfection. The palate follows, an almost unbearable itchy-where-you-can't-reach far away inference of the divine; flavors shimmer like a choir of angels. Whew!  
SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GJC-105 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese** ++  
Ah, the 0-star Auslese, the poor waif that no one wants. Listen my friend, with all due respect, if you don't buy this wine I will not sell you any Christoffel Kabinett. This is like the Spätlese but has more middle, more overt mineral, and fiendish, unstoppable length. Streamlined, insanely complex. Don't dare miss it chasing after the riper ones.  
SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GJC-106 **2001 Urziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese \*** +++  
As near to perfection as things can come on this earth. Slimmer, more fine-boned and delicate; precise and exact but again, deep and with unfathomable length. When we were asked at the end if we wanted refills of anything, I asked for this and spent the next half-hour in a trance of joy, it is so uncanny and so sublime. I even forgot to write my little “SOS” number.  
(between twelve and thirty years)

- GJC-107 **2001 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese \*\*** ++  
 The best 2-star Auslese Hans Leo has ever made. Densely mineral and profound but with simply breathtaking fruit; the poster-child for the greatness of 2001. So juicy and just-plain-drinkable I couldn't help but swallow. That should be my SLOGAN! "These Selections: swallow, don't spit."  
 SOS: 3 (between thirteen and thirty three years)
- GJC-108 **2001 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese \*\*** ++  
 Tired though I was of babbling superlatives, the weary truth is this is the best Erdener Treppchen I've drunk in my life: for it is. Unbelievable aroma; every scent and flavor facet of Treppchen elevated to perfection. A glory of fruit, density and minerality. Stunning.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GJC-109 **2001 Urziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese \*\*\*** +(+)  
 "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it. The wine was just bottled; the nose was barely cracked open; the palate is truly **spicy**, apples and cloves; sleek, transparent and mineral. Hans-Leo says it will certainly overtake the others. Which will make my "rating" conservative. Oh O.K., stupid.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty five years)
- GJC-110H **2001 Urziger Würzgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +  
 The epiphany of kiwi and sassafrass; crystalline, crazily ripe, really ultra-violet, glass-etching precision; real puff-pastry finish that tasted like great cheesecake! 140 Oechsle with no small acidity; 16 g.l.  
 SOS: 4 (between seventeen and forty years)



# heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

I have imported Martin Kerpen's wines since the very beginning, through a marriage, three kids (his) and a label change. I've started to recognize the flavors of individual casks in his cellar. We had a few very fat years, thanks to some fulsome and conspicuous reviews, but more recently things have coasted back to a steady cruise. When I tasted through the 2000s I was curious to see the sales figures, and I felt that these wines are too good for these numbers. The same is true—to say the very least—about 2001. And I'm delighted to see how y'all have responded to the lanky Herr Kerpen with all the enthusiasm the wines deserve.

Everyone in Wehlen stands to some extent in the shadow of Manfred Prüm, yet I don't really see anyone trying to emulate the style. There are good wineries making splendidly steely-mineral

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

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

Some of what's happened at Kerpen reveals the prosaic truths which lie beneath much wine romance. The quality of his wines improved significantly when Martin bought his



Martin & Celia Kerpen

new house along the Mosel, and completed the cellar. He used to have to make the wines in weeny widdle crannies in several different locations; now he's not only all under one roof but he's got ample space besides.

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? "I don't know, exactly! You have to work clean. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is 70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck." I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore he labors to make clear-tasting wine. Some have said that he makes wine in his own image—Martin is a tall, wiry sort of fellow—I said it too, but I've changed my mind. His wines are sleek (and long!) enough, but what impress-

- Vineyard area: 5 hectares
- Annual production: 3,400 cases
- Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

es me most about them is the multi-layered depth beneath all that finesse. It's an almost magical mingling of super-fine clarity with a remarkable chordal richness that takes the wines from very good to great. These are wines towards which you feel both admiration and tenderness; they are dear, winning wines. They needn't strain to be great wines; their beauty is their beauty.



**Kerpen at a glance:**

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the “Wehlen premium” but are still below the levels of many of the richer and more famous! Outstanding success in 2001!

**how the wines taste:**

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Less leesy-fluffy than Selbach, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not just pretty.

- GKE-069 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
Lovely old-fashioned woodsy touch on the nose; fairly dry as these things go; long and salty in the 2001 manner.  
SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)
- GKE-070 **2001 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Spätlese**  
Sensational fragrance, classically kirsch-y, racy, salty, tingling with vigor; gentle phenolic grip. Fine stuff.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and seventeen years)
- GKE-071 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**  
Classic lime-vanilla-herbal aromas; racy and slatey and rather masculine, as seems to be the style here this year. Cool, upright, lovely.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)
- GKE-072 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\* (Artist Label)** +  
You know this: it's the little bird in the rowboat. And the wine is just lovely; serious depth, solidity, complexity. More polish than the regular Spät, quite spicy and grand; amazing finish. Talc and papaya emerge; suavely stony length.  
SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty five years)
- GKE-073 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** ++  
This is mind-boggling; clean fruit and simply polytonal mineral complexity; almost the carriage of a Wachau wine—it might be Loibenberg. And once again the improbable conciliation of mass and nuance. One of the great 2001s.  
SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GKE-074 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese \*** +  
Now a pure mineral-essence, like bath salts-o-Sonnenuhr but with a rosewater aspect almost like Furmint; dill and tropical fruit in a nutso explosion. This is great wine and I only like the 0-star a weeny bit more because here the added sweetness removes a half-dimension of complexity from the finish. But you get more fruit.  
SOS: 3 (between eleven and thirty two years)
- GKE-075H **2001 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
Jellied-fruit of meyer lemon in a papaya crème-anglaise. Sunny and honeyed and a touch of botrytis; a sensual and tasty lil' kitten.  
SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty-six years)

# willi schaefer

## mosel • graach

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

Most businesses confront this conundrum eventually. What is the ideal size to which to aspire?

I would define it as the most robust volume consistent with maintaining the original motivating spirit of the enterprise. You know you've passed that point when it isn't as much fun as it used to be. Growth, in itself, is the siren song that dashes our souls against the rocks unless we insist on balancing our whole lives. This sermon will be rebroadcast at eleven.

Christoph sat with us again this year; at least I think he was sitting. He's, like, 9 ft. 3 inches tall or something, and him sitting is like me standing. I still can't get over that Christoph has grown up. I remember him as a toddler, and unless this is an acid flashback I can't quite accept him as an adult; I want to tickle him under the chin and make funny faces so he'll giggle. You can see him in the picture. He is going to make excellent wines; I feel it in my bones.

Although I enter Willi and Esther's house in a state of almost religious anticipation, what actually happens is we laugh and laugh. Maybe laughter is the catechism of this religion. When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been



Willi Schaefer

made. Christoph appeared in the doorway to say hi in his raffish sideburns. I recalled that the first time I drank this Domprobst was in 1980, in Willi's living room. His kids were little then. Willi left the room to take a phone call and

- Vineyard area: 2.7 hectares
- Annual production: 2,200 cases
- Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

I sat there with my glass of Auslese while the kids sat on the floor playing with a little top which hummed as it spun. The humming and the playing and the beauty of the wine and the friendliness and hospitality of my host became a single thing. I often recall that moment when I hear someone defend the idea of giving point-scores to wines.

I don't know a more decent, honorable, kinder or more conscientious man than Willi Schaefer. It's wonderful to be his friend and to sit at his and Esther's table. I hope he'll visit the States again so he can sit at mine. Everybody who knows Willi loves and respects him; he's never so serious that he loses his calm geniality, but his caring is woven into the fabric of his character; it simply becomes a way to live, not for fussing or testimonializing such as this one. Sorry, Willi!

He was one of the first vintners I ever met. First I just liked his wines and thought he was a nice guy. His wines in those days were just like him: honest, pure, unfussy, with a certain delicacy, not at all showy. But that youthful understatement matured into the most impeccable Mosel purity. You have to go a long way back to find a Schaefer wine that tastes fully ready to drink. I've never tasted one that was over the hill, and I've gone back as far as 1959 on several occasions. Starting in the 1989 vintage Willi's young wines seemed to become more expressive. These days they are about as vivid and racy and transparent as German wine can be. You put the first glass of the first wine to your nose and think: "There it is!" The soul of the Mosel is being revealed to you.



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

Christoph's decision to carry on the winery is quietly momentous. Schaefer said, with characteristic understatement, "we really didn't pressure him at all, he came to the decision entirely on his own," and there was something even more stirring than Willi's and Esther's quiet pride and gratification. How can I put it? I hope that Christoph observed the deep contentment in this household, the bedrock joy taken when one's heart is at home in one's work. Different vintners have said this to me at different times: Hans-Günter Schwarz at Müller-Catoir is always saying "you have to love it." Helmut Dönnhoff repeats almost as a mantra, "It has to be FUN." And Willi Schaefer has the glow of a man doing exactly what he was put on earth to do.

This year's visit was as rip-snortin' as always, yet a few of the wines were untamed broncos. Willi's a practical and sage kind of vintner; he knows he might err by stopping fermentation because it can be hard to know where the sweetness should precisely be while the wine's still cloudy and turbulent. So he usually makes a little dosage if a later adjustment is called-for. I felt many of the lighter 2001s ("light" being a relative term in this vintage) needed more sweetness, and said so. Willi, I bless his heart, heard me without ego but only with his innate decency and collegiality. "Christoph and I were very careful when we tasted to see when we'd stop the fermentation, but perhaps you're right," he allowed. One wine got away, a

Domprobst Kabinett already bottled. But two more were yet to be bottled, and I lobbied hard for more sweetness.

Let me repeat, when there's sweetness but not enough sweetness, all the components battle one another, and the sweetness is blatant and tinged with bitterness—a condition the Germans call "süss-sauer." By adding sweetness you create a balance of components so elegant that none stand out; the sweetness as such seems to disappear. It makes both actual tactile sense and wacko zen sense; you add sweetness to make the wine taste less sweet. And it works time and time again.

Thus my tasting notes for the works-in-progress are provisional. The riper wines were as splendid as I expected to find them, and the many Schaefer fans will be writhing in delight when you wrap your senses around these rugged beauties.



#### Schaefer at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

It is hard to put a finger on exactly what it is that makes these wines so precious. There is a candor about them that is quite disarming. They are polished too, but not brashly so. They are careful to delineate their vineyard characteristics, and they offer fruit of sublime purity. They are utterly soaring in flavor yet not without weight. What many of you seem to have warmed to is their clarity, precision and beauty of fruit, so maybe I'll leave it at that! 2000 was the fine vintage of a humble vintner. Willi knew if he harvested as selectively as looked necessary, he wouldn't get much wine and he might not get glamor-wine, but he'd get quintessential SCHAEFER wine. The new vintage recalls 1991, and have you opened any of those little gems lately?

GWS-090 **2001 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**

I'm always happy to be able to get Willi's Wehlener. This has polish and depth; it's cooler, less extroverted than Justen's, very long and fragrant. Willi already knew it needed another month of gentling down in cask, and he agreed to add some dosage to satisfy the antic whim of his fatuous American importer.  
SOS: ?? (between seven and twenty five years)

GWS-091 **2001 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**

Here I really must defer a tasting note, except to remark on the polish and fine apple-mineral fragrance. If it goes the way I think it will, it'll be gorgeous.  
SOS: ?? (between six and eighteen years)

GWS-092 **2001 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese**

Ah, here's what I've been waiting for; an absurdly complex and delicious wine; salty, fibrous, rye-crackers; none too sweet but apple-nutmeg brilliance on a firm obsidian-dark mineral backdrop.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (between nine and twenty five years)

GWS-093 **2001 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese**

(Fuder #5) Tastes almost Halbtrocken but such sweetness as it has is bound and balanced. Still, this is admirable rather than euphoric, a study of Mosel bones. In Alsace it'd be Kientzler or Jos Meyer.  
SOS: 0 (between seven and twenty six years)

GWS-094 **2001 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese**

(Fuder #3) Nose! Power, precision, drive, size, but what outline – what scenery this wine passes through! I sat in a haze of bliss, lost in fascination; white wine simply does not get any more enthralling. Enjoy!  
SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty seven years)

GWS-095 **2001 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese**

(Fuder #9) Pikant, exotic; big, spicy and smoky, like the young 90s – a big wine by Mosel standards; a manly man's Mosel.  
SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)

GWS-096 **2001 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese**

(Fuder #11) Ungrafted 50+ year-old vines. This shows the loveliest possible ripeness; banana fragrance (but not amylic) morphs into papaya; the palate is truly grandiose, a whole basket of tropical fruit, yet not opulent; beerenton (but no botrytis) and old-vines concentration; monumentally pretty but slight as a battleship! I swallowed it. Please don't hate me if you can't get much, or any; it's **extremely limited**.  
SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty six years)



Many of you know that young Marcus Haag was wrenched from his studies to assume control of the winery when his father died suddenly and much too soon. With the family in mourning, the winery had to go on. It took Marcus a few years to find his stride—with wine you only get one chance per year—and I had to tiptoe through some awkward wines to find things I liked.

How improbable it all is! It took the 1999 vintage, certainly the most “difficult” of any vintage in Marcus’ “era,” for the young man to demonstrate his ascension. In a year when many estates with outstanding track records appeared to stumble, this vintner got it all right. 2000 was even better.

Mother and son are happily ensconced in a shiny new house up on a hill above the village

(and away from the danger of flooding) with a glam-view of the great Dusemond ramp and the great vineyards. You could bring starlets there.

Haag’s wines were never easy to taste young, even in Dieter’s time. The first time I was ever there I froze my **patooties** off in his cellar, so I 1) asked to taste the wines upstairs in a warm room and 2) realized the wines would be backward because the cellar was so cold. Still, being a professional and all, I made allowances for a certain brusqueness in the young Haag wines, especially as the emergence of all that fruit in bottle showed how hidden it was earlier on. Plus I always seem to arrive a week after bottling, just as the wines are shutting down.

Yet no vintage I’ve ever tasted here was as inscrutable as 2001. The wines had a consistent note I call “stavey” because it makes me think of rusty cask-staves; it’s a metallic smell which puts me off. Unlike the usual young-Mosel

- Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares
- Annual production: 2,500 cases
- Top sites: Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr and Juffer
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

yeast, this doesn’t dissipate easily. We took a few of the more vexing bottles back to Zeltingen with us to see how they’d evolve with a few days oxygenation, and also to give Johannes Selbach a chance to taste them and perhaps identify the cause of the smell. Johannes believed it was a simple over-concentration of freshness, an über-reductive-ness if you will, caused by Haag’s icy cellar. If so, I’d charge several thousand Euro to consult, and recommend a space-heater.

What you see below are the wines I have the greatest faith in. There’s others, and I plan to follow these wines carefully. Marcus was just hitting his stride and I’d be both foolish and mean to dismiss these wines in a great vintage.

I tried to walk a line between tact and collegial openness, but I sensed they were deflated by my reaction. This I didn’t want. I am very fond of these people. Three generations of Haag (Marcus, Inge his mother, and her father) sat with us as we tasted, and I looked out the window at a gnat-sized speck of a human creeping among the vines. Little person, big mountain. Birds floated over the river. I am involved in these lives, I want only to bring pleasure. I hope I’m simply being an ignorant silly-billy.



Willi Haag

**Haag at a glance:**

The estate is no longer in transition as young Marcus Haag has TAKEN command after the shocking and untimely death of his father, Dieter Haag. Bright, elegant wines with silky fruit. JUFFER is more minerally. Excellent 2000s; Marcus' second consecutive triumph under difficult circumstances.

**how the wines taste:**

These are elegant Braunebergers with an agreeably countrified touch; they seldom have an "urban" slickness or finicky refinement. The JUFFER vineyard tends to give chunky, minerally wines with juiciness and grip and a bosc-pear fruit; JUFFER-SONNENUHR is creamier and more buttery, more the commice pear or even a butter-sauteed pear. Structure isn't so explicitly cogent, but many tasters prefer the gracious elegance of this site to the more blunt charms of the Juffer.

GHA-053 **2001 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Kabinett**

This had just been bottled and was a little freaked out, but that I can handle; chunky and pearsy as always; all pieces in place; fine focus, a piquant note; rather high color suggests how ripe this was.

SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

GHA-054 **2001 Estate Riesling Spätlese**

This comes from vineyards in Velden, part of Inge's dowry, and so it's a departure from the usual Haag-Brauneberg association; in fact I really liked this; wonderfully sleek and piquant, more quince than pear; empire apple, almost ore-like mineral; most interesting wine!

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)

GHA-055 **2001 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Spätlese**

Here I did discern the "graphite" aroma (as Kevin put it) fell away in the glass, encouragingly. Behind it is an unusually sleek, direct wine for this site; long, granular, fruity finish, neither sweet nor dry. There are also Juffer-Sonnenuhr Spät and Auslese (the middle of which is quite promising), Juffer Auslese (just in a tantrum from bottling) and two more big-botrytis Juffer-Sonnenuhr Auslesen plus a very promising Mandelgarten either Eiswein or heap-big Auslese. Here's hoping!

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)



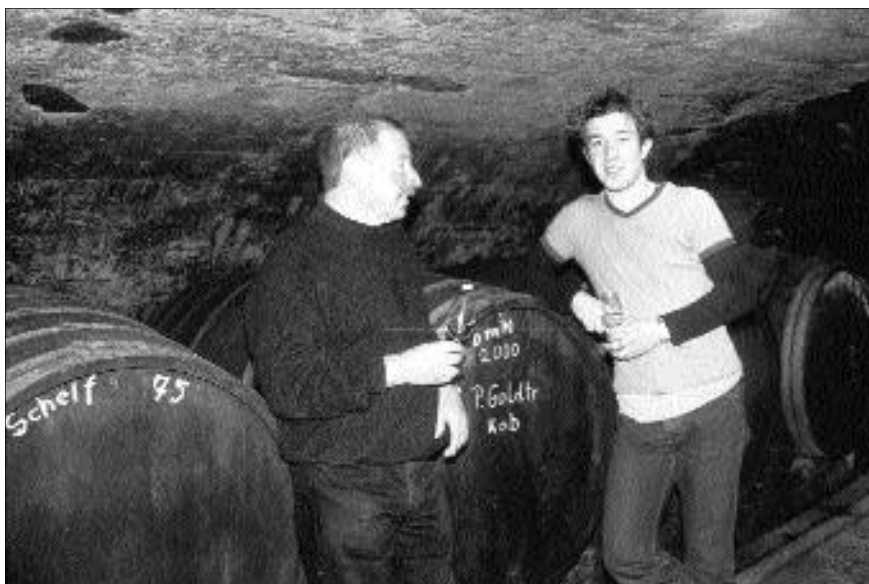
Hugo Schwang makes the kinds of wines that demand time. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present here. Even his basic 1995 Auslese was still a stinker in March of 1998. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with the cask samples, but these wines aren't really made for our frantic world. SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more attentive mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to notice stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

I have a stormy relationship with Piesporters. A few years ago when I first encountered Reuscher-Haart's wines, I thought I had found my Piesport pie-in-the-sky. In their acid-drenched, thick, leesy style I found for the first time stunningly detailed and authoritative wines from these maddening slopes **that didn't need to be archly modern in order to succeed**. And each year there are a couple of wines that take me back to that original epiphany. But only a couple. Other times I find them diffuse and blurry and I wonder if it's me or the wines.

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high qual-

- Vineyard area: 4.3 hectares
- Annual production: 2,100 cases
- Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr and Falkenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Müller-Thurgau

ity," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."



Hugo & Mario Schwang

### Reuscher-Haart at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

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

#### GRH-031 2001 Piespoeter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett

Still-unfiltered cask sample, but this is twice the wine the 2000 was; should be big and pearsy; has Spätlese mass and all kinds of grip. 2001 is exactly the kind of vintage in which this grower excels—remember the magnificent 1990s? So I'm lurching in to buy, and so should you.

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

#### GRH-032 2001 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese

Younger still, but again, recalls 1990, and should be excellent.

#### GRH-29H 1998 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml

You can hold a séance with this wine, it's so sultry: dried apricot and bergamot on the palate. Fine honey-finish, yet the wine isn't too sweet at all. A complex, concentrated beignet of a wine.

SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)



This was just a happy visit through and through. We'd had a great first year together. Dieter Hoffman came over and gamely made his way through the United States air transport system so he could meet you people and show you his wines. And a lil' `un made the scene, and all reports are he's a bonny child with a winning personality.

Not to mention, the vintage wasn't too shabby. In fact this was among the more just-plain likable collections of the '01 vintage, a delicious range of wines culminating in two deliriously pretty Auslesen that taken alone would restore anyone's faith in the ennobling power of botrytis.

I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year stage with Carol Sullivan at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he

did. Meeting him for what I thought was the first time last month, I had that déjà vu thing. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs last November. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter returned to the winery in 1994 and assumed full control in ninety-seven. His father stays on and the two generations do the usual dance! Father is a font of wisdom in this case, not least for having adjusted to several of son's more outre ideas, such as vigorous declassifying in 2001 and scrupulous adherence to vineyard purity, so no legally-allowed 15% of "Piesporter Who-knows-what" is gonna stretch the supply of Goldtröpfchen.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2



Dieter Hoffman & family

- Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares
- Annual production: 4,200 cases
- Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent

hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. Musts settle by gravity for 48 hours. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fermentations but not all; the wines age without SO<sub>2</sub> on their gross lees. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. What is irreducible is a feeling in the tips of the fingers, an intuitive relationship to vines and wine. That can't be taught. But it can be discerned.

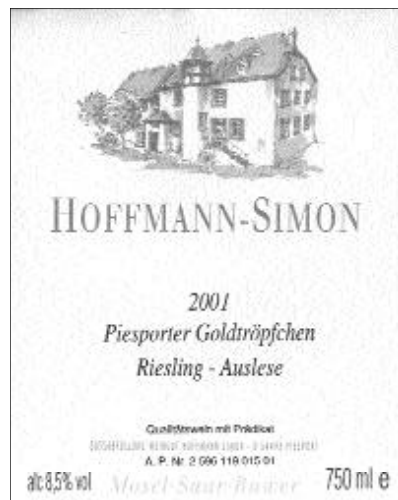
### Hoffmann-Simon at a glance:

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart. Remarkably successful 1999s and a bonafide masterpiece in 2000.

### how the wines taste:

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give—which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

- GHS-008 **2001 Estate Riesling**  
Nose like ripe peaches in a sunny window; extravagantly fruity; but the palate surprises delightfully by its dryness, a lovely, moderate and gentle melange of fruit, backbone and mineral, but with 2001's solidity and power.  
SOMMELIER ALERT!  
SOS: 1 (between three and eleven years)
- GHS-009 **2001 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**  
Solid; malt and passion fruit, earnest and with obdurate length.  
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GHS-007 **2001 Maringer Honigberg Riesling Auslese Trocken**  
Maring's vineyards, by the way, lie in a side valley off the river. Soils and exposures are good, but the moderating influence of the Mosel on the microclimate is of course missing. Yet the wines seem winsome and true, adorable Mosels in their pure delicacy. Hoo boy; would they were all like this! Ripe, slatey wine, deliciously salty like good bread; woodsy but not oaky; mouth-coating; fresh, lovely Riesling.  
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again nine to twelve years)
- GHS-010 **2001 Maringer Honigberg Riesling Auslese**  
Pearsy, spicy, lovely ripe Riesling, all sensuality and delight; a lick of malt and apple-blossom honey; also has the woodsy touch. An old colleague of mine used to say a wine had "lots of residual deliciousity," so Barry: this one's for you.  
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty years)
- GHS-011 **2001 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese**  
Selection of all clean fruit; compact and spicy, overripe pear and tangelo; despite its lavish sweetness it's solid and firm and will evolve fabulously.  
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty one years)
- GHS-012 **2001 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese \*** ++  
Barely riper than the above but this selection of clean botrytis creates a masterpiece along 1975 lines; malt and tropical fragrances; wonderful folding of botrytis into gorgeous fruit, such as one rarely sees. Noble and splendid: don't miss it. Old-timers who (like me) remember the glory-that-was-'75, here it is again. Young'uns who've wondered what the fuss was about; step right up.  
SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty five years)
- GHS-013 **2001 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese** +  
Yes, another Auslese and one from a vineyard you've never heard of; guess it's gotta be good! This is the upstream extension of Leiwener Laurentiuslay, but what really matters is here's another triumph that puts the "noble" in "noble rot." Seductively malty-talcy, meyer lemon and lemon blossom; there is just barely less fruit power here vis-à-vis Pies Gold; thus the botrytis is the headline-flavor, but it's so clean and perfect even a fusspot like me can DFK with this dirty, dirty girl.  
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty two years)





What with family members' health problems, it's been a couple of tough years for Loewens. But our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence. When I first listed the wines I did so on the basis of some hugely impressive samples I'd tasted at Selbach; it was the tail-end of my Mosel week and I couldn't squeeze another appointment in—but I had to have these wines. David Schildknecht happens to have visited Loewen before I met him but after the wines were in my book. "I'm not sure Terry knows what a tiger he has by the tail," David said to Bill Mayer. I do now.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in

your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition. Luckily his intuition permitted him to accept an informal consultation from Hans Selbach, which really benefited a couple of his 2000s; they ended up among the best Mosel wines I shipped. I imagine some big juicy sweet wine was employed to flesh out the Kabinett and Spätlese. Nothing wrong with that. But I am bemused by what feels like a certain rigidity some Moselans display on the subject of dosage.

Let me rant for a second. I have seen all kinds of contrivances to adjust an imperfect wine on the Mosel. Blending a big sweet wine into a small wine either deficient in sweetness or just to scrawny is the most common. Plenty of "failed" Eiswein ends up being used this way. Auslese too. If you have some teensy bit of BA too miny to bottle and sell, you might use some to bolster a few casks here and there and bottle the rest for the family to drink. Few Mosel growers blink at such "adjustments"—nor should they. Why, then, is the idea of dosage such anathema to them? They are already using wines in lieu of Süssreserve. This rant will be available on audio-cassette, read by "The Rock." He usually Leiwen's things up.

Leiwen is just upstream from Trittenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus

- Vineyard area: 6.2 hectares
- Annual production: 4,200 cases
- Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay
- Soil types: Devonian and light weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau

to have been a resident of Pölich and not of Wehlen then the Pölicher Held would enjoy the renown of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. Yes that stretches the point—but there's still a **point**; there are great vineyards we don't know because there hasn't been a great vintner to do them full justice.

Leiwen is apparently a warren of activity these days. I am told of the existence of a group of young producers eager to make names for themselves, their home village and its vineyards. Among these seething young hot-heads is Carl Loewen, who is sensible as regards pricing. What interests me about Loewen, apart from the wonderful wines offered below, is his championing of great unheralded sites such as the Thörnicher Ritsch, Pölicher Held, Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay and the already-mentioned Leiwener. Natural fertilizing, reduced yields, slow fermentations, minimal handling—they only rack the wines once, for instance. It's an all-cask cellar. "I'm dubious about wines made in steel," says Loewen. "The summer after the vintage they're highly presentable, but I doubt they have the stature to age well."

Loewen's wines also have a quality of companionability which can't be isolated or quantified but which determines how friendly you feel toward them. Some wines seem to want to take you to a world where all there is wine. Others, no less absorbing or delightful, seem content to meet you in your world. Whenever I drink or taste Loewen's wines I always want to curl up with a book, ideally by an open window near a singing thrush.



Carl Loewen

along this stretch of the Mosel. A lot of the renown a site may or may not possess is dependent on a flagship estate. To cite a somewhat absurd example, if J.J. Prüm happened

### Loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! “Cool” chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

### how the wines taste:

All that’s stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a “northern” coolness without being explicitly slatey. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: “I don’t like ‘old-wine’ flavor and I definitely don’t like this petrol taste,” he says.

#### GCL-016 2001 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett

38-year-old vines, a measly 89 Oechsle (legal Auslese and then some!); ripe, rich and chalky; appley; perfectly balanced sweetness, firm but tender.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

#### GCL-017 2001 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

Whew! This is dense, slatey (it’s grown on a soft slate which gives it particular charm), again perfect balance; pearsy-nectarine-y fruit, spicy acidity, and a wonderfully slatey finish. Leesy and vinous.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

#### GCL-018 2001 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese

At last, I am a Ritsch man. The site is dour and spectacular, ancient-looking steep terraces rising directly from the Mosel. And the wine is a slate Statement of the first order; almost a Wachau ore-like concentration; less fruity than Laurentiuslay, an explicit terroir critter. Here the 1975/1971 resemblance is very clear. Flinty: if Bernkastel is flint and kirsch, this is flint and gravensteiner. Fascinating and valuable Mosel-variant.

SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

#### GCL-019 2001 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese

There’s an immensity here, an oceanic density that contains among other things botrytis, and a hint of grassy Eiswein tone, but the firm capaciousness is what’s so impressive. What this fruit will evolve into . . . hmmm! I hope I live at least that long.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)

#### GCL-020H 2001 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml

“The littlest Eiswein I’ve made in ten years,” said Carl. Johannes Selbach remarked: “But I’ve gotten tired of this silliness with everyone fussing to make these intensity-bomb-wines that are so acid you have to drink a glass of milk afterward to avoid scorching your throat.” “Just so,” answered Carl. “In the final analysis the most important thing in Mosel wine is elegance.” Thus, this lovely little Eiswein.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)



# carl schmitt-wagner

## mosel • longuich

“The 2001s have a comeliness and beauty seen by no vintage since 1966,” said Bruno Schmitt. “You haven’t forgotten this is my favorite Mosel vintage of all time, Herr Schmitt?” I asked. “Ah yes, that’s right! You do like that vintage, don’t you. Well, what do you think of these youngsters?”

Well good sir, thanks to your generosity I have been able to taste quite widely through your vintages, and this is therefore not an opinion born of ignorance nor fleeting euphoria. It is your best vintage; at least I cannot remember any that were better. And you and all 6,000 of your 105-year-old ungrafted vines can just take the rest of the day off! Because this is The Goods.

Anyone who loves Mosel wines needs a big ol’ clump of these beauties in the cellar. These are just sizzlin’ Mosels with all their mojo workin’ plus some of yours.

The half-bottles came out again when we were through with the young wines. I have almost lost count of the number of old wines this remarkable man has shared with my friends and me. But he hasn’t! I think he remembers each and every one. Herr Schmitt often shows the oldest wine first; last year it was a 1961 Spätlese, in astounding condition for a nearly 30-year old wine of unexceptional ripeness. But I fear I have lost the capacity to be taken aback any more by the stamina of Mosel wines. I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this “drink now to four years” crap by wine writers who’ve never set foot in a German winery. The atmosphere is festive and the wine chat moves briskly around the table. I love the ceremony with which the new wines are presented. Wine is significant not only as a provider of livelihood, but also as a filament connecting us to a human continuity.



Bruno Schmitt

“They are very **old-fashioned**,” is how Mrs. Selbach describes this estate. It’s an averagely small (3.5 hectare) operation which first came to my attention a few years back. I saw their name among Bernkasteler Ring members (an organization which contains a number of my Mosel suppliers), and Stuart Pigott made a point of tipping me off to some evidently stunning 1989s. So I went and had a look.

- Vineyard area: 3.7 hectares
- Annual production: 3,000 cases
- Top sites: Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg, Longuicher Herrenberg
- Soil types: Blue Devonian slate, weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

I found a spicy, baroque style of wine. But that was the vintages available at the time. Fruit is the dominant characteristic, rendered with an almost glaring, spicy clarity. It’s interesting to note that the Herrenberg was classified category “A”—the best category—during the world’s first official vineyard classification, undertaken by the Prussian land office during the early nineteenth century for the purpose of—you guessed it—tax assessment! The original document, published by Stuart Pigott as a vineyard map, is remarkable in its fidelity to current notions of the best vineyards. What you’re being offered is on the order of an insider’s tip for excellent Mosel wines from a first-class site and a top rank estate, both relatively unknown. You heard it here first.

There’s been a fine run of vintages here, showing the natural tendency of these wines to taste sleek with minty spiciness. They remind me most of all of Merkelbach in their eye-popping clarity and persuasive spice. I also have the sense they are basically ageless; there seems to be a general deceleration of time in small European villages. I wonder if wines, too, learn to take it easy and not rush to reach wherever it is they think they’re going.

By the way, a word about his item numbers, which we adopted here; this is a system begun by Schmitt’s father in which each wine produced is numbered sequentially, ad infinitum! Therefore, wine number 1204 is the one thousand twelve hundred and fourth wine produced since the system began. As there are often multiple casks of wines with the same name, I thought it best to indicate which ones I wanted by using his own system. Now you know.

**Schmitt-Wagner at a glance:**

This is a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 105-year old ungrafted vines—some SIX THOUSAND OF THEM. Makes among the two or three best Kabinetts along the Mosel.

**how the wines taste:**

This is an old-fashioned winery and so the wines are individuals with all that implies. If I taste across the range I find a certain clarity and purity in every wine, as well as a keen spiciness I assume comes from the soil. Certain casks are cranky like certain folks are cranky, but many casks are **miraculous**, they hum and glow with vitality, they speak the plain truth of the land with the clearest possible voice. At their best they stand easily with the VERY best anywhere on the Mosel. It was Schmitt who kicked off this year's catalogue, and I like the symmetry of seeing him near the end again. He's a vigorous man who has lived his life in wine. Each wine is an aspect of his story. When he brings the old ones out to share with us, he is saying "this is how I have lived."

- GSW-030 **2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 There were two Fuders. #1385 was perfect, with a sassafrassy nose, spicy-slatey kiwi and key-limey, gorgeous swirl of soil and flower, wonderful length; a Mosel essence. #1386 had a brighter, more gingery nose, and the palate confirmed, with even more brilliance, wonderful flowery high-tones, a concentrate of apple-essence. We blended the two and the result was miraculous. This stands with the great Sonnenuhr from Selbach-Oster and the Treppchen from Christoffel as the greatest Mosel Kabinetts in this offering. Two Fuders equals 220 cases. Don't delay.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and . . . and WHAT? I've had 35-year old Kabinett from here that still tasted fresh. To be prudent, let's say twenty years!)
- GSW-031 **2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 (Fuder #1387) Lovely demure green apple and slate classic. Serene, definitive Mosel.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between nine and twenty five years)
- GSW-032 **2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 (Fuder #1397) This is almost luridly root-beery and licorice-y; explicitly slatey, like sun beating off sheets of slate. "That about what happened!" said Bruno.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty three years)
- GSW-033 **2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Another two-Fuder blend, Kevin's idea this time. Beat my tired old ass to the punch, did he. It's #'s1394-1393. #1393 had aromas of quince and fennel-frond and a finish like lavender; very long and serene, like #1387 but riper. #1394 had a vivid snazzy nose! Deep deep fruit, almost creamy without being soft. And the blend is amazing, multi-dimensional, has it all.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty seven years)
- GSW-033 **2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese** ++  
 (Fuder #1402) Sensational wine! Has more fond, more essence, a riper core, but no more sense of sweetness; but what slatey length; clings for dear life to the back palate; already filigree and exquisite, both caressing and firm. Haunting and gorgeous.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GSW-034 **2001 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese**  
 (Fuder #1403) Even creamier now, more overtly rich, yet so "fondue" (a French tasting term I like, denoting a mature blend of all elements) and so chordal. Dreamy fruit over an implicit core of slate. More seductive than its sibling.  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty eight years)

I don't know if this is true, but there's an awful lot of people saying that Maximin Grünhaus has come down a notch, and Karlsmühle has ascended to the very top of its region. I love Grünhaus and I'm not terribly into the popularity contest or tip-sheet mentality. But I'm telling you this for a reason, and it is:

Given the near-religious awe in which Grünhaus is held, and given that Karlsmühle's damn near as good—maybe just as good; maybe better—and given that Karlsmühle's wines cost significantly less than Grünhaus's, then maybe, just maybe, y'oughta be paying more attention, squire. Huh? Waddaya think?

I have some thoughts. One of them is that Karlsmühle hasn't really had a typical vintage since

1998. 1999 was weirdly ripe and low in acid (though Peter Geiben thinks they'll age like the great 1959s did) and 2000 was really very tasty but it was, after all, 2000, and now 2001 comes along and it's Big Jim Slade clompin' around. Muscle isn't necessary bad, but it isn't the thing we go to the Ruwer to find. Yet there are superb and wonderful wines from here in 2001 . . . when the sweetness is right.

Peter Geiben has often excelled with his Trocken wines and I hoped to find a couple among the 2001s, but the vintage didn't suit the style here, the wines were sharp and wounding. Some of the "sweet" wines seemed acerbic also, even my old favorite Mäuerchen Kabinett, which has 35 g.l. residual sugar and needs 45. These are rugged, big-boned wines with a lot of viscera, as if they were portraying Rheingau wines, but they have their particular acids with which to deal and one needed to fine-tune sweetness.

What does work is among the most heart-rendingly lovely wine you'll see in a green bottle with "2001" on it.

We do well with these wines but not as well as they deserve. The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they're more expensive than Mittelmosel wines. We Yanks don't have time to dis-



Peter Geiben

tinguish between Mosel & Saar & Ruwer because we're too busy to take German wine as seriously as other wine. Put it this way: can you imagine us refusing to pay more

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Lorenzhöfer Felslay and Mäuerchen, Kaseler Nies'chen and Kehrnagel
- Soil types: Clay and slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% each of Müller-Thurgau, Weissburgunder and Kerner, 1% Elbling

for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune - "Hey it's all Burgundy, man." Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don't mind me: I've got rants in my pants.

Karlsmühle is one of those pleasant country hotels near enough to a big city (Trier) to attract lots of weekenders. (Hell, if you took a long lunch you could drive there from a downtown office and still get back in time to do a good afternoon's work.) The wines Peter made were like his father's: serviceable, pleasant enough to do what they needed to do, supply the hotel-restaurant with home-grown product. It was back in 1987 that Peter started to wonder . . . it was, after all, a lot of work to make wine on these slopes - among the steepest in the Ruwer Valley. And there was a lot of wine taking up space in the cellar. What might happen if he dedicated himself to making less wine but excellent wine?

This wasn't entirely idealistic. Peter doesn't have a poetic temperament. He'd brush away any wine fairy who happened to alight on his shoulder. His interest was that of a worker who knows he can do better with his tools, and decides to see how much better. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He'd rather talk about the trellising method he's developed, and he'd far rather talk about hunting. A friend convinced him to stop de-acidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was

pleased with the results. He's done away with wood in the cellar and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. You can't imagine how abrupt it all is; you turn toward the south from an especially prosaic corner in the village of Ruwer, and within a single minute you're immersed in this narrow, secretive, bucolic valley with wind whooshing through the trees and the tiny Ruwer stream hissing and gurgling. If you blink you'll miss it. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the **Felslay**, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the **Mäuerchen** on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great **Kaseler Nies'chen**, in which Geiben now has two fine parcels. There's some Kehrnel from the Patheiger holdings. Peter has enough to do.

His wines from the Lorenzhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the **Nies'chen** is fine-

stoned, i.e. lots of crumbled slate and thus superior drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and **Kehrnel** is more coarse-stoned, thus less porous, and the wines are less elegant. Peter took us for a walk through the vineyards. He also gave us various spring-waters to taste; the region is gifted with subterranean streams. We tasted from springs beneath the Nies'chen, Kehrnel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different. I told the group that these are the waters the vines drink, and of course this helps to create the wine's flavor.

Metaphysics? Old-wives tales? Unable to be scientifically verified? Please don't ask me why I believe in these things. Instead, tell me why you'd **rather not**.

The best Ruwer wines seem to distill the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said Sigrid Selbach. They have that and more; they are the acme of the genre. If you love Mosel wines - and based on my sales it appears you do—this is as fine as they can be.

A FINAL NOTE: Geiben has enlarged his vineyard holdings with leased sites from the old PATHEIGER estate. As this property had its own reputation, Peter has opted to employ A DIFFERENT LABEL. So if you order Karlmühle and receive Patheiger, don't worry, it's correct, no one screwed up, be happy.

#### Karlmühle at a glance:

Of the "big three" in the Ruwer (Grunhaus and Karthäuserhof, the other two) this is the least expensive by far. Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlmühle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

#### how the wines taste:

Ruwer wines can be the *ne plus ultra* of refinement, with their own keenly slicing flavors of cassis and sometimes cinnamon.

- GKM-065 **2001 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett** +  
 With thrillingly balanced sweetness, this is nothing short of gorgeous: jasmine, tilleul and plum blossom nose; piquant delicacy, sweet flowering dill and fennel-frond; high-frequency flavors vibrate in an endless urging whisper. This is what "exquisite" means. SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between seven and sixteen years)
- GKM-066 **2001 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Wonderful cinnamon, cassis and plum-blossom fragrance; fabulous spice and length, as feline as wine can be; delicate but endless. Simply fantastic quality. Warning: YMS alert (young-Mosel-stink), but if you have a minute to swirl, in fifteen years you get the girl. SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty three years)
- GKM-067 **2001 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel"**  
 All tang; shimmers like crepuscular rays; recalls the 1990 but perhaps even juicier; all apple-butter and with a taut steel wire joining sweetness and acidity. Everything was just bottled, and I strongly suspect I'll have underrated many of these sweet wines, and that my notes will exaggerate their steeliness and underrate their fruit. Please bear it in mind. I try with these notes to give an accurate reading of the wine on the day and err on the side of caution.  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty seven years)

**GKM-068 2001 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel"**

110 Oechsle, "very little" botrytis. Brown-butter and cox-orange pippins; bigger and fleshier but still quite tangy with an obdurate limey acidity. Galvanic power rather than gushy charm.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)

**GKM-069H 2001 Kaseler Kehrnagel Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

145 Oechsle; strength, an almost Rheingau starched-ness and a formal, coiled power; fruit runs to wild plums and blackberries; turbocharged roar of intensity (it was purely healthy fruit frozen by dint of wind-chill); tastes like a sauce with soy, crème de Mur, and reduced wine!

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty five years)

**TWO VERY INTERESTING RE-RELEASES:** a chance to see these wines in a grade-A+ vintage just at the point they're showing what they'll look like as grownups. **SOMMELIERES** should pay close attention here; these are drinking fabulously and you won't have to feel guilty for cracking them too young.

**GKM-070 1997 Lorenzhöfer Felslay Riesling Spätlese**

Now a fine, tangy, stylish wine, all redcurrant and cinnamon and a wonderful earthy touch. Perfect balance, and just starting to find its voice.

SOMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty one years)

**GKM-49 1997 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Auslese**

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I gave this one star back in 1998 when I first tasted it, writing: "Cinnamon and currant leaf and marvelous spicy length and a yin-yang balance of earth and sky in this wonderful thing." I was just so florid in those days. Last month I wrote: this is quintessentially Ruwer wine, filigree, calligraphic; exquisite fruit, none too sweet; the essence of stylishness, detail and complexity.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty five years)



I confess I don't know quite what to make of this estate. Either Roman Niewodniczanski (mercifully known as "Nevo") is a visionary genius who will revolutionize the Saar, or time and circumstance will erode his vision into something more sustainable.

What a man! He's a complete Borg, nearly seven feet tall, looking unsettlingly like Klaus Kinsky in *Aguirre, Wrath Of God*, and he is driven. He loves wine with all the deranged passion of a convert. He has traveled the wine world as if he were independently wealthy. (Wait a minute; he is independently wealthy, scion of the Bitburger beer empire.) He is nobody's fool, and he has the courage of his convictions. Time will tell whether they are too outre for fate to sustain. He is also quite charmingly earnest and thoroughly convincing.

In effect he wants to make Wachau wine in the Saar. It begins with pitiless yield restrictions, proceeds to old vines (average of 40 years), continues with a program to acquire any bit of good land available—and plenty is in the new millennium in Germany—and all of this is bold, to be sure, but hardly radical, you're thinking. The final touch is stylistic: Nevo wants to produce what he calls "harmonious dry" wines, by which he means wines with a consistently dry profile whatever residual sugar they actually carry. In practice this usually precludes the kinds of wine which make the Saar famous, typified by, say, Egon Müller. Nevo wants more body, more alcohol, less sweetness (albeit not analytically bone-dry, unless that happens to work) and the powerful inner concentration deriving from old vines and low yields. He also wants to make rooted, soulful wines; he's resolutely anti-technology and works almost entirely in cask.

He's landed with a flourish on the German wine landscape. "Discovery of the Year" in both Gault Millau and in the Wine-Salon in Hamburg, and many other laudatory notices. At the very least he's breathing fresh air not only into (what was) the moribund Van Volxem estate, but into the entire sleepy Saar valley. At most he will succeed in recalibrating our assumptions of what's possible with Saar Riesling.

Also, what prices are possible with Saar Riesling. Here's perhaps a down-side of all that cosmopolitanism; he's a little ga-ga about making the Big Price Statement, because many of his heroes have brazenly rewritten the old rules, and wines now cost whatever the market will pay. I wouldn't focus on this point if Nevo hadn't; it was a leitmotif of our encounter, repeated it seemed every three minutes.

As far as I'm concerned, given his investment and die-hard passion, I hope he gets any price he needs for the wines. But I also ask him to remember; it only takes one. As soon as someone cracks the barrier, others follow. If

- Vineyard area: 13 hectares
- Top sites: Scharzhofberger, Wiltinger Kupp and Gottesfuss
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

Nevo attains his goals, other wineries will ask "Why not me? Are my wines, what, chopped liver?" and then prices will be as silly in Germany as they are everywhere else. The growers will probably build a statue in his honor in downtown Trier, but the consumer will lose. So, with great respect, I sound this note of caution.

I tasted the entire 2000 vintage. I selected the right wines. Mine is a minority opinion, I am well aware, but most of the big dry beasts didn't do it for me. That said, 2000 is as we know a singular vintage, and no serious judgement can be made until enough vintages of varying types have passed.

2001 sure tasted good!

We went on a leisurely trapeze through the cellar and tasted most of the new vintage from cask. Many wines were still fermenting, and the ones that had finished were still on their gross lees. Remember, this is resolutely old-fashioned winemaking in the best possible sense. Some of the still-fermenting wines struck me as perfectly balanced, and I felt much triste to think they'd be any drier. I didn't — couldn't — take detailed notes; first, the wines are works-in-progress, and second, there's nowhere in a cellar to write. So I wrote my quick 'n dirty impressions, which I'll share, with the caveat they are far from definitive.



GVV-003 **2001 Saar Riesling**

This is the calling-card, the volume-potential wine, partly from estate grapes and partly from purchased, though Nevo won't purchase just any-old-grapes from any-old-grower; he has a regime he wants followed, and he wants this wine to be on every table because it is so patently delicious. I tasted two lots, one still fermenting, and it was slatey and snappy; I liked it. I wholeheartedly like the idea. I'm not frothing my usual spume only because I didn't see the finished wine. If it turns out as I hope, it'll be a great value.

GVV-004 **2001 Scharzhofberger Riesling**

Another aspect of Nevo's plan is the eschewing of the whole German sugar-pyramid, and for this I admire him. There were two tasty wines leading up to this (a Wiltinger Riesling and one from the great single-site Braunfels) but there wasn't enough to slice us a tranche. The Scharzhofberger was divided in two Fuders; one was enveloped in fruit, the other was less evolved but potentially very fine. If these turn out as I imagine, they'll be perfect examples of what Nevo wants to achieve; deep fruit, soil flavors wrapped around, voluminous and dry but not lean or mordant.

GVV-005 **2001 Scharzhofberger Riesling "Pergentsknopp"**

This is the sirloin-parcel in the great site, with the oldest vines. From cask it was limey, serious and very fine. At their best these can be deliciously mineral Rieslings showing all the variety's innate nobility when it's planted in great land. The question of whether it jumps through the expected Saar-wine hoops is, Nevo hopes, moot. Moot the hoop, I say.

GVV-006 **2001 Wiltinger Gottesfuss Riesling "Alte Reben"**

"Old vines" indeed: 120 years old, as a matter of fact, and ungrafted. The Gottessfuss, also, is an unheralded Grand Cru, with its fine hard slate; great wines in hot vintages. Again, two casks; the first of them was truly stunning, recalling Bründlmayer's old-vines Heiligenstein; easily 1-or-2-star quality. A second cask showed more sharpness. Judgement deferred. But tremendous potential.

GVV-007 **2001 Scharzhofberger Riesling Spätlese**

I gather this is the concession to the old guard; the cask from which I sampled was wonderfully smoky, and rather on the dry side. Again, like all of these, saturated and full of character, with glorious ripeness. Just to round out your impression, there is also Wiltinger Kupp in two versions, regular and old-vines, as well as a regular Gottessfuss, as well as a Wiltinger Braunfels from the ancient parcel called VOLS. As we are just beginning to work together, we're still exploring how we can best be useful to each other. I look forward to a continuing fascinating dialog, and many important and wonderful wines.



# SOS

## A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines. Interestingly though I posed the figure I selected no wines to which I actually gave the figure!

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!



