

AUSTRIA 2010

terry theise estate selections



table of contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>The 2009 Vintage</i>	4
<i>Earlier Vintages</i>	7
<i>Grape Varieties</i>	8
<i>Austrian Wine Laws</i>	11
<i>DAC</i>	12
<i>Austrian Wine Culture</i>	13
<i>When to Drink the Wines</i>	13
<i>The Question of Organics</i>	14
<i>Map of Austria</i>	16
<i>Burgenland</i>	17
<i>Hirschmann Pumpkin Seed Oil</i>	18
<i>Weingut Prieler</i>	19
<i>Weinbau Heidi Schröck</i>	22
<i>Weinbau Sattler</i>	26

Front Cover Photo: *The Ecker Family, Circa 1955*

Weingut Paul Lehrner	28
<i>Carnuntum</i>	31
Weingut Walter Glatzer	32
<i>Weinviertel</i>	35
Weingut Schwarzböck	37
Weingut H.u.M. Hofer	39
Weingut Setzer	41
<i>Wagram</i>	44
Weingut Ecker	45
<i>Kremstal and Kamptal</i>	48
Weingut Erich and Michaela Berger	49
Weingut Familie Nigl	51
Weingut Bründlmayer	56
Weingut Schloss Gobelsburg	62
Weingut Ludwig Hiedler	67
Weingut Josef Hirsch	70
<i>Wachau</i>	73
Leo Alzinger	75
Nikolaihof-Wachau	78
Hans Reisetbauer	83

Introduction

My sweetie and I were going to be apart while I was in Austria, so to mark our final evening together I swallowed hard and opened my one and only bottle of a great old Riesling. It was Knoll's legendary 1990 Loibenberg Smaragd *Halbtrocken*. In those days they were less draconian about residual sugar, and this 12.5% alc beauty was a balm.

I remember when I first drank it, in the Summer of 1992 when I first visited Austria's wine regions. I'd visited Hirtzberger, Jamek, Nikolaihof and now Knoll, whose wines were lyrical and tender. It was a sunny July afternoon and I sat outside and had the two great '90s, Schütt and Loibenberg, and when I tasted that wine I knew I had to get these astonishing things into the hands of American consumers. It wasn't only that the wines were "good," or that I "thought I could sell them;" they could be truly *great*, and I felt it my duty to extol them.

I begged Emmerich to sell me a bottle each of those '90s. They were officially unavailable (and I don't recall anymore how it was I came to taste them), but he relented. And you know how it is with single bottles; you wait and wait and wait. I opened the Schütt a couple years ago only to find it corked. But this Loibenberg was as sublime as I remembered, and I was connected again with that first moment of ignition, realizing these wines were original, meaningful, and uniquely beautiful.

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

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

ly is, showing its lines and creases, and what it will sustain.

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

tell you jokes in English and who just came from a tasting of twenty-three vintages of Grange-Hermitage. But when you taste his wines, you taste something quite specific and seemingly eternal. It's a little dysphasic.

If German wine is mystic, Austrian wine is corporeal, even sexual. That is perhaps because Austrian wine is more than "merely" Riesling (her Rieslings are about as celestially mystic as the

variety can ever be), and it might also be that these are the most graceful high-alcohol wines on earth, hence you drink them *as if* they were medium-alcohol wines and pretty soon you get sorta dazed.

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

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

- Competitive, snappy, vigorous dry whites at the low end of the market.
- The best values on earth for monumentally structured dry white wines.



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

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

- Your fear of the German language . . . *Keine angst!*
- Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.
- The market's preference — abetted by lazy wine merchants and middlebrow journalists — for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can *engage*.
- The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.

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

There's certainly plenty to choose from, with new importers coming along all the time. Most of their wines are quite good, because the base-line in Austria is remarkably competent. Yet I looked at a potential add-on from the Kremstal this year, an estate that came highly recommended, and the wines were perfectly good — or "perfectly good," the kind of wine if you'd ordered blind in a restaurant you'd be relieved. O.K., *this isn't stellar but I can drink it*. Like that. Immediately thereafter we'd staged a blind tasting of wines I'd already selected, alongside a very famous estate who'd approached us. It makes no sense to add names just because they're names.



The wines have to fit somewhere, and so I tasted them alongside wines we already had, divided into price categories, all Grüner Veltliner. And the very first thing my colleague and I noticed was the *quality level rose markedly*. The guy whose wines we'd begun by tasting was simply outclassed. Our wines had more character, more focus, more precision, more *interest and beauty*, in a nutshell.

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

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



Weingut Prieler's Goldberg Vineyard.



Close-up of vine at Schloss Gobelsburg.

Now they're on the label.

So I was sanguine, until I heard they had consulted the German VDP to see how the whole Grosses Gewächs thing was managing. Oh *shit!* Unless the Austrians wanted to study what not to do, this was a can of poison worms. It remains to be seen to what extent they'll tie the bestowal of "First Growth" (*Erste Lage*) to the residual sugar in the wine. It's less of an issue in Austria because nearly all the wines are dry. I pray for sanity, and hope to find it. Because if a site is great then it is great whether the wine has zero, five or fifteen grams of sweetness, provided the label alerts the drinker by dint of words already in use, like *Halbtrocken*.

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

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



Hillside vines at Nigl.

simply *unavailable* in bone-dry versions.

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

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

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

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

Each time I raised these issues with growers, I saw them trying to hide their dismay behind a veil of politeness. Some were willing to agree that *Rieslings* could indeed benefit from a mini-dollop of sweetness, but not Grüner Veltliner. That should always be dry; it tastes better that way. I'm suspicious of uniform opinions, but O.K., the world can probably do without GrüVes carrying little bits of sweetness. Or? The next-to-last GV grower at whom I tasted was Hofer, and he's really a non-interventionist, being organic and all. And one of his GrüVes had a few grams of RS—and tasted absolutely wonderful. I think a couple questions are at play here. To one's own taste one should always be faithful. If you truly hate sweetness then you shouldn't consume it. For the rest of us—the 99.8% rest of us—perhaps a little flexibility is in order. The other question has to do with pleasure. We like to repeat the bromide about wine being a "beverage of pleasure" but we don't always mean it. We're very busy obsessing and scoring and having little fun that I can see.

I just read a bunch of tasting notes on '05s in an Austrian wine magazine and noted one writer's use of the term *Trinkspass*, which loosely translates into "joy-of-drinking," and this was a first. Till recently everyone wrote of the usual things, power-intensity-mass-density-etc, but very few ever asked whether, at some point, wine could also be a joy to drink.

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

You know what I mean! When we're starting out we often ask "How *much* flavor does this have; that way I'll know how much I like it (or how many *points* I'm supposed to give it)," but as we gain more experience we start asking "How beautiful does this taste, how fine,

how haunting?" And when we finally learn to relax with wine we barely think abstractly about it at all; we just know when our bodies and senses transmit the joy-signal.

The 2009 Vintage

It strikes me as a cross between 2001 and 2006. In case you don't remember those vintages, '01 was a botrytis year that turned out better than anyone had imagined and which is drinking very well right now. 2006 was a clean and sometimes over-endowed vintage that might have used a less heavy foot on the gas at the top level.

The headline should read *MANY OUTSTANDING WINES FROM "DIFFICULT" 2009 VINTAGE*. In January I asked Michi Moosbrugger (Gobelsburg) whether it was true 2009 had been a "struggle."

"Not really," he answered. "Or rather, not especially. It had the usual struggles but nothing catastrophic. Besides, we don't like vintages that are too easy. Everyone makes good wines. In harder years you can stand out more."



Harvest at Nikolaihof.

'09 is heterogenous, and everyone has his own story. Hofer talked about botrytis, while 25 miles away Schwarzböck had nothing but clean grapes. He in turn had to struggle against overripeness, while his near-neighbor Ecker in the Wagram, a scant half-hour's drive, picked late but with perfect fruit. Just when you started thinking it was a better vintage for Veltliner than for Riesling, you'd taste at three wineries whose Rieslings were supreme.

So, what can we say that is at least generally true?

For most growers, flowering was perturbed by cold weather that created *millerandage*, called "verrieseln" in German, meaning failure to propagate. But I learned not to see this as tragic. Several growers said "Yes, we had smaller bunches, but because they were so loose they were actually more resistant to rots and botrytis."

But the vintage is small — 30% below average, sometimes by verrieseln and sometimes by pre-harvest dropping of dubious fruit, and sometimes both.

The vintage tastes *ripe*. It is not in the family of the "cool" years like '08, '04 or '02. It is a remarkably grace-



ful citizen of the *big* years, like a suddenly springy and buoyant 2006, or a 2000 that lost 30 pounds.

One thing that's uniformly true, at least in this portfolio is that *the Liter wines are absurdly outstanding, the best they have ever been, better than their previous-best in '06.* Sadly, the other truth is they are less plentiful than usual – so don't wait to buy, and anticipate a period of 1-2 months out-of-stock between vintages later in this year.

Another almost uniform truth is that the 2009 Rieslings crave air. If you drink them this year or next, decant them. Or rather, splash the living crap out of them. You'll get three times the wine you paid for. I don't know why, no one knows why, but this is so. You can not make a reliable judgment on 2009 Austrian Rieslings until they've had at least five minutes in the glass.

It is a rather slight vintage for Gelber Muskateller. The wines, when they are good, are 1-sided, showing the racy catty side of the grape without its usual counterpoint of elderflower and orange blossom. Attempts at riper wines were usually met with dubious botrytis. Now I'm a Muscat lover and I don't mind them being little cat-bombs, and they will do their gorgeous feral thing just fine. But it's not a great vintage for Muscat, or as Jeffery Lindenmuth calls them (in the May issue of Food Arts), "Gelbers." The writer finds much to admire in "aromatic whites" and says that Muscat may be the next big thing. Would it could come to pass! But maybe it's better if I just go on hoarding them, since so little is made.

Our friends at Nikolaihof, of course, have an entirely different tale to tell, reporting only a 10% reduction in quantity and "no particular difficulty" over the growing season. Of course! Yet it bears repeating; this is very likely the legacy of almost 40 years of bio-dynamic farming: strong, robustly healthy vines. Growers in transition, even growers through transition and able to certify, are often stricken by how daunting and labor-intensive it all is. But their children will bless them.

The morning after my Nikolaihof visit I sat with another grower and repeated their story. He couldn't keep from rolling his eyes, and I couldn't help but notice. Now most of you know I am adamantly not dogmatic on

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

It could well be that 2009 will turn out to have been the 2nd-best vintage of the decade, behind 2007 (and ahead of the sometimes stunning but sometimes overrated 2006), if all you do is count the number of excellent wines. It could also be that these growers figure out how to make excellent wines almost all the time.

You'll note I haven't described any vintage-flavor in general terms. It isn't easy to do. I noted a sense of high-extract density, very chewy mid-palates, lots of stuffing in these wines. I also noticed their verticality; they can have a brilliant facet that reaches upward in a filigree and soaring point. The Rieslings have some of that toasted-grain and yellow-fruit thing the German Rieslings had. The Veltliners lean toward the fruity, yet they can also be svelte – svelte-leaners, one might say (if one were a real degenerate).

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

It will be hard this year; there are so many amazing wines.

WINERY OF THE VINTAGE



That is, the winery who made the largest number of great wines from the 2009 vintage. It is clearly **HIEDLER** if you want to be able to actually *find* the wines. It is **ALZINGER** if you want to be frustrated. He has 115 cases in total for the United States, but the wine, if you find it, will melt your heart. **HIEDLER**, on the other hand, is a thrill ride, one of those golden convergences of a vintage and a vintner who seems to have been born to make it.

COLLECTION OF THE OFFERING

That is, the very greatest sustained offering that crosses vintages, and in this case it is, hands down, **SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG**, if for no other reason than the two glorious, ethereal 2008 “Tradition” bottlings. This doesn’t take away from the marvelous offering from **NIKOLAIHOF**, but due homage must be paid to two of the greatest dry white wines of all time; those *Tradition* ‘08s are the apotheosis of a great idea into a beatific glowing exquisite pair of wines.

GRÜVE OF THE VINTAGE

Yet again I must divide this into the wine you can find and the one you can’t. The *very greatest* GV I tasted from 2009 was **ALZINGER’S STEINERTAL**, of which some “six to ten cases” will storm the gates of American wine commerce. If vintage ‘09 isn’t mandatory, the Great One is **BRÜNDLMAYER’S 2008 LAMM**, to be followed next year by the equally promising ‘09. That Lamm is everything great wine can be, including a note of searching ambiguity that haunts your soul even as it lights up your senses. But if it must be ‘09, and if you really *must* be able to *obtain* that thang, then **HIEDLER’S “MAXI-MUM”** it must be.

Among the many superb runners-up, try not to miss **BERGER’S Gebling**, **SETZER’S** fantastic **1995** “Die Lage,” **BRÜNDLMAYER’S** balls-to-the-wall **Käferberg**, **GOBELSBURG’S** always-wonderful **Lamm**, and **NIGL’S** masterly **Alte Reben**.

RIESLING OF THE VINTAGE

<sigh> Again, the one you can find is the sensational **HIEDLER Heiligenstein**, and the one you can’t find is the **ALZINGER Steinertal**. Other Rieslings that managed to make me not think about sex for three straight minutes – I told you I was away from my *Femme* – were **HIEDLER Steinhaus**, **HIRSCH Gaisberg** and his *astonishingly compelling Heiligenstein*, **NIGL Privat**, and two amazing back-vintages from **NIKOLAIHOF**, 2006 *Steiner Hund Reserve*, and 1999 “*Steinriesler*,” bottled in 2010.

The **MUSCAT OF THE VINTAGE** is, once again, our hero **BERGER**, who has the very gift with this variety.

I thought **THE BEST ROSÉ** was **NIGL’S**.

VALUE(S) OF THE COLLECTION

The **absolute, top value in this offering** is the *Zweigelt Liter 2008* from **ECKER**. Other ridiculous values include:

GLATZER’S *Zweigelt Riedencuvée*

ECKER’S *Grüner Veltliner Steinberg*

HIRSCH’S *Veltliner #1 (which soars above its class in ‘09)*

DOMAIN SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG’S
Gobelsburger Riesling

THE WINES YOU’D MOST

LIKELY OVERLOOK AND SHOULDN’T

These will comprise what we’re calling the **HARD-CORE LIST**, which differs from the standard core list in one very basic way.

The conventional core-list is built on supply and continuity and consistency. We picked the wines we always like and can always get. But this left some 100+ orphans exiled to the DI offering, and many of these wines deserved a lot more attention.

Thus the **hard-core** list, which will select and identify a small group of fantastic wines for *this year only*, because they’re in short supply, and maybe they won’t be so remarkable next year. You can order them DI, but we’re gonna buy and stock them and you can – and really, should – score them from us. Remember, the point here is *discontinuity*; these are 1-offs, unlikely ever to be repeated, little slices of antic jollity, you know, *what the f@!k* wines! My goal is, when you unscrew the first cap, you take one sip and say “Well shit, *this* is cool!” Here they are:

GLATZER 2009 *Grüner Veltliner Dornenvogel*. The guy is so successful with his basic bottling, almost no one knows how good his “reserve” wine is – and what value it offers. This ‘09 really is his best since 1997, and you could buy a double-magnum for the price of a bottle from the poo-bahs of the Wachau.

SCHRÖCK 2009 *Gelber Muskateller*. It’s Heidi’s first-ever pure “yellow” Muscat, a matter of possibly unrepeatable happenstance, and as gorgeously soulful as this variety can ever be.

HOFER 2008 *Weissburgunder “vom kleinen Eichenfass”* because this to me is a perfect oak wine, a rare example of how to do this often queasy genre *right*.

ECKER 2009 Roter Veltliner. Because admit it, you'd never buy it for any living reason otherwise, and the wine is *alive*, so absurdly interesting and animated you'll wonder how you never discovered it before.

BERGER 2009 Grüner Veltliner Gebling. Because as much as I love selling tons of Erich's Liters, none of you know how good his regular wines can be, and it is simply not acceptable for Berger *merely* to be a supplier of (admittedly rockin') fridge white. This is a great vintage of his top GV.

NIGL 2008 Zweigelt "Klassisch." Because I fell droolingly in love with it. That's why! Because Martin is so reputed as a white-wine grower, you'd be tempted to think this was merely a thoughtless line-extender, some piddly little red he made so his customers didn't have to go elsewhere for their red wine. And yet I am convinced you'll look far and wee to find a red that delivers *more sheer joy* at anything near this price!

NIKOLAIHOE 1999 "Steinriesler." It's actually a Weingebirge Federspiel, in cask for ten years, and I want to honor both the fact of it and also the wonderful *quality* of it, by buying it and asking you to give it your love.

THE TWO GREAT WINES OF THIS OFFERING

Remember, not necessarily "the best," but for a salient reason the most remarkable. And the first of them is actually a *core-list* wine, to which you wouldn't imagine I'd need to draw attention. But **BRÜNDLMAYER'S** amazing 2009 Grüner Veltliner *Kamptaler Terrassen* offers a striking amount of sheer *class* and is a stirring example of delivering quality to the person without the deepest pockets for wine. The second great wine is **HIEDLER'S** 2002 Riesling *Steinhaus*, a superb Riesling in the beginning of its gorgeous prime, which he is offering at the price of the '09.

Earlier Vintages

2008 -I have the sense we won't mind seeing the back-end of this "small" vintage, and yet I'm sure its best wines will give enormous pleasure for many years to become *because* the vintage was "light."

I can't really say any Great Truth of 2008 was revealed by a year's worth of bottle age. Its little wines have long been drunk up. The lithe silvery minerality and slender focused fruit of the vintage are and will always be delightful. And most of its reds are much better than the year's reputation for lightness would suggest. What they show is both fruit and substance.

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

2006 - There is no question the vintage is grand, and very little question the vintage is great, or will be. That said, I myself comprise some of that very little question, because in the stream of so much certainty, I find I must demur. First of all, there are many, many supernal wines among these 2006s, and as we've already said, the overall quality was pushed up such that even the little wines had stature.

2006's most vocal proponents like to say two things: One, the vintage as a whole carries its high alcohol in balance, and two, it is not compromised by botrytis. Both things are true, but only one will remain true. Botrytis will never come. But balance, I think, might leave. It's easy to suppose a wine manages high alcohol when it's still infantile and chubby, but what happens when the fat melts away? I think some of these wines will then seem stark and heady. And those are the wines that *seem balanced now*; there are others that were awkward and even grotesque to begin with.

You will feel differently if you tolerate high alcohol better than I do. I find I don't very well any more, and I'm drawing my (admittedly arbitrary) line at 14%. It's gotta be drawn somewhere, and 14% is the point at which the odds of my deriving pleasure from a wine fall dramatically. A few somms who know me probably want to spit in my soup, because they bring me bottles of über-cool wines and I send them back unopened. My senses dislike them, my food dislikes them, and my whole somatic system is depressed by them. So bear in mind, this is the frame of reference for my suspicions about some of the ostensibly "great" 2006s.

These were confirmed when I recently opened what had been one of the highlight wines of the vintage when tasted young, before bottling. I couldn't wait to see what had happened. I'd lauded the wine to the skies. The wine is *still* laudable, and I'm sure that other tasters would have been mystified by my demurs. The wine came on like gangbusters, it smelled fabulous, it was full of sex-appeal and wow-factor, and the first impression on the palate was similarly exciting, justifying all my early praise. And I *had* praised it, so I had my cred to uphold – I wanted, even needed to love this wine. But when the first blast of fruit faded, I noticed *first* the alcohol (14%) and then *that the first blast of fruit faded*. What was *that*



about? It was as if the wine had spent itself on foreplay. I'm totally into foreplay, but dude, stay *awake* for the main event, huh?

Wine of course is a slippery being, and I don't insist this one is doomed to disappoint. Maybe the early fruit-madness is just in a developmental funk. Maybe the wine will come back in another form. I'm not easily seduced by mere excitement, after all, and this wine *seemed* to have all The Goods it needed to lay serious claim to greatness. But where had they gone?

Cork



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

First Among Equals

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

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

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

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

Here's a baseball metaphor. Any wine in this offering gets a base-hit on a line drive. A one-plus wine does so with runners on base, who are driven in. A two-plus wine is a base-clearing double in the gap that misses

being a dinger by inches. A three-plus wine is a 7th-game-of-the-world-series walk-off grand slam home run.

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

GRAPE VARIETIES

Grüner Veltliner

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

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

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

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

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

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

Riesling

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

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

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

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

Gelber Muskateller

Only in Austria (and Germany) are they required to distinguish between this, a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains* or *Muscat Lunel* and its less refined but more perfumey

cousin the Muscat Ottonel. Most Alsace "Muscat" blends the two, and usually Ottonel dominates.

ABG-107 2008 Muscat, Heidi Schrock
ABY-191H 2009 Gelber Muskateller, E & M Berger
ABY-205 2006 Gelber Muskateller BA, Brundlmayer
AFN-170 2007 Gelber Muskateller, Brundlmayer
AHS-103 2009 Gelber Muskateller, Nigl
AHS-112 2009 Gelber Muskateller, Heidi Schrock
ASB-025 2009 Gelber Muskateller, Schwarzbock

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

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

Pinot Blanc

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

RED VARIETIES

One of the as-yet untold stories in Austria is the remarkable improvement in the quality of the reds from what once were thought to be white-wine-only regions in lower Austria, such as the Kamptal, to name but one. When I first started, the reds were afterthoughts, and the few one found were often anemic. That has decidedly changed, and while the wines are still less robust than those from Burgenland, I'm not sure this is such a bad thing.

It may be a climate-change thing and it might be a know-how thing – or both – but whatever the reason it is a heartening development for anyone who likes food-lovin' reds.

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

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of

old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

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

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

As if. Most of what I tasted ranged from mediocre to downright objectionable. When I stopped being bummed, I realized I had a lot to be happy about; my red-wine guys were already the hippest of the hip, and all I had to do was quit apologizing for them, quit the self deprecation, the "Hey I know y'all know much more

about red wine than I do, but these are actually not too disgusting if you'll just taste them please" thing.

Now of course, between the two poles the truth crouches somewhere. And I'll try to delineate it here, in my



Blaufränkisch grapes

Solomonic fashion. Austrian red wine is to be taken seriously, that much is beyond dispute. Yet for every truly elegant grown-up wine there are many others that are silly, show-offy, insipid, even flawed. Trust me, we're spitting those out and driving hastily away. What I am selecting are just what I like best, medium-weight, fruit-driven wines with poise, grace and elegance but also with length and density. Neither I nor my growers are into shock-and-awe wines; we all know how facile it is to make those inky dull creatures. Even the biggest wines from my producers—what I call their super-Tuscans—never let the flavor-needle lurch into the red.

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

useful, the satisfying and delightful.

Indeed it is gratifying to note a growing appreciation within Austria for reds with attributes of grace instead of mere brute power. Anyone can make such wines if you grow grapes in a hot enough climate, and they all have a pall about them, something withering and obtuse. Yet this singularly prevalent idiom is becoming less attractive to many Austrian vintners, who seem to have discovered what makes their wines unique and desirable, and who've set about to nurture it. Good for them! One symptom of this growing enlightenment appears among the Sattler offering. Erich is gradually discontinuing his "super-Tuscan" wine (which he called *Cronos*) and using that fruit for single-varietal bottlings of stellar-class Zweigelt and St. Laurent. I'd like to see others follow suit.

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

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

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

It's the fastest-growing red grape in Austria (from a small base, of course), having nearly doubled in acreage

ABG-095 2006 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen, E & M Berger
 ABG-105L 2009 Zweigelt, E & M Berger
 ABG-108 2008 Blauer Zweigelt Haid, E & M Berger
 ABY-210 2004 St. Laurent Ried Ladner, Brundlmayer
 ABY-220 2005 Cecile (Pinot Noir), Brundlmayer
 ABY-234L 2008 Zweigelt, Brundlmayer
 AEC-029 2007 Zweigelt 'Tradition', Ecker
 AEC-035L 2008 Zweigelt, Ecker
 AEC-037 2009 Zweigelt 'Brilliant', Ecker
 AEC-039 2007 St. Laurent, Ecker
 AEP-066 2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe, Prieler
 AEP-068 2008 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, Prieler
 AEP-068M 2008 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, Prieler
 AEP-070 2008 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, Prieler
 AEP-070M 2008 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, Prieler
 AEP-071 2008 Pinot Noir, Prieler
 AFN-171 2008 Zweigelt, Nigl
 AFN-175 2008 Zweigelt Eichberg, Nigl
 AGL-139 2009 Zweigelt 'Riedencuvée', Glatzer
 AGL-141 2008 Blaufränkisch 'Reserve', Glatzer
 AGL-142 2009 Zweigelt 'Dornenvogel', Glatzer
 AGL-143 2008 St. Laurent, Glatzer
 AGL-144 2008 Göttsprung, Glatzer
 AHF-034L 2008 Zweigelt, Hofer
 AHF-039 2008 Zweigelt 'Vom Kleinen Eichenfass', Hofer
 AHF-040 2007 St. Laurent, Hofer
 APL-070 2009 Claus, Paul Lehrner
 APL-071 2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger, Paul Lehrner
 APL-072 2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochacker, Paul Lehrner
 APL-073 2008 Blaufränkisch 'Steineiche', Paul Lehrner
 APL-074 2007 'Cuvée Paulus', Paul Lehrner
 AST-018 2006 St. Laurent 'Reserve', Sattler
 AST-024 2007 Zweigelt 'Reserve', Sattler
 AST-030 2009 St. Laurent, Sattler
 AST-031 2009 Zweigelt, Sattler
 AST-032 2008 St. Laurent 'Reserve', Sattler
 AST-033 2008 Zweigelt 'Reserve', Sattler
 ASZ-042 2008 Zweigelt, Setzer
 AZZ-149 2008 Zweigelt 'Gobelsburger', Gobelsburg
 AZZ-156 2007 'Cuvée Bertrand' (Pinot Noir/St. Laurent),
 Gobelsburg
 AZZ-157 2007 St. Laurent Haidegrund, Gobelsburg

since 1999, while remaining a distant 5th among all red grapes planted. One needs a certain religious zeal to grow it, and there's a new organization of its passionate partisans, which includes Michi Moosbrugger of Schloss Gobelsburg. Though there are 11 known clones, none of them is anything but a bitch to grow. I remain convinced that if this grape and its wines came from *anyplace* that didn't speak German, it would be mega-trendy in our fair land.

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

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

Burgenland is Austria's leading red-wine region; all of the stars are there. In my portfolio Prieler and Lehrner take their place among the elite, while Sattler makes his way into the kindly group below.

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

Austrian Wine Laws

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

There's a discernable trend away from the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. Most growers don't seem to care whether it's a Kabinett or a Qualitätswein or what-

ever; they think in terms of regular and reserve, or they have an internal vineyard hierarchy. So I follow their lead. I am possibly a bit *too* casual about it all. But I don't care either. The dry wines are all below 9 grams per liter of residual sugar, so you can tell how ripe the wine is by its alcohol. If there's a vineyard-wine it's because the site



Wheel of Taste

gives special flavors. And old-vines cuvées are très chic.

Austrian labels have to indicate the wine's residual sugar. They're actually a bit off-the-deep-end on this issue. There's a grower in my portfolio almost all of whose wines have a little RS. This is deliberate. The wines are fabulously

successful, and nobody finds them "sweet." But another wise sage voiced a note of caution. Other growers (said the voice) notice this man's success, and they imitate his style so they too can be successful. But they do a facile imitation of the most *superficial* aspect of the style, i.e. the few grams of residual sugar, and the next thing you know our Austrian wines are once again headed in the wrong direction. Don't get me wrong (he continued), I like the wines; they're not my style but they're good wines. But everyone doesn't have this man's talent. And so in a sense his wines are dangerous.

Such are the terms of the debate!

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



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

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

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

DAC

And just what does this acronym mean? It means "Don't ask, Charlie," because I'm not going to answer you.

This may seem churlish, but I am truly annoyed. I published an article in last September's WORLD OF FINE WINE that detailed why. Some growers agree with me, and I suspect others do but hesitate to speak

out. So, in a nutshell, this is the pith of my dismay.

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

I have some wines herein that are actually called "XYZ-DAC" and in that case I'll use the name. In other cases I'm leaving it out. The difference between *Hiedler Grüner Veltliner Thal* and *Hiedler Grüner Veltliner Thal Kamptal* DAC is that the latter has two additional unnecessary words. I am very much in favor of any and all words that tell you something about the actual wine, but equally against words that tell you how a bureaucrat or marketing guy has catalogued things.

Austrian Wine Culture

For a while it seemed to mellow; Germany's economic doldrums dried up the major export market for Austrian wines, and the market relaxed. Then Germany woke up, and now it's a seller's market again. I got to Austria April 30th and was distressed to see wine lists already full of '09s. "But Terry, you forgot," Peter Schleimer told me, "The wines have been on lists since *January*." Sadly, this is true. One fashionable grower told me his customers start asking in *late NOVEMBER* when the new vintage will be available. Come December, he *cannot sell* the current one. December! Small wonder some of the growers simply can't comprehend the challenges we still face marketing this "difficult" category (difficult-by-dint-of-umlauts is how I like to put it; the same wines from any other country would be demanded like Viagra), and I try and balance the obstacles of buying AND selling the wines, and believe me my legs weren't meant to bend that way.

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

It can be odd to deplane into this lovely country for the first time, climb into your car and head off to your first winery. Along the way you are deep within old Europe in all its stately handsome antiquity, yet when you ring that first bell you're entirely likely to meet by a dashing young person who speaks fluent English and knows more California winemakers than you do. His office is chock-a-block with gizmos, he's using a rabbit corkscrew and fancy stemware and his cell phone is programmed to ring with Tarzan's voice. But as soon as you taste his wine you're immersed again into a kind of abid-

ing Good. They are "wines as they've always been, only with better machines." They begin with soil, to which they are determinedly faithful, and they eschew confections at all cost. It is quite stirring, these slow, deep wines coming from such cosmopolitan creatures. It is even more encouraging to catch the occasional glimpse of the deeply anchored values which lie below the surface. It says, we don't have to give those up in order to be 21st-Century men and women; it says maybe we can figure out how a person should live.

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

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

When to Drink the Wines

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

Riesling, amazingly, ages faster. In certain vintages it takes on the flavor-known-as "petrol," which it later sheds. Great Austrian Riesling will certainly make old bones—30-40 years for the best wines—but all things being equal GrüVe tastes younger at every point along

the way. So: young is always good. If you want mature overtones wait about ten years. If you want a completely mature wine, wait about twenty.

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

A Note on My Use of the Word "Urgestein":

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

A Note on My Use of the Phrase Secret Sweetness:

This emphatically does not denote a wine with camouflaged residual sugar; in fact it doesn't refer to sugar as such at all. It attempts to describe a deeply embedded ripe-tasting flavor that *suggests* sweetness but which is in fact the consequence of physiological ripeness. Most of us know by now there are two things both called "ripeness": one is the actual measure of sugar in the grape (or must), which can be ostensibly "ripe" even when other markers of underripeness (e.g. bitter seeds or high malic acids) are present; the other is a fuller ripeness when both seeds and skins are sweet. Austrian whites from physiologically ripe fruit often *convey* a kind of sweet echo even when they contain little or no actual sugar. I like my little phrase "secret" sweetness, because it's a sweetness that seems to hide from you, though you're sure it is there. But if you look straight at it, *poof*, it's gone. Look away and there it is again. It only consents to let itself be inferred. This I just love.

The Question of Organics

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

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

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

The truly organic or biodynamic estates can choose whether to certify by various means, and most of them do. I have one certified-organic and two biodynamic estates in this assortment. The political issues around certification can be thorny, especially if one's a lone wolf by nature. But what's the alternative? If you won't certify, do you really have a right to the claim of "organic" or "biodynamic?" After all, anyone can *talk* whatever he pleases, but the ones who endure the paperwork and the politics ought to be the only ones with rights to the power of the organic "brand." That said, what if you simply do the work because you feel it's worth doing, but you don't broadcast it? Fair enough, it would seem, but how do you answer the inevitable questions?

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



A row of Austrian houses



A View of Hiedler's Ried Schenkenbichl Vineyard, which is used in their "Maximum" wines.

Map of Austria



burnt and

hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

Storing and Handling

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

The Assortment

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

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

Bottle sizes

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

OAT-003 - 12/250ml
OAT-007 - 12/500ml
OAT-010 - 6/1.0L



weingut prieler

neusiedlersee-hügelland • schützen

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

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

We were out celebrating because Silvia’s gorgeousness was ALL OVER the cover of the new “*Falstaff*” magazine. They were Vintners Of The Year. This is a big deal; *Falstaff* is sort of like Food And Wine but with lots more wine coverage. Oddly enough in three of the past five years it’s been one of my guys on *Falstaff*’s cover, first Heidi Schröck, then Michi Moosbrugger (from Gobelsburg) and now Prieler. I think I’ll have to send Peter Moser a shiny new unicycle or something.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I’d like to do more with this estate, because here is a family doing everything right. The wines appear to be evolving also, toward a greater polish and more overt fruit. I say “appear” to be because I don’t really know. Silvia says it isn’t on purpose. I try to applaud it so as to be encouraging, but come on, what affect does my screwy taste have? I’m the asshole who orders *schnitzel* for dessert.

Prieler at a glance:

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

AEP-065 2009 Pinot Blanc Seeberg

Just a perfect 12.5% alc (“Though the grapes were ripe enough to give 13% potentially,” Silvia said); a high skin-to-juice ratio creates more oyster-shell and less yellow-fruit flavors; indeed this shows some of the saline leanness of the *Leithaberg* white you’ll see below; it’s fossil-y, birchy, fennel-frond; snappier than usual.

AEP-067 2009 Chardonnay Ried Sinner

They were pouring plenty of this on Austrian Airlines last week. “Oh yeah, Chardonnay, I’ve heard of that, I know what it tastes like,” I can imagine those hapless fliers thinking. Well think again there Horst, because this is *stones*, man, a glass full of juice squeezed from rocks; compact and bright and focused and saftig, and it doesn’t have the heady alcoholic clumsiness of some steel-fermented Chards. Again a lovely 12.5% alc, full of hay aromas and a subtle licorice, with a snap of mint on the finish. The basic idea, by the way, is all-steel but with lots of lees-contact.

AEP-069 2009 Leithaberg Pinot Blanc, 6/750ml

Just north of the Neusiedlersee is a range of low wooded hills. If you land to the north flying into Vienna you’ll pass right over them. They’re about 7-8 miles from the lake’s northern shore. Their lower slopes are planted in vines, which enjoy two singular advantages over other Burgenland whites. One is soil; these vines grow on a complex mélange of slate, tertiary limestone and gneiss. The other is microclimate; the slight elevation makes for cooler nights and longer ripening. You can’t make palling overripe wines from these vineyards.

There’s a group of 14 growers who’ve agreed to bottle separate cuvees from these vineyards, both white and red. Among them is Prieler. The wines must be wild-yeast fermented, and oak can’t be used except to round excess tannin. The avowed point of the wines is to be mineral.

Dark aromas lead to a palate that’s softer and more out-flowing than the pithier Seeberg; hyacinth and iris now, more torque, a more commanding mid-palate. Will bottling form this into something more outlined and focused? There’s both strength and diffusion in this suggestive dozing wine.

AEP-066 2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe**+**

CORE-LIST WINE. Boy, has this gotten good the past couple vintages. And this ‘08 is exactly what you want to smell in a glass of Blaufränkisch (or “BF” as I prefer to call it), the polished silky benchmark; precise, specific, gushing but not sappy. How honorable to respect the beauty of the basic form! The world can never have too many such things.

AEP-068 **2008 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, 6/750ml**

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AEP-068M **2008 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, 6/1.5L**

The best red I tasted this year in Austria, and I suspect it may be because it contains all the 2008 *Goldberg*, which wasn't deemed outstanding enough to bottle alone. This wine is wonderful, like pre-salé lamb and fresh rosemary and bloody *jus*; it smells uncannily like Chianti Riserva but tastes incredibly minerally – I sometimes think BF is what Sauvignon Blanc would be if it were red - with firm juicy length and an ashen, haunting smell of burning shoots, leading to a sophisticated finish of roasted lamb, demi-glace, mint.

AEP-071 **2008 Pinot Noir, 6/750ml**

+

The most delicate and by far the classiest PN yet from Silvia's hands. She seems to be rethinking her basic vinification. It has the '08 silkiness and subtlety; a graceful, relaxed, adult PN that articulates deliberately because it knows how much time it has, and speaks moderately because it knows the value of what it has to say. This one's much more red-meat than "smoky oak."

AEP-070 **2007 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, 6/750ml**

+(+)

AEP-070M **2007 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, 6/1.5L**

First offering of one of Austria's great iconic reds, but not only iconic; this is one of the few that can truly be called world-class. It hails from a schisty hillside (both are rare in this vicinity, the slopes and the soil) and is Serious Business that needs to be aged, and decanted well before drinking. It is often opaque when young, but this was quite the aroma-bomb, massive black truffle and char, iron and hot asphalt, the bitter savor of the grill-mark on the meat. It sweetens with air. The palate is brooding, massive, tannic, with a swollen, almost throbbing finish, a little touch of the scorch of roasting peppers on the gas flame; it's shrouded, but the obscuring material isn't heavy, so when it's finally shrugged away it's all of a sudden.



weinbau heidi schröck

neusiedlersee-hügelland • rüst

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

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

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

One time, we drove amongst a whole gaggle of those new and weirdly beautiful windmills in an otherwise deserted field. She drove me through Hungary for my first time, and we saw the many dentists in the border town of Sopron, and then we crossed back over into Austria en route to an unseemly schnitzel orgy, and then we met Heidi's extremely charming friend Friedel who took us to see his friend the descendant of Count Almaszy, and as if this weren't enough, on our way back we spotted two huge wild boar grazing in a small grove of trees not ten yards from the road. And to think I might have been home watching baseball on TV. . . .



Heidi Schröck and Some Guy

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

Heidi seemed to expect me to cajole her to grow the domain so we could get all the wine we could sell. Instead I did the opposite. I mean, why? She *likes* it the way it is. It's the proper dimension to let her pay the quality of attention she enjoys and the wines need. I'm just glad to know her and be part of such a clearly successful life. I want the whole world to be like Heidi and her winery.

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

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

and also so extremely droll and funny.

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

Being a wine-girl is a bigger deal in Europe than here, as I've said elsewhere, yet I don't think of Heidi as a "woman-vintner" but simply as a vintner. She belongs to two girl-vintner groups, one of which I think she founded. She doesn't make a huge deal about it; it's largely a matter of creating a matrix for mutual sisterly support. Yet another guy I represent regaled me with a story of how he gave her a hard time. What about all the

women who work hard with their husbands, and who are every *bit* as crucial to the making of wine as all these marquee females with their groups and their brochures? Who's speaking for *them*? Not an unreasonable point (and bless him, the guy's loyal to his wife!), but it points out an adage I'm about to coin: it doesn't matter what you do, you'll piss somebody off. Hmmm, not bad, but I can do better. How's this; no matter how good you try to be, someone will hate you. That's more like it. You read it here first. Or, maybe . . . They'll hate you anyway, so you might as well be bad. This is fun! Maybe if the wine thing doesn't work out I can get into the fortune-cookie business. "Even if you put the seat down you still won't put it down *right*." "The food on your companion's plate always looks better."

AHS-110 **2009 Weissburgunder**

This is closer to Prieler's than the two wines usually draw; again there's an explicit oystery note, with white corn and spring-onion elements; snappy, strong and dry, with a markedly complex, saline-herbal finish.

AHS-112 **2009 Gelber Muskateller** +

There won't be a "Muscat" in 2009 because Heidi was displeased with the quality of some of its usual blending partners. *This*, on the other hand, is a miracle.

It smells like some Abyssinian garden, orchids and elderblossoms and wisteria, with a sweet note from the acacia casks she aged it in; this wine sits with the '08 Nikolaihof as the most soulful and vinous examples of my favorite yum-yum variety; there's a polleny chamomile flavor, loads of middle and no real bite, even though it's entirely varietal. Actually in its winsome detailed way this is very deliberate, long, amazing wine.

AHS-103 **2008 Muscat**

At first the Sauv-Blanc is prominent – somehow – and Muscat is a high note imposed atop it, but this shifts with each sniff, growing catty here and orange-blossomy there; a creamy hologram of shifting exotic flowery spice that leads into a white-pepper finish.

AHS-102 **2008 Furmint** +

The '08 is entirely dry, has 13% alc but in a streamlined and almost puckery feel; this is pure naked quince and pickled ginger and star-fruit; spicy and fresh and not exactly mineral but old-school; some nuances from the acacia cask it aged in, chamomile, almond; almost more Riesling than Chenin, less suave, more rectilinear. Hey, you can score some Chenin mojo without the risk it'll go all *Chenasse* on you and smell like a dirty ashtray by the second glass.

Updated note: this has developed wonderfully in the last year, and I strongly suggest buying it now while the 2009 has a chance to reveal itself. We have 34 cases, and the wine is mineral and long and perfect.

AHS-111 **2009 Furmint**

This is a ripe, waxy wine, done in small acacia barrels because of the small crop. It doesn't show (or hasn't yet found) its rosewater side; it's all inferential and oblique and umami, but there's a *lot* of material here, seen through a glass of gauze and haze.

- AHS-113 **2009 Ried Vogelsang** +
 A summit for Heidi's wines. 60% Welschriesling, 40% Pinot Blanc and Gelber Muskateller, it has a freaky Pfalz-like fragrance of lemon blossom honey and candied ginger, really an *Auslese* scent, though **this wine is dry**. Yet it's talc-y and malty, sweet-leesy, spicy, ringent, vital and vigorous – and *delicious*, with a candied-spicy finish that suddenly introduces all this exotica and tonka bean. A beguiling, original wine. Be a crime to miss it. Really, I'll send the police to your apartment if you don't order it.
- AHS-114 **2009 Grauburgunder**
 As always, all barrique, ambient-yeast, long lees contact, malo not blocked (though also not encouraged), and this '09 was oddly mute in May '10. Maybe just unfinished. It was adamantly smoky and not showing its usual leathery sweetness. If past is prologue, it will come around, and when it does you'll have an oaky wine you can respect yourself for loving.
- AHS-105H **2008 Welschriesling/Weissburgunder Beerenauslese, 6/375ml**
 There's more Pinot Blanc than usual (and less Welschriesling, due to a selection to omit the "bad" rot), and it smells unusually good; meyer-lemon, teensy notes of green beans and even radish; the palate is drier than expected, grainy, lemon-meringue, long and custardy.
- AHS-106H **2007 Ausbruch "On The Wings Of Dawn," 6/375ml** +
 And it can often seem greater than its big brother coming right up, because it shows better younger. The '07 had lots of botrytis, you see it from the unusually deep color, and man do you smell it; there's a hint of cask, *confiture* and honey and acacia; the palate is salty and beautifully fierce, not really complex but a lot of torque; obviously sweet, but this is a wine to *drink*, not sip. I know "honey" is such a feeble cliché, yet this is an exact liquid honey.
- AHS-107H **2007 Ruster Ausbruch "Turner," 6/375ml** ++
 Single-vineyard and 100% Furmint. These '07s have a lot of will; they're assertive, pointed, not as puddingy as the '06s; this is really *intense* – a word I seldom use - but there is nothing yielding about it; it's a strong physical wine. Furmint shows as the blown-out candle aroma way back on the soft palate.



THE DUO OF SCHRÖCK & KRACHER WINES

These can now be released, though under sad circumstances, what with Alois Kracher's distressingly premature death. He and Heidi were friends, and "Luis" loved a new project, and he wondered what sort of wine he might help make on the "other" shore of the Neusiedlersee, where the soils were more complex than the sands of Illmitz.

I spoke with him on Heidi's cell phone one day as she and I were driving home from dinner. She'd told me about the project, and I assured Luis I'd be glad to collaborate with Vin Divino on joint marketing and sales, assuming they felt the same. Luis said he was very relieved to hear it, and I wondered why. I didn't think it was extraordinarily gentlemanly of me. . . .

Now of course it's all changed. Alas. Luis is gone. As I write I'm not sure what's becoming of Vin Divino. Nor do I know how much wine Heidi wants to sell. I only know I want to be the only guy selling it.

There are two wines, a dry one called *Greiner* (the name of the vineyard) and an Ausbruch. Both are 2006.

The Greiner is all Welschriesling, picked very late, and vinified "in the old ways;" it shows exotically ripe roasted-corn aromas, rhododendron-honey, plantain and passion fruit – and cask. It suggests a dry Jurançon, but not one of the modern ones. It's a little fiery in a sort of flamenco flared-nostrils passionate way; a little hot paprika old-school exotic being, with a sort of flowing heaviness and a heat that's more capsicum than alcohol. It's certainly an affectionate nod to the ancestors, at least the ones smart enough to have made a wine like this.

The sweet wine is another old-school highly baroque being; roasted honeyed aromas with a metallic shimmer; my companion Leif nailed a sweet chili-like heat, and even with this ornamented antique *gestalt* it's gentler than Heidi's '07s; it has a minty creaminess and a cherubic glow.

AHS-108 **2006 Schröck & Kracher Greiner Welschriesling Halbtrocken**

AHS-109H **2006 Schröck & Kracher Rüster Ausbruch, 6/375ml**

weinbau sattler

neusiedlersee • tadten

I visited Erich Sattler in his swell new digs on May 1st, and they were putting up the ceremonial maypole in the town square in Tadten. We did the whole tasting to the sounds of the oompah bands. If only there'd been cheerleaders my life would've been complete. Gimme a Z! Gimme a W! (etc.) Don't you think Zweigelt deserves a cheer?

I'm writing this at my dining room table, looking out the window, and a cold front just passed through. Until a few minutes ago it was gray and misty outside, and suddenly the air has cleared and I can see individual leaves and everything's outlined in a silvery blue light.

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

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

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

Erich Sattler is emblematic of the new generation of

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

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



Erich Sattler

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

AST-029 **2009 Zweigelt Rosé**

It's sold out at the estate but you might have some and I'm sure you have no idea exactly how much to like it until you read my gormless tasting note. Well, go on and like it. It's *saignée*, darker than the '08 on purpose: "We wanted more red wine character." It's all *groseille* and rose-hips, strawberry and bacon fat; the palate is solid and vinous, "EU-dry," with an almost chewy middle albeit a clipped finish. Still, nice to drink a wine that tastes like marjoram and gravlachs.

AST-030 **2009 St. Laurent**

CORE-LIST WINE. Three days' bottled when I saw it, but its juicy velvety texture was lovely and the sweet plum fruit gives a forthright tasty wine with substance and discretion. Though the texture is almost creamy, the quality of fruit is dry and leans in the Mourvedre direction.

I had a jar of some truffle goop and wanted to make use of it. Then I thought of Bouloud's black-truffle and foie burger, and I thought *I too can be decadent*, so we got some ground veal and made us some slutty patties with the truffle stuff, and just to totally gild the lily we stuffed a pat of Dartagnan black truffle butter in the middle of each, to melt as the burgers cooked. Oh yeah baby, it tastes as good as it sounds – and the wine to drink with it is *precisely*, absolutely specifically and particularly a “basic” St. Laurent, assuming you can't find a decent basic Chorey-Les-Beaune, or would rather pay half its price.

The bigger “reserve” St. Laurent would have too much fruit, and maybe oak would show, and these wicked little burgers don't *need* all that mojo – they have their own. What they need is a yummy wine that knows how to be a straight-man and let the food get the laughs.

We're all insanely busy stretching towards the stellar; we really got to *rawk the carafe*, but if I stand for anything in this lil' wine-life of mine, it is to insist we learn to cherish wines of modesty. It will make us more kind. It will help us understand the beauty of the humble. It will save us money!

I have a fantasy that somewhere up on a stage, some international wine mega-star, Guigal comes to mind, is getting a big ostentatious trophy for attaining an average “score” of 98.3 points for his \$300+ wines, but back in the big general tasting they're cleaning up, and a guy approaches some Rhône grower whose \$12 Cotes-du-Rhône gave him pleasure, and he says to the grower, “Thank you for this wine, it makes me happy.”

No question in my mind where I'd rather be, and *who* I'd rather be.

- AST-031 **2009 Zweigelt**
CORE-LIST WINE. Also bottled three days. Spicy, almost cedary aromas; charming but not (yet?) sweet fruit – it's the Claret side of Zweigelt, almost like the finely dusty Gobelsburger, though its wild lavender overtones indicate the warmer climate this grows in.
- AST-032 **2008 St. Laurent “Reserve”** (*Available September 2010*) **+**
This one's quite Burgundian, with lovely streamlined suave fruit, lissome and silvery with a white iris perfume on the finish. If you'd like something with more tertiary flavors, do consider the following “old” decrepit geezers....
- AST-018 **2006 St. Laurent “Reserve”** **+**
Ripe aromas like un-modern Burgundy; plummy, sweet and ducky; the palate is wonderfully sweetly roasted and caramelized—Osso Bucco in a glass!—it's a charmer, extravagant rather than contained; 2005 was more complex, this one's more affectionate. In fact it's almost mead-like, it has so much sweet fruit. How he gets it so rooty-sweet but also so cool and firm and solidly structured I don't know, but the bacon and espresso jazz is a thing you drink and then crave.
- AST-033 **2008 Zweigelt “Reserve”** **+**
More taut and bright than the St-L, more exotic, smoky and solid, almost speck-like. For me it's all the fruit virtues of Ribera del Duero without the challenge (again, for me) of overripeness and mawkishness. This instead is addictively fruit-driven.
- AST-024 **2007 Zweigelt “Reserve”** **+**
The usual berried aromas with a lashing of cask; sweet, iris, cherries and truffles; tighter tannin – tighter generally; the fruit is extravagant but girdled in tannin, yet the finish is again suavely compelling. I love the sweet ribby char with the iron sharpness of the grill marks and with the sweetness of the glaze; it's stylish and lavish, but if it were Syrah – which it resembles – it's be a moderate and firm one.

weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

One year Paul mentioned a change he wanted to make, toward what he felt would be more age-worthy wines. In practice this meant more tannin, which has become the symbol by which one affects ones “seriousness,” I guess. I was wary. He has every right to make the kind of wine he wishes, but it wasn’t why I chose to work with him.

I bore in mind the timing of my visits, usually 2-3 weeks after bottling, when the wines are truculent and spiteful. But that’s when I always show up, so I’m comparing apples to apples.

Paul’s a guy you want to encourage to talk, and this is easier than it might sound since he doesn’t spit when he tastes. He has opinions. He has started to wonder whether his region is

really suited to Pinot Noir and St. Laurent. He aligns himself more and more with the particular ornery angular Blaufränkisch, and is considering whether to lease a vineyard in Südburgenland where the soils are volcanic and the vineyards are steep. Paul is restless and passionate and full of beans.

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

Thank God for an honest man. And with Lehrner it



Paul Lehrner

seems less like a choice he makes than an imperative of his temperament. He makes wine of candid fruit without embellishment, and he talks to me about them candidly and without embellishment.

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

This aesthetic doesn’t preclude concentration and it positively invites complexity. It does insist wine must be refreshing, not fatiguing, and it is bored by bombast or opacity. Personally if something (or someone) is screaming at me I’m barely interested in what it has to say; I just want to get the hell away. Wines which speak in moderate voices immediately compel my attention.

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

Two final points. It’s somewhat misleading to call these wines “light,” as in fact they have considerable depth. What they are *not* is inky, tannic obsidian dragons which bellow 600% new oak at your schnoz. They

have a sort of black-belt surety, a calm contained power that doesn't have to be *demonstrated* every five minutes. Second, Lehrner's wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from 2008.

This year I found the wines to be rugged again. Paul had driven the samples to Rust to be tasted during our visit to Heidi. I don't know whether they suffered by being wrenched from their context, or maybe from sim-

ply having been schlepped, but I tasted tannin in front of fruit, and I prefer the reverse.

2008 was a rough vintage for Blaufränkisch in general. And Paul has a track record whereby he's earned the benefit of the doubt. I liked what I ended up selecting. If you like a sinewy style of red, you'll like them even more.

Lehrner at a glance:

Fruit-driven reds at sensible prices from a down-to-earth vintner who'd rather quench thirst than win medals.

APL-070 **2009 Zweigelt "Claus"**

It now says *Zweigelt* on the label. Robustly juicy and warm aromas, like that first instant you can smell the roast in the oven. Though it's bottle-sick to the max, it shows caraway and cracklings and is nice in its chewy way.

APL-071 **2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**

CORE-LIST WINE. It's a value thing! Sweetheart aromas of toasted dark wheat bread, sorghum and rusks and duck breast. Darker aromas than usual. It's also more tannic than the '07, and I wonder whether it has the body to manage. But: it is bottle sick...eventually those aromas turn into actual flavors.

APL-072 **2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker**

Even darker and more intense now; a gravelly richness yet still tannic, though this wine clearly has the stuffing it needs. Flowering thyme, mid-palate density, some real mojo here in a kind of countrified idiom.

APL-073 **2008 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche"**

+

Not a vineyard name, but a "brand" name to denote his best "reserve" quality. And *here* is how to use new oak; the wine is sweet and satiny and seductive, but BF is hard to tame, and the rampant violet and sweet-herbs are front and center; finishes plummy and smoky. I'm not sure I'll respect myself in the morning, but I'll surrender to this.

APL-074 **2007 "Paulus"**

(+)

This is his super-Tuscan. I wonder whether these cuvees will go the way of their paradigms, which seem to be struggling lately. Anyway, you know the drill; presence of "international" varieties and tons of new oak, and though the idea can strike me as sad or even despicable, I like the wine when it emerges in elegant balance with some (at least) of its origin-imprint intact.

So, to the wine at hand: it smells good! Summer truffles, blood, *groseille*, nutmeg, cinnamon, like a moussaka, cloves and meat. But the palate weirdly conveys almost none of that savor, being minty and tannic and imperious. It has to be a phase, because those fetching aromas must have a cognate on the palate – or? "I will gladly pay you Tuesday, for a wine you decanted last Friday."



Sunflowers in full bloom

can untum

weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

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

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

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

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

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

He's installed two fermenters, one for reds and one for whites, the second of which is kept underground in a newly-built cellar in order to keep fermentation temperatures down. He has 25 hectares of vineyards, from which he aims, like all the young lions, to grow the best possible grapes. He'll green-harvest when necessary, not only to increase dry extract but also to guarantee physiological ripeness. Glatzer does all his harvesting by hand, though he could, if wished, work much of his land by machine.

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

There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tasting notes. Yet in a sense these hardly seem necessary; to

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rosenberg, Haidacker, Rote Erde**
- **Soil types: sandy loam, gravel with clay & sand**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Zweigelt, 15% St. Laurent, 15% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Blaufränkisch, 10% Merlot, 10% Weissburgunder, 5% Pinot Noir, 5% other varieties**

delineate the minute vintage-variations of wines which are always varietally True and scrupulous is more trouble than it's worth. And, I can now proclaim, after truly painstaking diligent research, that Blaufränkisch is better than Zweigelt with Schnitzels.



Glatzer at a glance:

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

GLATZER WHITES**AGL-135 2009 Grüner Veltliner**

CORE-LIST WINE. The first wine I “officially” sampled this year. Wow, what a euphoric fragrance, beans, sorrel, tonka; the palate is light, fresh and transparent yet with a pointed, focused and clinging finish. A bright, tasty and useful wine that finally delivers just that little bit more than it first seemed. The best since the over-achiever 2006.

AGL-138 2009 Grüner Veltliner “Dornenvogel”

It means thorn-bird, because the marauding little tweeters like to eat the ripest grapes, so Walter uses it for his best lots. I put this on the HARD-CORE LIST because I couldn't ignore the value. Some years this wine's just a little better than the regular GV – or the regular GV is *too* good – but this '09 is really another kind of wine entirely. In place of the fruit of the basic wine, this has that Tuscan olive-oil aroma; the entire thing of more vinous and tertiary; it has something in common with Alzinger's Mühlpoint, a beany-starchy plumpness on the mid-palate but a peppery zing on the front. It's a keeper too. Wait at least 5 years – if you can! Finally, only Ecker's Steinberg plays in the same value-field as this.

AGL-140 2009 Weissburgunder

All steel. Battonage and spicy aromas; the palate is brisk and crackery, varietally true in the mussel-shell style.

GLATZER REDS: ZWEIGELT**AGL-139 2009 Zweigelt “Riedencuvée”****+**

Total sweetheart aromas, almost lulling; a beaming fruit. The palate begins by seeming light but firms, concentrates and sweetens dramatically, into the kinds of blackberries that leap from the bush into your hand as you reach for them. The “+” isn't for power or strength but for the wolf-spit deliciousness, the cherry tobacco finish, the gorgeous modesty.

AGL-142 2009 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”

Consistently one of my favorite reds in the portfolio, if not in all of Austria; it has the coolness of the '05 with the vinous thrust of '06; the finish is ripe and smoky. Only 15% new wood. I love its mélange of firmness and juice.

BLAUFRÄNKISCH**AGL-141 2008 Blaufränkisch Reserve**

“We declassified 20 thousand Liters of Blaufränkisch into Landwein in this vintage,” Walter said. This variety needs warm weather in the weeks leading to harvest, but '08 was fitful and cool. Still, this culling is correctly if delicately varietal; discreet but also elegant and sweetly spicy, and with a warm garrigue-y bouquet-garni finish.

ST. LAURENT

AGL-143 **2008 St. Laurent**

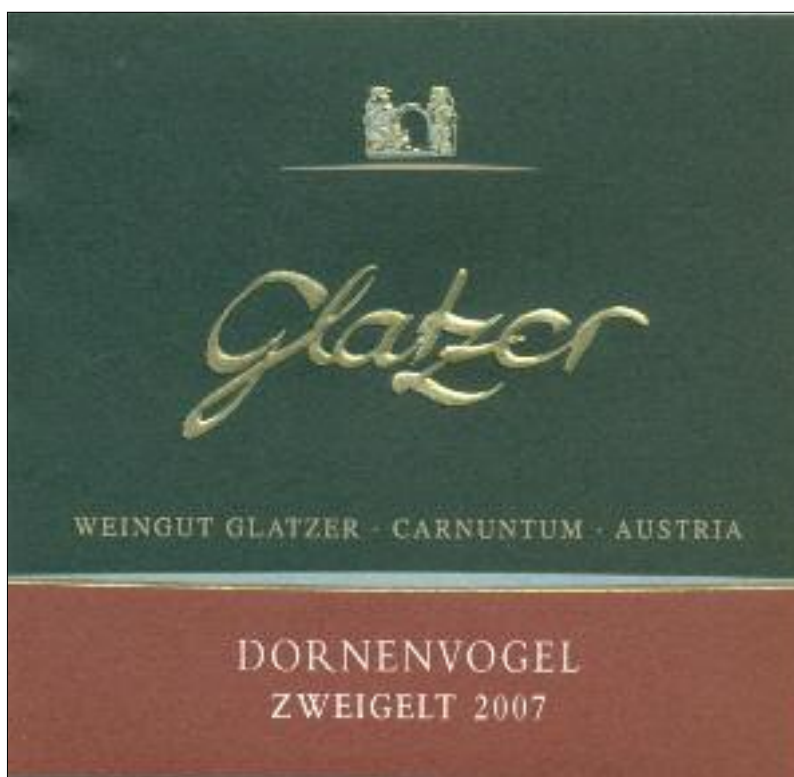
No new wood, but intensely smoky, like a fire of vine-cuttings. Animal, but *clean* animal; it's direct, this guy. He isn't mapping DNA but he'll fix your tractor. This is especially *wild* for St.L.

THE "SUPER-TUSCAN"

AGL-144 **2008 Gotinsprun**

+

A cuvée of 60% BF, 15% Merlot, 15% St.L., and 10% Syrah. I don't know how this wine always smells so mineral, like some Pomerol-Priorat hybrid. It must be the best BF material, which really dominates this vintage, which is seductively spicy, like those 100-year-old salts, iron and violets; perfumey complex finish.



weinviertel

weinviertel

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

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

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

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

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

It needs a certain

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

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



weingut schwarzböck

weinviertel • hagenbrunn

In some ways Schwarzböck's '09 vintage is atypical. They had no botrytis, and they had more overripeness than other growers I visited. "The time-window for picking grapes of medium ripeness was really small, since it stayed warm through mid-October. We waited as always for physiological ripeness, perhaps at times too long. You're always wiser in hindsight...." They began quite early (September 10th) specifically in order to have a few light wines to offer (such as the fervently zippy Muscat). 2009 had 50% more rain than an average year, yet slightly more sunshine too, so you find wines with alcoholic power yet also with high acidity. It's easy for me or anyone else to come along and tut-tut over a couple wines that may have gotten away, but

you try managing a 23-hectare property with more than 50 different parcels, tough guy.

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

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

Hagenbrunn is virtually at the city-line of Vienna – you'd expect the trams to run out there. Some of the vineyards are on not-insignificant slopes, and most soils are loamy loess, with Riesling being grown in sandstone covered over with loess. They have a modern tasting room where you can buy – I swear I'm not making this up – bars of milk-chocolate filled with Riesling and dark chocolate filled with GrüVe. Now I know where my allocations are going. Rudi and Anita seem in every sense to be a typical young vintner-couple, but even on first

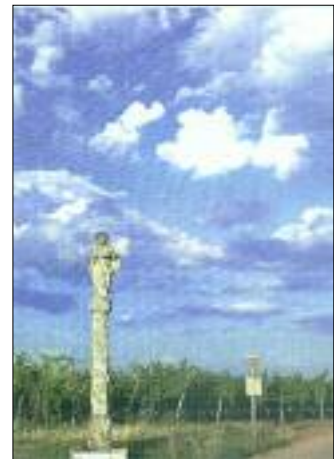


Rudi & Anita Schwarzböck

- **Vineyard area: 23 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Aichleiten, Hölle, Kirchberg, Sätzen-Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Loess, partly with sand or marl for Veltliner, flysch-rock riesling**
- **Grape varieties: Grüner Veltliner 40%, Riesling 15%, Zweigelt 15%, Welschriesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Gelber Muskateller**

acquaintance I sense something more. Rudi seems just a little bit shy, as if he's more at home in the world of the vines than in the tasting room. His seeming diffidence reminds me of Walter Strub's, in that it reflects less a hesitancy than a modesty built on knowing there's always more information and you're never done experiencing. I'm eager to know this guy better.

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



ASB-022L **2009 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

The second among my liter wines I tasted, and I was starting to glean that somethin' wuz up with these '09s, because this showed remarkable weight and grip for the "simple" wine. Even its 12.5% alc was higher than normal, and the wine is super-tasty and true, in the sorrel and rhubarb dialect.

ASB-023 **2009 Grüner Veltliner DAC**

+

Hate the concept, LOVE the wine; it is every way GV can be loveable and useful; it's the oleander and vetiver type but with really glowing fruit; buttery lima-beans, dill with a few threads of Pecorino; it's snappy and long, digitally focused, with a classic peppery finish. *The value is STUNNING.*

ASB-024 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Kirchberg**

CORE-LIST WINE. I wanted a large-scale GV at just this price, but in '09 I got a mammoth-scale wine – 14.5%; it's the flowering-field vetiver type, with peppers and chilis, a power-pack on the palate – you can charge your laptop battery with it – and if you can accept a sort of bellowing expression, you can enjoy the big old mess of fruit for the next two years. The mid-palate shows a fascinating psychedelic balsam nuance.

ASB-025 **2009 Gelber Muskateller**

+

Ahhhhh...back to earth, with the 11.3% alc; it's a *granité* of freshness! It might have been a little riper, in fact...more flowery. But the purity of fragrance, the puppy friskyness and the narcissus and herbs and *sencha*...many layers for a light wine, even complexity, and it sure is weirdly long. Thus the plus.

ASB-026 **2009 Riesling vom Bisamberg**

This used to be called "Pöcken" but Rudi wants to spotlight the macro-terroir of this hill just northwest of Vienna. Here is where '09 works its magic, elevating this sometimes-tart Riesling to a rare warmth and grace; an elegant, grainy, stylish and juicy dry Riesling.

ASB-027 **2009 Riesling Aichleiten**

About 10% botrytis beautifully integrated; balsam again; it recalls Dürnsteiner Freiheit or even Hollerin, the apricot flavor; a seductively pitted-fruity dry Riesling.

ASB-028 **2009 Zweigelt Rosé**

Zweigelt in fact, and this is everything I want from a *light* Rosé, silky and charming and focused and fresh; a Rosé with the virtues of good white wine, just with a different fruit.



weingut h.u.m. hofer

weinviertel • auersthal

It was a rueful Mr. Hofer (sounds like the title of a Victorian novel...) who met us a couple weeks ago. Seems he was taking a tank of his Rosé to be bottled back in January, and was driving too fast, and hit a patch of black ice, and the tank tipped over, and most of the Rosé was lost. I mean, the poor guy wasn't insured, and the Rosé is a cash-flow item.

He also dealt with a fair amount of botrytis in 2009, which for an organic grower, means many trips into the vineyards to spray. The vintage turned out to be in the good-to-very-good category, but my friend Hofer isn't going to make huge profits in 2010, between the small harvest and the lost wine.

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

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

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

The wines have a quality of moderation and intelligence; they are clear and reasonable. In "normal" vin-

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

tages such as '02 and '04 they are exceptionally deft and even charming. In warm years they can flirt with extravagance. They have a kind of firm smoothness that's cool like marble. There are some lovely reds to show you.

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

AHF-035L **2009 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter SOLD OUT!!!**

As I write we've already bought it all from him, and you've bought it all from us. But be *glad* you have it, as it's the best one in years! These '09 GV Liters are really absurd.

AHF-037 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg**

+

CORE-LIST WINE. And again, remarkably expressive, less brioche-y and more roasted than the '08; grains, vetiver; the palate has a firm focused core of pepper and legume and black walnut, and even has the satisfying bite of good *chevre*; the finish is a touch clipped but everything that comes before it is way good.

AHF-030 **2008 Riesling**

+

I'm surprised by the pitted-fruit aromas. The palate is a keen cold stream of minerals but that apricot jazz won't stop playing, and tilleul and aloe vera notes are also in the jam; it's a cool wine but not chilly; racy and complex. As attractive a Riesling as this money can buy.

- AHF-038 **2008 Pinot Blanc “vom Kleinen Eichenfass”** +
Possibly I have taken leave of my senses, but this was an oaky wine I really liked. It's 20% new barriques, with malo and batonnage blah-blah, but the result was *gracefully* woodsy and not blatantly “oaky;” indeed it recalled old-school white Burgundy, not overripe or tropical, with saltiness, fruit and wood seamlessly bound by a creamy leesy vein that subdued the cask-machismo. Hat's off!
- AHF-036 **2009 Zweigelt Rosé **SOLD OUT!!!****
We got it all, such as it was, and if you got any *you* scored a seriously good glass-o-pink, flowery and substantive.
- AHF-034L **2008 Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter**
Yes! A red organic Liter, and it's perfectly simply yum-may, with perfume and substance and no redeeming social value.
- AHF-039 **2008 Zweigelt “vom Kleinen Eichenfass”**
50% Allier, 25% each Austrian and American. (*USA! USA! USA!*) The fragrance is like a cherry and damson marmelade seasoned with the “sweet” profile of oak, but the palate is spicy and vigorous and berried and minty; it's not a polished wine and yet is isn't at all coarse; it's lusty in a tensile way.
- AHF-040 **2007 St. Laurent**
First offering. This is suave, meaty, warm-hearted, comfort food in the form of wine, but just when you think it's nothing but a swaddle, there's a smoky char on the mid-palate and a little jab of dustiness at the end. This is even more marked with the cork-finished bottle (we tasted both from cork and Stelvin).



weingut setzer

weinviertel • hohenwarth

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

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

I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic virtues. In people it denotes an effort of behavior whereby you feel appreciated and cared for. In wine or music it creates a response of palpable delight. I find this feeling more pleasant than many other feelings which seem to have greater prestige. Don't get me wrong; there's a place in me for being knocked out, blown away, stunned, impressed, but I find none of these as exquisitely pleasurable as feeling delighted or charmed. Also, charm is a flexible virtue. Charm can exist in big wines or medium wines or little wines. I

also appreciate this virtue because it seems less reducible to recipe: any grower of unexceptionable talent can make intense wine. It seems much more intuitive to craft wines of charm, less a matter of formula than of constant attending to tiny details. And knowing all the while that



Hans & Uli Setzer

your wine won't be the biggest, boldest, loudest rock-em sock-em wine on the table. But it will insinuate, will crawl inside a certain temperament and sing its siren-song, and this is the pleasure for which we live.

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15 minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the summit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure loess terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram. Yet I feel the wines are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his "competitor," bless him) called Vinovative.

But I don't want to leave you with the impression this is a "modest" winery producing the kinds of wines that happen to charm me. Indeed, Setzer is serious and

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

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

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

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

ASZ-037L **2009 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

The most refined and *cool* among the GV Liters this year, though the fruit is ripe and the aromas are expressive and pure. You might say the *acoustics* are perfect. Not only a slug-it-down wine; you can also chill to it.

ASZ-039 **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Easy To Drink”**

As I write I have just learned the BATF approved this label, much to our surprise. Yay to them and all their household pets. Someone must have tipped them off to the best-kept secret in the Austrian wine business, that “GV” stands for “Get Västed.”

But the juice is good, as is the idea, an 11.8% alc GV with a modest (but important) 6 grams of RS – which is deliberate – and it’s a cuvée of young vines from the best vineyards, showing pungent GV aromas and a thick lentilly palate leading to a peppery finish. A varietal exemplar, in fact. Maybe they could call it “Skeevy GV.”

ASZ-038 **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Ausstich” DAC**

+

This is just a classic and marvelous Setzer wine; if you want to “get” this producer, just give a modicum of deliberate attention to *this* wine. Alc is a delicate 12.2%, and the whole thing is just so deft and pretty it even overcame my resistance to anything called “DAC.” An utterly classic GV fragrance showing every attractive facet; the palate is delicate and caressing, a lullaby of fruit, whispery body, luminous and calm; one of those wines you love for *how* it tastes, not how much “intensity” it has. It’s loving kindness in a bottle.

ASZ-043 **1995 Grüner Veltliner “Die Lage”**

++

A very limited library release, and the best wine I’ve ever offered from this grower. A backwards note...the tertiary finish is all maple-baked ham; the fragrance is all kelp and moss and lightly smoked abalone; the palate is fervidly spicy, exotic, snappy, candied ginger; an absolutely *perfect* young-adult GV. Not only a great opportunity, an astonishing *PRICE!*

ASZ-041 **2009 Roter Veltliner Kreimelberg**

+

This is as subtle as a flying mallet, but in its bellowing blatant way it’s a true original. Wild aromas of roasted yellow peppers, corn and summer savory; the palate is like a bong-hit of GV, as if it were fined with jalapeño dust – if you want something *novel*, seek no further, especially not to some Mediterranean island growing some indigenous grape planted by Hammurabi. Sure, *you* feel oh-so-cool that you found it, but it’s *not this good*.

ASZ-040 **2009 Riesling**

+

In the 2009 idiom; dried apricots, corn flakes, almost chestnuts, roasted corn, and again it craves air, and develops key-lime and *pêche-de-vignes* and balsam, wintergreen and salt; a lot of complexity and a raw silken texture.

ASZ-042 **2008 Zweigelt**

The ‘08 reds have a vintage aroma I happen to like; it reminds me of a purée of rabbit with fennel and bacon; it’s smoky and plummy (and needs decanting to shake off a slight reduction), but it’s an upright, sweet-fruited slightly dusty wine, elegant and right-bank Claret-y.

Wagaram

The Wagram

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

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

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



weingut ecker

wagram • kirchberg-mitterstockstall

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

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

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

I like every single wine I taste here. I liked their exceptional clarity, their incisive detail, their high-definition obsessive nuance, their fresh vitality, and most of all



Bernhard Ecker

I love their charm and deliciousness. It’s not the same sort of charm we see in Setzer, whose wines are more cashmere-textured, but it is something of great good humor that elevates the wines from mere correctness. I don’t want all wines to be modern as these are, but I want all MODERN wines to have the animation and soul I taste here.

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

When we introduced this estate in 2007 I was dismayed to find most of the wines I wanted were *already sold out* in late April. You may think this estate is “obscure” but inside Austria it is gulped away with hyperactive haste, and I feel very lucky to have scored it. In this weak Dollar era, but not only in a weak-Dollar era, a grower offering *this* much value has got to be cherished.

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

AEC-030L **2009 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

Though it appears here first, at the estate you actually taste it *last*, because Bernhard has huevos of steel and he knows how crazy-good even his “basic” wine is. This is another wonderful ‘09 Liter, scrupulous and true and refreshing and full of character. It almost insists you drink it outside.

AEC-034 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Steinberg**

On primary rock (uncommon in the Wagram) and this is prototypical in every way, loaded with all the specifics of Urgestein-GV, stylish, detailed, full of ore and finesse; and come on man; where do you this quality at THIS price???

AEC-032 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg**

+

Loess again now; one of those deft gravity-defying wines that floats in a cloud of gauze, yet packs 13% alc. And then you see how the mid-palate – a classic loess lentil-sorrel profile - melts into a freaky-long finish, and you notice the strangely beautiful marriage of creamy texture yet focused flavor, a nuanced melting into mineral, echoing the glaciers that gave the soil it grows on. Oats, quince, mutsu apple, the list goes on....

- AEC-033 **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Prämium”** **+**
50-year-old vines from the Wagram’s top site Mordthal, which means “valley of murder” in English. This is cultured-yeast fermented in steel and racked into 1700-Liter acacia casks where it sits on the fine lees. The wine is masterly, recalling an Alzinger Mühlpoint from a cool year; beans and pepper and the *right* kind of power, a zen force of deadly accuracy. The tautly stretched finish hints at cress and frisee.
- AEC-031 **2009 Roter Veltliner**
Fresh roasted yellow peppers, boxwood and pears; the palate is animated, spicy and bright, with the classic varietal soy undertone; maitakes too; the wine is just wonderfully *alive*.
- AEC-038 **2009 Riesling Im Wasn**
5 weeks in bottle, this guy needed lots of air; then a flinty Mirabelle-y wine with a lot of bouquet-garni of sun-baked herbs and a taut limey finish. It’s tabula-rasa dry Riesling, filling out as it warms, but staying minty, even mentholated.
- AEC-040 **2009 Zweigelt Rosé**
A silky, loquacious fruit-bomb, pretty as can be, and almost salty.
- AEC-035L **2008 Zweigelt, 1.0L**
THIS WINE IS THE BEST VALUE IN THIS PORTFOLIO. Absolutely masterly! Beautiful color, fetching aroma, ripe gracious texture; sappy but not “sweet,” actually a little dusty and with a lovely grapy bite.
- AEC-037 **2009 Zweigelt “Brillant” (*Brilliant is Correct*)**
There was an ‘08 I feel head-over-heels in love with, and he said he had 50 cases left, and I bought it all, and couldn’t wait to show it to you. But oops. “50 cases? I meant 50 bottles!” and now I done got my heart broke agin.

I tell you this because I was probably uncharitable to this ‘09, now that I read over my notes. It’s more robust and roasty and smoky and tannic than the miraculous ‘08. In time it may be better. Look at the price!
- AEC-029 **2007 Zweigelt “Tradition”**
From a different site than the Brillant, and bottled later than was the ‘06; a nearly perfect fragrance, classic Zweigelt, ripe and plummy. With a year in the bottle it’s gotten very tasty and sexy and smooth.
- AEC-039 **2007 St. Laurent**
1st bottling, and boy is *this* tasty, a classic St-L you could teach a class with; “sweet” and dark, minty and plummy, with a long seductive finish.



kremstal & kremstal

kremstal and kauptal

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

Austria's best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals. This doesn't mean the cheapest wines; it means the lowest available prices for *stellar* wines. Austria is often paradoxical in that the more you pay the better the value, e.g., the top Kremstal/Kauptal Grüner Veltliners seem to provide more quality than *any* other white wine the same money would buy. This may be partly due to the giant shadow cast by the neighboring Wachau, and the determination of the best Kampers and Kremser to strut their stuff. For the price of really middling Federspiel from a "name" estate in the Wachau you can get nearly stellar quality in Kammern or Langenlois, and

the absolute best from a Nigl or a Gobelsburg is substantially less expensive than their Wachau counterparts. And, every single bit as good. Other than the profound individuality of certain sites (Heiligenstein comes first to mind) there's little of regional "style" to distinguish these wines from Wachau wines. In fact Willi Bründlmayer told me all three regions were once one big

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

region called WACHAU. Ludwig Hiedler points out Langenlois is warmer than anywhere in the Wachau, and he believes his wines need even more time than theirs do.

I had a rather subversive conversation with a Kremstal grower this year, as part of our mutual lamenting of the "DAC" silliness. He said "I'm not really all that sure why we need all these *regions* at all; Kremstal, Kauptal, Traisental, Wagram. . . are they really so different?" Well wow. I don't often hear growers speaking so blasphemously. It sort of made my mind reel. *You know*, I said, *even the Kremstal is senseless as a single region; the valley itself is one thing but it's very different from the loess terraces along the Danube in terms of exposure and microclimate, to which he*

agreed. You can make a case for the Wachau between Dürnstein and Spitz, i.e., the gorge, because that area has singular characteristics. But I'm not entirely sure how the consumer benefits from having so many different regions whose wines aren't that different from one another. I rather think these things are done by bureaucrats and marketing folks, because they get a kick out of categorizing. Yet a *true* breakdown of these places based on soil, exposure and microclimate would look very different than the currently demarcated regions.

I really don't know whence the greater sense of amplitude of Wachau wines originates. For me it's a difference in weight dispersal; Kauptal and Kremstal wines seem more sinewy and tall—basketball players—while Wachau are the body-builders. You might say that Wachau compares to Hermitage as Kauptal-Kremstal does to Côte-Rôtie. It would need another two importers of Austrian wine to get all the deserving growers into our market, there are so many of them. I could actually see myself becoming identified with this region exclusively—The CHAMPEEN of the KAUP TAL!—because I



strongly feel it's the most accommodating source in Austria (therefore among the most in the world) for utterly **great** wines. I won't, because I'm attached to my suppliers all over the place. But if I had it to do again, knowing what I know now

KREMSTAL WINES

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

But the last few vintages have seemed to *compelled* Erich back to the old style. He couldn't help make creamy charming wines from that material. Look, I am a

- **Vineyard area: 18 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gebling, Steingraben, Zehetnerin**
- **Soil types: Loess, stony clay, gravelly loess**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Riesling, 10% Welschriesling, 20% Zweigelt, 10% other varieties**

BERGER



2007 Grüner Veltliner

white table wine dry - Kremstal

A Spätburgundy from Austria

at 12,50 € **PRODUCT OF AUSTRIA** 1 Liter
OF 2005/07

IMPORTED BY THE WINE COMPANY, 1000 GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK 10017
BOTTLED BY THE WINE COMPANY, 1000 GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK 10017

A black and white photograph of a man standing outdoors. He is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt under a dark jacket, and cargo pants. He has his hands in his pockets and is looking towards the camera. The background shows some foliage and a building.

And I would stake this claim; if you buy wine for **practical** reasons, not simply to have “nothing but 90+!!”

ABG-104L **2009 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

CORE-LIST WINE. This is almost always the Class among the liters, and 2009 continues the trend. There's simply more substance here, and y'all are very smart for making this into the mega-brand it has become. Alas the remarkable '09 – likely the best vintage ever and definitely the best since '06 – gave around 18% less than '08 did, so start being careful as you get toward the Fall.

ABG-110 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Lössterassen**

A gentle sweet GV fragrance leads to a surprisingly pithy salty palate, with crags and angles, and also with force and torque. It's strong but not ungainly.

ABG-106 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Gebling**

++

I'm seriously disinclined to let y'all ignore this masterpiece, so I put it on the HARD-CORE LIST so you can see what Erich does at his best. And this is the best in many years, maybe all the way back to '93. It has power and polish, length and grace, secret-sweetness and tremendously dense minerality; it recalls great vintages of Nigl's *Alte Reben*, and it builds a city on the palate. It also came in 1st in its blind flight, where I wrote "stylish, noble, long, aristocratic."

ABG-109 **2009 Riesling Steingraben**

One of Austria's sleeper-Rieslings, having been given top honors in VINARIA recently – but who associates Berger with stellar Riesling? This '09 is a large-scaled sinewy masculine Riesling that recalled an '09 Pfalz wine; a big, sweet Jarlsberg fragrance seasoned with ginger powder and botrytis; the palate is muscular and salty and the finish shows botrytis again.

ABG-107 **2009 Gelber Muskateller**

As go the GV Liters, so goes the Muscat, almost invariably the best in the portfolio – as is this. It's the pure green catty side of Muscat without the elderflower; it's light and mineral and leaves an opal-basil finish. It's of course a pleasure-giving brisk lip-smacker with a spearminty length, and this is more than good enough. But don't look for the blossoms of a riper year.

ABG-105L **2009 Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter**

Quite the little vogue for this guy lately, thanks very much. A gushing almost sappy aroma leads to a surprisingly dense and almost powerful palate – even with a little tannin – and a bacony finish. The wine exceeds its price-class, but it's still a shame you stop here, because what's coming up is....

ABG-108 **2008 Blauer Zweigelt Haid**

Do you miss Zin? Are you old enough to remember Zins you could actually *drink*? Are you ancient and decrepit enough to recall those halcyon innocent days? Ribs 'n Zin, burgers 'n Zin, no other wine was like it, and these days you wouldn't recognize it any more. Did you think those vamping briary wines were things of the cobwebby past? Well yeah, shit, you're right – almost. Because, there is THIS. So be a huckleberry-hound again, and sidle up to your new best friend. It's sappy but not gooey, strong (13%) but not musclebound, and the berries overflow the basket.

ABG-095 **2006 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen**

+

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

weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

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

But lately I have been making myself *drink* them just as though they were ordinary beverages, because I want to see what kinds of *lives* they live when they're not wine-specimens we examine delightedly. And I've discovered that what they need is time, ambience, and food. Not because they are imbalanced (the usual bromide for crummy wine is "Oh it needs food," to

which the only proper response is "No, it needs to be better wine.") but because they exist in the sensual world, and they are more useful than we think.

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

Nigl was so uniformly stellar for so long – virtually every wine in every vintage between 1993-1999 – that we were taken aback to find they could be variable. Variability is too complicated for some of us, so we defaulted to the obtuse judgment that "Nigl isn't so great any more," which was actually just pathetic. Martin



Martin Nigl

Nigl's great wines, which are not infrequent, are as great as they've ever been.

It's no secret I had issues with some of the top 2006s, which took ripeness to a level with which I wasn't comfortable. Nigl's wines at best have an eerie clarity that's something between monastic and psychedelic. Theirs is a penumbral or spectral sort of beauty, around the edges of which is something invisible, like radio waves, and this is absent when the wines are too corporeal and

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Piri, Hochäcker, Goldberg**
- **Soil types: Mica slate, slate and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 40% Grüner Veltliner, 4% Sauvignon Blanc, 4% Weissburgunder, 10% Chardonnay, 2% other varieties**

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

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

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

up at the old castle and hear the leaves whisper in the Piri, just outside.

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

urgestein soils, which warm quickly."

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

Nigl at a glance:

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

AFN-164 2008 Nigl Brut de Brut (Sekt)

As before, 80% Chardonnay and 20% GrüVe, but this will be the final vintage, as he's opted to concentrate on the Rosé (see below). I'd tasted this wine umpteen times but never actually *drank* a bottle, so I hurried to order it on a hot Spring evening a month ago at DC's way-cool Proof restaurant. He has so much cool wine on the list I didn't wanna blow the wine-wad on Champagne, and this Sekt was just der ticket. Trouble was, it was too good! I couldn't get over how attractive and yummy it was. I didn't hold up my end of the conversation for a great many minutes....

This '08 is a wee bit young and brash, full of apple and wet straw, a racy summertime fizz.

AFN-172 2008 Nigl Brut de Brut Rosé (Sekt)

A true Blanc de Noirs, mostly Zweigelt with some Pinot Noir, and it is just super-pretty! Strawberries soaked in tomato-water.

AFN-163 2009 Zweigelt Rosé

The best Rosé I tasted in Austria, the cleanest stream of pure fruit, the most generous, most charming, and silky and filigree, as all Martin's wines are.

AFN-162 2009 Grüner Veltliner Freiheit

CORE-LIST WINE. Lovely fragrance, a perfect lentilly lima-bean loess GrüVe; the palate is light, discreet but not shy, and with 11.5% alc you get *ripe* flavors in '09 – as if you could have removed 1% alc from the '06, and given it more detail and mineral.



- AFN-167 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri**
Expressive aromas, pointed and ore-like; juicy shimmer on the palate; classic “rocket” style arugula and boxwood primary-rock GrüVe.
- AFN-168 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** ++
In the blind tasting (the day before I visited the estate) I wrote “near-perfect fruit, stylish, long, superb.” It was the best wine in its flight. The next day, with time to ponder the wine, it just osmosed the absolute mastery with which it was made; one of his all-time best A.R.s; sensational, noble loess GrüVe aromas; expressively hot-blooded and devilishly long; generous but boldly outlines; power in the service of focus – and perfect pure fruit.
- AFN-173 **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Privat” Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage** +(+)
AFN-173H **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Privat” Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 12/375ml**
AFN-173M **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Privat” Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 3/1.5L**
With the new site-classification (or rather the updating of the old one), the parcel-name will appear on Nigl’s labels. The “Privat” wines have – with very few exceptions – always come from this vineyard, a steep slope below the Hochäcker with only a wall separating the two. Soil is the mica-schist variant of Urgestein.
- Martin insists this is even better than the A.R., and he may be right. At first it’s juicier, less adamant, but the wine is still holding some cards. You see its open creamy texture but only catch glimpses of its depths. Decanting will help. What peeks out is complex, “sweet” Urgestein, spicy and nettle-y but also the iris notes of great GrüVe.
- AFN-177 **2009 Riesling Dornleiten**
CORE LIST WINE. Always a light Riesling from Urgestein, meant for drinking ideally within 12-18 months, the wine is reliably limpid and charming and well suited for by-the-glass use in restaurants not requiring the presence of cute animals on the label.
- AFN-166 **2009 Riesling Senftenberger Piri**
It has its characteristic aroma but also a tic of botrytis, or a facsimile of botrytis; the palate is deft and green as in herbs, green tea, spring woods when the trees have just leafed out; the palate is juicy and conveys secret-sweetness but still pointed and minty. Fascinating set of flavor parameters you don’t usually see all together.



- AFN-169 **2009 Riesling Hochäcker 1er Lage** (+)
 Three weeks in bottle when I tasted. Quite cool-seeming given its 14% alc; its usual exotics are muted (these seem to come from the abnormally high humus-collection in this plateau vineyard); what shows is a surge of silvery richness with hints of apricot and mango.
- AFN-174 **2009 Riesling “Privat” Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage** ++
 AFN-174H **2009 Riesling “Privat” Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 12/375ml**
 AFN-174M **2009 Riesling “Privat” Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage, 3/1.5L**
 I fear I’m too conservative, as I have an instinct this wine will prove supernal, not merely outstanding. It’s far more open and extroverted (than almost everything around it), a sensationally green out-in-nature wine until the burst of “sweet” Mirabelle in the middle. But Thai basil and even cilantro, radishes and spring-onions are up-front in-your-face; it’s as though you were walking pensively through the woods when suddenly you turn a corner and realize you’re on top of a hill with a huge sun-blasted view below you.
- AFN-170 **2009 Gelber Muskateller**
 Moose-CAT! No “Riesling-like restraint” here. Just yowling away with catty spice.
- AFN-171 **2008 Zweigelt “Klassisch”** +
 Wow this is *perfect*; beautifully sappy and bacony, an irresistibly tasty goddamn wine! Wonderful finish of cherries and mint. I don’t know how a red delivers more *joy*, and with 12.5% alc. – so I put it on the HARD-CORE LIST.
- AFN-175 **2008 Zweigelt Eichberg**
 Older vines, 2nd and 3rd-use large casks; more depth here, more vinosity and tertiary dimensions, but still fruit-driven even at 13.5%, showing more of that serious torque people seem to demand. I myself am usually content with deliciousness.
- AFN-176H **2008 Grüner Veltliner Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml**
 Picked January 8th, 2009 in fact; this is quite dense and sweet but still clearly varietal and exotic; grain and maple; a hint of young botrytis radish should fade away. Best wait a year, but not five and for sure not ten.



weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

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

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

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very alert. He follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the "Wine Professor" because of his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are, come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

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

"All different wines are aged by the classical method in oak and acacia casks in deep vaulted cellars. In the vineyards the family apply organic principles (no chemical fertilizers, herbicides and chemical sprays)." Bründlmayer neither crushes nor pumps 90% of his

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

musts; the other 10% is macerated overnight and crushed to emphasize varietality. Nor is this formulaic; it adapts from year to year.

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

I also think Willi's wines are changing somewhat from the time I first encountered them, or perhaps it is I who have changed. They are like an extremely good-looking woman (or man!) who wears very understated clothes. They are almost completely without affect, but with great candor and transparency. I also appreciate the willingness to risk, even when I'm unconvinced by the results. I'm sure Willi would say "It keeps things interesting."



Willi Bründlmayer

Bründlmayer at a glance:

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

I'll confess it's gotten harder, not easier, to sum this up over the 16 years I've been visiting here. In each of the last two vintages the texture of Willi's wines has changed. Lately they're showing the calm zen demeanor of Alzinger's wines. Perhaps less explicitly articulate, yet somehow more kind. I don't think it's on purpose, or at least, it may be a collateral effect of something else he set out to do. For an estate this large, Willi is remarkably willing to let the wines control their own destinies. In many vintages, one or another of them will escape, such as the insanely peppery '09 Vogelsang GrüVe. I can hear him say "We don't seek to *shape* it; the wine follows its own preferences." Willi refers to me as a "classicist," because he notices how I wince at certain extremes, of alcohol perhaps, or botrytis. He in turn is admirably willing to love a wine even if it's what I might call ornery.

His sparkling wine is the nearest thing to Champagne of anything that *isn't* Champagne, yet it doesn't imitate Champagne and only tastes a little like it.

His reds are strikingly fragrant, but he seems to prefer them cool, sometimes to a point I perceive as stiff. But this is how he wishes them, lean and stretchy and sinewy. It is very good of him to tolerate my being selective among them.

Now and again there's a weird rogue crazy-ass amazing wine. It might be a Rosé one year and a Muscat another, but it is often something you never expected.

I'd call Willi's wines sophisticated and civilized, as long as you know these aren't euphemisms for diffidence. They are rarely touchy-feely but often affectionate. The best ones taste as though they were fond of you.

I'll list the reds first because I tasted them first—by my request.

how the wines taste:

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

ABY-234L 2008 Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter

Willi has never been eager to be associated with Liter wines, most of which I imagine are sold at his *Heurige*. But this wine, in its modest way, epitomizes something important about Bründlmayer. It is silky and classy. You could call it an unpretentious aristocrat. It's amazingly tasty, so that you keep looking at the bottle again to confirm it really is a Liter. It is markedly *fine* for its "stature."

ABY-210 2004 St. Laurent Ried Ladner

I look for Bründlmayer's reds to be more forthcomingly fruity. They always smell lovely but are sometimes cooler and more tannic than I prefer. He was sweet to let me cherry-pick, and I *really* like this wine; it's cool but not lean, just pleasantly light, with a lovely balance of upper-register tones balanced by a subtle smokiness; it has sweet fruit and clear outlines, and is both admirable and tasty.

ABY-220 2005 Pinot Noir "Cécile"

This reminds me of the good '98 red Burgundies; fetching aromatics, warm sweet veggies and a really attractive finish – and between all these, some slightly rustic tannins. But remember I am oversensitive to tannin and what is "rustic" to me might be balanced to you. The *fruit* here is admirable.

ABY-225 **Sekt Extra-Brut, N.V.**

A non-vintage though in fact all 2007. 30% Pinot Noir, 20% Pinot Gris, 10% GrüVe, 20% Pinot Blanc and 20% Chardonnay. And the first release of a new item. A *lovely* new item. It made me think of Aubry, in fact; it's as rusk-y, a little less *iodé*, but lushly explosive and perfectly balanced, racy but not remotely shrill. Disgorged 2/10, this stands seriously alongside Champagne, and it's better balanced than many attempts at very-dry Champagne.

ABY-219 **2006 Sekt Brut**

+

This could well be the greatest sparkling wine ever made in Austria. It's quite the powerhouse with 13% alc, and it has the '06 forcefulness, but it's a really spicy gripping doughy wine; apple-chips and polenta and clarified butter and saffron. An atypically explosive vintage, but I don't mind being impressed!

ABY-179 **Brut Rosé, N.V.**

One-third each Pinot Noir, Zweigelt and St. Laurent, and now 2008; it's still awfully charming though it needs time on the cork; the entry is a little brisk but the finish is really fine; *groseille*, veal stock, plum, glazed salmon; it reminds me a little of Lallement's, and it has nowhere to go but up.

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

ABY-221 **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Kamptaler Terrassen"**

++

CORE-LIST WINE. The best vintage ever of this, and a super-pretty, sleek and elegant GrüVe. Insanely refined and expressive at this price – for more than this price; aristocratic texture, meltingly lovely fruit, even-tempered, gracious and lingering. Amazingly good!

It is, as always, from young vines in the Grand Crus.

ABY-224H **2009 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml**

X-treme GrüVe; powdery, crushed rocks and mint and a really cleansing finish. Kiss that girl, man; your breath will never smell better.

ABY-226 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg**

+

This is an 1er Lage but I think only for Riesling. The soil is crazy – silica-heavy primary rock with weathered mica-schist, granite and quartzite; in southeast terraces there's even loess. The vineyard is high and windswept and has extremes of temperatures. Even this GrüVe speaks with a Riesling accent. It's sweet of Willi to let me offer it only in some vintages, and this '09 is a beauty; smooth, flute-like but with a tight mineral pith that gives an endless iron spine to the finish and pulls the peppery beans in its torque-y slipstream. Man this is easy to love! I was reduced to grunts and sighs.

ABY-212 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben**

+

ABY-168 **2005 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben**

++

Willi wants to delay release of this wine, and/or hold back stocks so it can be shown with at least a little tertiary development. We looked at the last four vintages and it seemed to make the most sense to offer these two.

The '08 is explosively youthful and gorgeous. Wonderful density, richness and focus. Stern but by no means brooding. It's one of the *coiled* vintages, not one of the capacious ones like '06 or '03.

The majestic 2005 is absolutely marvelous, just entering its adult life; exotic dried-mushroom and roasty aromas, like an heirloom chicken you put in the oven with pancetta and black truffles; it's long and loaded with meadow-sweetness and 2005's beautiful fruit.

- ABY-229 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Ried Käferberg, 1er Lage** ++
 “We thought we wouldn’t push this vineyard any more, just let it make the wine it wanted to make and not insist it make a big wine.” It’s loam, sand and alluvial deposits over a bed of Gneiss; the microclimate is warm and wind-sheltered.

The wine is magnificent; a stunning fragrance, pointed and capacious and powerful; the best since the great ’02; a gorgeously paradoxical blend of precision, power, breadth and focus; it’s passionate yet classical; long and solid, yet an aspect of that length seems to float in a smoky cloud above the palate.

- ABY-213 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Reid Lamm, 1er Lage, 6/750ml** +++
 This is as good as a lot of things get. GrüVe, white wine, *big* white wine...the site is a heat trap on limestone-bearing loam, and who is luckier than I am to have *three* growers here!

There is, by the way, an ’09 in the wings and it too has “+++” potential. But this wine is both very fine and also great – not always the case for any wine. It has a repose the hyperactive Käferberg doesn’t have, an extraordinary complexity and a quiet force; it’s an easily great wine, i.e., it envelops you in its embrace instead of knocking you over. It doesn’t blow you away – it blesses you. And the mysterious richness of this blessing haunts you for hours.

RIESLINGS

- ABY-227 **2009 Riesling “Kamptaler Terrassen”**
 A classic and scrupulous and sophisticated Riesling; clear, grainy and satisfying.

- ABY-228 **2009 Riesling Steinmassel**
 Atop a wuthering plateau, it’s gneiss and amphibolite and silvery sparkling mica, and the wine, as you’d expect, is mineral –driven. In the best years it has the perfect mélange of mineral and wisteria; this ’09 has a botrytis ambience or maybe something that *seems* like botrytis, since Willi said “These were the healthiest Riesling grapes in the German-speaking world,” with tongue I think in cheek. Thus I taste a smokiness and saltiness I cannot explain.

- ABY-232 **2009 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**
 This supernally great Riesling vineyard – one of the five greatest in Europe and thus in the world – is explained a few pages hence. This wine is creamier and more exotic than Steinmassel, and also with an echo of something-resembling-botrytis, though here it is more harmoniously bound into the fruit. It’s yielding and salty and elegant.

- ABY-197 **2007 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein “Lyra,” 6/750ml** ++
 The name refers to Bründlmayer’s trellising method, a Y-shaped system that looks “as if the vine is throwing its arms up toward the heavens,” says Willi. This system also more than doubles the leaf-surface exposed to sunlight and encourages quick drying of leaf and grape alike after a rain. Willi also wants to demonstrate you don’t *need* old vines to make great wine.

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

What a lovely thing to say.

Empirically, I seem to be favoring this over the old-vines bottling in most of the recent vintages (and I ended up reversing my appraisal of the two 2006s after tasting them in bottle); this has really striking fragrance – “expressive” doesn’t begin to describe it; the palate is shimmering with diamond-gleam; an almost perfect mélange of cream and spice; it’s at the limit of power and penetration but finally rescued by its astonishing perfume.

- ABY-215 **2008 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein “Lyra,” 6/750ml** ++
 This wonderful wine, which I’ve started to prefer over its old-vines counterpart, is becoming one of Austria’s reliably great Rieslings. There’s utterly lavish green-tea aromas here, like a jade-oolong mixed with extracts of verbenas, wintergreen and wisteria; oh man, this is a *great* ‘08, splendidly juicy and spicy and exciting, with a kafir-lime finish, long and complex and grand. I couldn’t somehow spit it.

THE BEST OF THE REST

- ABY-205 **2007 Gelber Muskateller** ++
 There’s just ten cases of the ‘07 remaining, partly because a Very Important Reviewer gave it a big number with a “9” in front of it.

It is out-of-this-world; a fragrance as complex as Muscat can be; currant, bergamot, wisteria; the palate is cooler and spicier than the aroma suggests, with an opal-basil face almost like Müller-Catoir’s Muscats; there’s a stubborn length and a refusal to yield to simplicity; in fact there’s *bouquet-garni* and some serious minerality here.

And with another year in-bottle it’s become an absolute mind-warp, with a ridiculous *boucherie* floweriness, unlike any Muscat and barely any wine I’ve ever had.

- ABY-191H **2006 Gelber Muskateller Beerenauslese, 12/375ml** ++
 I don’t have a note because Willi gave me a bottle to drink in the restaurant that evening, and geek that I am, I draw the line at writing tasting notes at the table. But the wine is absolutely *out of this world*!

- ABY-184H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml**
 Oh, um, well maybe it is possible to make even better sweet wine. My bad. This is the kind of wine that both melts me and galvanizes me, because it shows what is possible; you can make sweet wine that isn’t just another honeyed figgy syrup, but instead a wine that is the quintessence of the Auslese, with all of its clarity and minerality intact and visible, not hidden under a same-old same-old botrytis blanket. Indeed this wine is all green, all Loiser Berg, all streamlined, focused and ecstatic. You need this in your life, but please don’t buy it all until my dibs are in.



NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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



Heiligenstein vineyard

weingut schloss gobelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

Peter Schleimer and I were having dinner one night, and we ordered Gobelsburg's 2005 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition," and it struck me I've tasted the wines many times but never yet drank a bottle. It was lovely, and got us talking.

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

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

"The prime motivator for these thoughts arose during the tasting of the old wines in the estate's cellar," Michi begins. Though this was done in order to determine what these old wines might be worth, the experience

set a range of thoughts in motion. "Afterward I grew curious about the winemaking practices of the '50s and '60s, and spoke with Father Bertrand as well as the cellarmaster of those days. I felt that to understand those practices would help me better to understand what we're doing today."

"I began to form the theory that, as more technological possibilities existed



Michael Moosbrugger

and were used, the wines became more uniform. The opposite possibility was also to be considered; less technology meant more variable wines. But these were just my starting-out hypotheses, and I'm not at all certain absolute answers are to be found. I think in order to begin to understand the wines of the pre-technological era, you have to try and understand the ideas behind them.

"The purpose in those days was to "school" the wines, what the French still call *elevage*, to raise the wines, or bring them up. It thus followed that for each

- **Vineyard area: 40 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Heiligenstein, Gaisberg, Lamm**
- **Soil types: Volcanic sandstone, mica slate, and alpine gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Grüner Veltliner, 25% Riesling, 5% Zweigelt, 8% Pinot Noir, 7% Merlot, 5% St. Laurent**

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

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

It may have been the character of the 2008 vintage, it may have been Michi's increasing familiarity with this new/old mode of working, or it may just be and who knows why – but these two '08 Tradition bottlings are almost unbearably beautiful wines. Not just profound, and not just fascinating: *beautiful* wines. And it is now almost two weeks since I tasted them, yet they still haunt

me. So I went and opened a bottle of the 2006 GrüVe Tradition this week, and realized that something in me is *converging* with something in these wines.

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

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

One year we're sitting in the tasting room and the windows are thrown open on the mild Spring day. The omnipresent birds are trolling for mates (thrushes and blackbirds all day and half the night; I got to the point I hoped to be awakened at dawn by them) and a brisk Spring wind is enchanted with flowers, all forming an aural backdrop to the verdant young wines in our glasses. But soon we heard a new sound, voices, little-kid voices to be precise, and we wandered over to the window and saw Michi's little daughter giggling away with her tiny friend. Remember, a Spring day, breezes and birds, and now this



impossibly beautiful little girl in her cotton frock and bonnet, chirping and laughing and scolding. I watched Michi gaze at his girl. He was in the middle of serving me the greatest collection of Grüner Veltliner I'd ever experienced, and very much

The Guy right now in

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

There is certainly no one *better* in this offering. I am awed by the dedication and long-term idealism of Michael Moosbrugger, and I am keenly thrilled by his wines. But perhaps even more, I am touched by the grace and kindness of Willi Bründlmayer's gift to us all.

Bründlmayer? Explain.

Schloss Gobelsburg has a centuries-old monastic tradition, during which, as Michi puts it, "There were periods when the wines were great and periods when they

weren't; after all, not every generation of monks had the same passion or skill. But what was always true was the quality of the land." When Willi first told me the story he too pointed to the vineyards. "Terry, it is some of the absolute best land in the Kamptal," he said.

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

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

Moosbrugger and Bründlmayer leased the winery and Willi consulted in all aspects of vineyard and cellar until our young hero could stand on his own two feet – which happened pronto.

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

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

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

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

AZZ-070 **Brut Reserve N.V.**

AZZ-070M **Brut Reserve N.V., 6/1.5L**

I have enjoyed bamboozling my friends when I serve them this blind; they are certain I'd be serving them Champagne, me being me and all, and they wrack their brains trying to figure out varieties and sub-districts but they are *sure the wine in their glass is Champagne*, i.e., they don't promptly conclude "This can't possibly be Champagne." In fact I think it's among the best non-Champagne fizz I've tasted, and wonderfully it is nothing like Champagne – it's 15% Riesling, 15% Pinot Noir and 70% Grüner Veltliner thank you very much. Riesling and GrüVe derive from pre-harvests in the Grand Crus like Lamm and Gaisberg (!).

Now based on '06 with reserve wines from '05-'04, disgorged 4/10 but not seeming to have suffered from it; it's incisive yet polished, a little walnut, a little wintergreen, a little yuzu, a little asian pear, all meeting in a spicy lingering finish where the GrüVe emerges.

RED WINES

AZZ-149 **2008 Zweigelt "Gobelsburger"**

Sweet varietal fragrance with a bacon-fat nuance, and as always it shows the focus and moderation and the graceful mélange of fruit and dustiness – though the '08 has a tighter core, at least for now.

The sheer value of this wine is striking. All it needs is attention. Last time I took it around (to the bemusement of two salespeople who expected me to insist on trotting Dönnhoff and Schaefer around in the sample-bag) we sold it in 7 out of 11 accounts we visited.

AZZ-156 **2007 Cuvée Bertrand, 6/750ml**

I know I shouldn't offer this, because how do you sell a wine without a varietal tag, but I mean, did you *taste* it?? As always, the volume of gracious sweet fruit just charms the pants off you; a core of porcini and sandalwoody sweetness, a wine that holds your hand. The finish is vaporous and pretty. (Pinot Noir/St. Laurent)

AZZ-157 **2007 St. Laurent Haidegrund, 6/750ml**

Yes I know it's expensive but it is markedly complex and long, very much in the seductive Pinot Noir manner. When the Burgundy closeouts are gone you'll have to make quite an effort to find a wine this good at this price.

GR-GR-GR-GRÜNER VELTLINER!

AZZ-147 **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Gobelsburger"**

The 2nd-label. The first wine we tasted in the big blind tasting, after running through the wines of a well-regarded property in the Kremstal. *Right away* we knew we were in a different world. And this wine was 2nd-best in the flight-of-six and by far the least expensive. I wrote "fine, precise, long, mineral." And tasting it more deliberately a couple days later, it was so pointed, focused and shady, with so many green-tea notes you don't know where to start. I mean, a *perfect* GrüVe fragrance, this wine RAWKS in ripe years; it's like the Mini-me of Steinsetz, and it leaves a taut snappy finale. It's the '06 skinny-dipping in a cold pond.

AZZ-151 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz**

AZZ-151H **2009 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz, 12/375ml**

CORE-LIST WINE. The first of the great GrüVes here, from a high plateau south of the property, on tertiary gravel along with huge rocks from the original Danube, all blanketed by a layer of loess. This '09 is fervently minty and spicy; oyster-shell and yuzu. The Altoid-effect. This is take-no-prisoners bomb of ZAP, dry and flinty and nettle-y.

AZZ-159 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Renner 1er lage**

+

The site lies at the foot of the Gaisberg, and contains eroded gneiss with a high proportion of paragneiss, mica and amphibolite. A perfect recipe for wines of both minerality and generosity – exactly what this is. It had been bottled three weeks before I tasted it, and was a little “cooler” than usual, as if it were standing at attention on a brisk morning; it’s both more directly stony and also more elegant than usual, but that yummy fruit soaks in rivulets through the stone, and the finish is classic oleander and vetiver.

AZZ-152 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er lage, 6/750ml**

++

AZZ-152H **2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er lage, 12/375ml**

AZZ-152M **2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er lage, 6/1.5L**

This takes the aromas of power-pack GrüVe and disperses them into a skein of detail, which is always striking for such a big wine – not to mention the quality of the aromas. This, again, is great wine, more moderate than '07 or '06, more melting and accommodating. Bründlmayer’s Lamm is analog and enveloping; this one is digital while being just as hospitable. Is it as great as the '06 and '07 were? I don’t know, but I’ll buy more of this for myself, and will get more joy from it.

AZZ-153 **2008 Grüner Veltliner “Tradition,” 6/750ml**

+++

AZZ-153M **2008 Grüner Veltliner “Tradition,” 6/1.5L**

This is explained in the chapter-introduction, which I ask that you please *not skip over*. Because this wine takes us into the other world, where it isn’t about being fascinated with the design of the flavors, but rather being stirred by the whole unfathomable beauty of everything. This wine, especially, contains and delivers that beauty as if it couldn’t help itself. Maybe it can’t. The wine conveys the most delicate imaginable ecstasy, defying your effort to deconstruct, chanting its meaning in a sweet calm repetition – relax...be happy...it really is this good...let go...take it in....

R-R-R-R-R-RIESLINGS!

AZZ-148 **2009 Riesling “Gobelsburger”**

CORE LIST WINE: The best vintage yet, and a fantastically limey, bright Riesling, with detail and charm and a fine mirabelle fruit.

AZZ-158 **2009 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage**

+

Still silvery and sleek, as Gaisberg is, but with a sweet lick of fruit-honey in the middle – not RS, just a ripe grinning core of essence, that finally turns to a lavender smoke that in turn yields to a dry stony finish.

AZZ-154 **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage** **+(+)**
 AZZ-154H **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 12/375ml**
 AZZ-154M **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 6/1.5L**
 If gaisberg is like a trout, this is like a buttery skate wing, more toothsome and juicy. It's more bottle-sick than the other Rieslings, but still allusive and exotic and vibrantly complex.

AZZ-155 **2008 Riesling "Tradition," 6/750ml** **+++**
 AZZ-155M **2008 Riesling "Tradition," 6/1.5L**
 Now ennobled by the juice from Gaisberg's oldest vines. The aromas are again, utterly uncanny; the dark lilac wisteria of '08 with the subtle woodsiness and the surmise of tertiary flavors. This year the wine is so brilliant it couldn't really be "softened," so it wraps the brash mineral and keening fruit in a warm jacket of vinosity; it recalls Nikolaihof's '05 Steiner Hund (Jungferlese, not the later-released Reserve), but its detail and spice and length and precision are astonishing. White wine doesn't get any better than this.

A FINAL R-R-R-ROSE

AZZ-150 **2009 "Gobelsburger" Rosé**
 Silky, fine, light and refined, even a little phenolic; this wine has the old-world diffidence, not a whopping ton of fruit, and it's a brisk little guy for hot weather, cooking, and eating outside.



weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

Ludwig Hiedler considers his 2009s to be “One of the absolute top vintages of the last decade.” In advance I might have inferred ‘09’s ripeness wouldn’t have suited him, as his wines are already generous and creamy. Clearly I’d have been cruelly duped! It is an astonishing collection, as superb a vintage across-the-board as I have ever tasted, in any country, at any time since I started doing this work.

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

The first organic experiments are happening, in the sites Thal and Kittmannsberg. And for the past several years now Ludwig has done only spontaneous fermentations without enzymes or even SO₂, and without temperature control. Part of this is Ludwig’s innate restlessness, and another part is his desire to eschew the established orthodoxies. I’d like to hope it is also a signal that Austrian vintners in general are retreating from internationalism. When they arrived on the world stage they were, naturally, eager to join the prevailing currents; they spoke with colleagues from all over and returned home full of notions and ideas. This of course is harmless, and has its good side. But not as good as stepping away from the prevailing norms from any-old-where in order to learn what is uniquely one’s own.

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



María & Ludwig Hiedler

I caught María looking pensively at her husband. “What first attracted you to Ludwig?” I asked her.

“Believe it or not, it was his ears,” she replied thoughtfully. “Look at those proud powerful ears.” I did, and agreed they were impressive. “Then it was the scar on his cheekbone, and after that it was a sense I had that this man had both his feet not

only *on* the ground but even *in* the ground, that he wouldn’t be blown away by every little breeze.”

I glanced over at Ludwig and all I could do was smile. It was all so true. He is a very beautiful man. And

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

lately I feel his relationship to his wines has somehow culminated, so that human soul and wine are aligned in a unity of being. You can’t separate them; he *is* this wine; it *is* him.

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

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

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

they won't wreck your budget.

Hiedler's wines are both intense and genial. He's informal, open, transparent. Even his tasting room is clear, a modern, white room under a tempered-glass sun-roof. He feels the wines of Kamptal need a full year to

begin to show, perhaps even longer for his wines. Wachau wines show earlier. This is especially true of the loess-grown Veltliners, which have less minerality but a bigger belly of fruit.

Hiedler at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

- AHL-153 **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Löss"**
CORE-LIST WINE. Winsome lentil and legume, and smoky as all hell on the palate; very impressive in its class, with grip and aristocratic fruit.
- AHL-154 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Thal 1er Lage** +
CORE-LIST WINE. Very deep loess covered with red sand give what I think is Hiedler's signature GrüVe, the one that is most a "Hiedler wine." This '09 has class and character and a detailed fragrance, but it's the *palate* that's really amazing, with texture and length and spice and a lovely shoot-fire smokiness; a grown-up grace; it made me think of the '99 Champagnes, in fact; a hugely long finish like green beans and lardons and roasted wheat.
- AHL-162 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Kittmannsberg "November"** +
AHL-162M **2009 Grüner Veltliner Kittmannsberg "November," 3/1.5L**
In the beginning this was an exceptionally late-harvested Thal, but it has become a wine from the *Kittmannsberg*, a deep loess site that gives a prouder and mightier wine than Thal. I always think of neoclassical Greek architecture with this wine, though the '09 starts out with barley and veal-stock aromas, marjoram, Madagascar peppercorns and maiitake; the palate is explosively ringent and physio-sweet; harder and craggier than Thal, more radicchio, but the attack and the finishing blast of juice are impressive.
- AHL-155 **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum," 6/750ml** +++
AHL-155M **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum," 3/1.5L**
It was the best wine in the blind tasting, coming near to perfection. "Stellar nose, elegant, stylish; superb in every way" is what I scribbled. The day before I also noted a fabulous fragrance, rich and meaty and incomparable, with a pork-roasty richness and the smoky char of the end slice, and the spaghetti squash that soaked up the juices and the kale you mixed in. This isn't wine "for" food; it's wine as food. The best since the legendary '02.
- AHL-159 **2008 Weissburgunder "Maximum," 6/750ml** +
AHL-159M **2008 Weissburgunder "Maximum," 3/1.5L**
You want to see how good Pinot Blanc can *be*?

52-year old vines, and I recall few better vintages than this one of what I would argue is the best Pinot Blanc in the world. Articulate, wonderful ripe fruit but no brute power; delineated and filigree, spicy and penetrating; like a perfect *crepe* with ham and béchamel; nubby and silky. Yes Virginia, Pinot Blanc does *this*.

LUDWIG'S UNBELIEVABLE '09 RIESLINGS

*Our hero doesn't really think himself a "Riesling man," but when he's in the zone I don't think there are sexier dry Rieslings **anywhere on earth**.*

AHL-156 **2009 Riesling "Urgestein"**
CORE-LIST WINE, and lots of spicy impact in a lip-smacking, satisfying mid-week wine – keep reading for your weekend specials!

AHL-157 **2009 Riesling Steinhaus 1er Lage** **++**
Ludwig calls this a "rampant" vineyard; it has amphibolite and gneiss in the higher terraces and loess in the lower, and it always gives him a singular Riesling that hints at Sauvignon. But this '09 soars above its usual class, coming close to Gaisberg in its flowery-mineral purity; the internal mouth-perfume is a romance of herbs and petals and stones; a wine of jaw-dropping beauty and ethereal sweet mintyness. And **RIDICULOUS VALUE**.

AHL-080 **2002 Riesling Steinhaus** **++**
Not a lot of this available, but my god, what a chance to see a fine dry Riesling at the onset of its adult life. Just gorgeous green ramp-y waves of sweet-pea purée. And because there's no upcharge for Ludwig's having stored it for you in perfect mint condition, this has to be **ONE OF THE VERY, VERY GREATEST VALUES ON THE WINE MARKET TODAY**.

AHL-158 **2009 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage** **++**
Hiedler's is actually the Strasser Gaisberg, which is the lower part of the hill as it turns to face southeast. This can all be confusing; there is Zöbinger Gaisberg, Kammerner Gaisberg and Strasser Gaisberg, basically the same hill, only claimed by three different localities. If the wise denizens who created the redundant "DAC" could devote their attention to simplifying this little matter....on the other hand, maybe they'd best leave it alone.

This Gaisberg is more of a loess vineyard. The wine in question is sublime, an ethereal angel-song of the Steinhaus, absurdly expressive and primordially vivid on the palate, like moonlight so bright you can read by it, like a splash of freshness enough to wake the dead. I mean, this is why we love dry Riesling, we who actually do love it.

AHL-161 **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage** **+++**
AHL-161M **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 3/1.5L**

Massive, 1001-Nights aromas. You sense alchemy to the wine, as if it yielded to a spell; the palate swoons down a rabbit-hole where there's only the incense of the vegetables and fruits and spices of the earth. Every great facet of this greatest of Riesling vineyards is here in perfect form. Only 13.2% alc, and a lucid dream of shimmering perfection.

At the risk of hectoring, *please* compare the cost of this masterpiece with its equivalents – few as they are – from *Alsace and Germany*, and you'll see the top Grand Crus and *Grosse Gewächse* do not remotely attain the value of this great wine.

AHL-152 **2008 Riesling "Maximum," 6/750ml** **++**
AHL-152M **2008 Riesling "Maximum," 3/1.5L**

A *cuvee* from Heiligenstein, Kogelberg (gneiss and amphibolite) and 50-year old vines from Dechant (loess); insanely exotic and long, and every possible bite of ripeness despite "only" 100° Oechsle and 13.5% alc; minty to the end of time, and absurdly long, as expressive as a kick to the shins, yet enveloping, almost gushing.

One of the few best Rieslings of the '08 vintage. It has a lusty belt-it-out fragrance, in the jade-oolong and vetiver direction – at this point. Smokiness begins. The palate is electric yet lavish, so fecund and bloomy it's almost not Riesling any more, but rather brioche-like, brothy almost like some Grand Cru Chablis; it's salty and positively *amok* with vitality.

AHL-160 **2009 Riesling "Maximum," 6/750ml** **+**
AHL-160M **2009 Riesling "Maximum," 3/1.5L**

I had to ask Ludwig how I'd sell this in light of the shatteringly excellent (and less expensive) Heiligenstein. "Give it time," he said. "Maximum is always tardy. Look at the '08, how well it has developed." Man has a point.

weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

"I am incredibly grateful that for two years I was your winery of the vintage," Johannes told me over dinner last week. "I don't expect to get this every year!"

For me the most important aspect of this little game I play is that it ignores *any* political implication whatsoever. That is, it says how I actually feel without regard to what grower needs more sales or what grower needs to be placated or who might have his feathers ruffled.

I don't do it to indulge myself. I could keep it private. I do it to guide you as efficiently as possible to each year's highlights. That's all. I trust you guys to know that if a grower was highlighted one year but not the next that *doesn't mean this grower has "slipped"* or any such thing you might infer. It means that wine is a dynamic and fluid thing, grown in nature and made by people, and in any given vintage some may soar and others may cruise and others may stumble.

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

I think his 2009s are marvelous. The basic GrüVe is insane, the best it's ever been. The two 1er Lage Rieslings are surreally fine,



Johannes Hirsch

I happened to speak with Hirsch during the most gruesome days of 2008's summer, when all it did was rain and the vineyards were struggling to stay healthy. "So Mister Bio-dynamic; great timing, dude!" I said – I'm such a sensitive guy – and 'Hannes' replied "You know, if this had been the first

year of transition I don't think I'd have gone through with it, because it's so difficult..." but when we had the bottles lined up nine months later he echoed something I've heard before: "Now when I taste the wines I really forget what we went through to make them. I know it was difficult but I don't physically *remember* it, you know?"

I saw "Hannes' father this year for the first time in a while. I'd forgotten how hale he looks, like someone

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Lamm, Gaisberg, Heiligenstein**
- **Soil types: Loess, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling, 5% Other**

who'd just come down from soloing Nanga Parbat without oxygen. "Boy, I'm not very healthy compared to him," went through my mind. It was good to see the two men, good to remember 'Hannes is his father's son.

It's been actually something of a bitch the past years. First the disastrous floods before the harvest in 2002. Then the birth of the twins, who needed surgeries which required several 7-hour road trips to the other end of Austria. Then the bio-d conversion. Even after the hard growing season of '08, I had the sense Hirsch had somehow *ascended*, arrived, Gotten There. Both '07 and '08 were so stellar and so singular – no other Austrian wines are quite like them – it feels like the whole thing is tuned and humming.

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

With regard to the bio-d thing, Hannes is there now, the transition is done, but typically for him, he had some issues with the politics of the matter, and now "wishes I

hadn't said anything, and just done it." I have a principle of not identifying as organic or bio-d anyone who doesn't certify, because it prevents people from green-washing their way to the organic "Brand." I am contradicting myself here because it can't be helped – you already knew (because I already told you) that Hirsch was among a group who were all converting to bio-d together. So there's no point in being coy about it now. He's doing it but isn't willing to certify. No Demeter on the label. Don't sell the wines as "organic." Just be glad they are. And this is how Hannes wants it.

We tend to like to party with Hannes, 'cause he's crazily witty and likes to have fun, but when the party's over he's a man with an active and probing mind. And

he seems to have no fear. He was the first in Austria to go 100% Stelvin, the first to delay bottling and releasing his Grand Crus, and now that the politics of the biodynamic conversion are apparent, I have little doubt he'll find some novel way through.

Sometimes when you have your kids they lead you back to your soul, and the Johannes Hirsch I know now is rather different from the one I met ten years ago, still fun and witty, but entirely more probing and curious, even restless. He seems to want to go back and rethink choices that seemed simple when he made them the first time. He seems to want to decelerate in general. His wines, always exciting, are becoming profound.

Hirsch at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

AWH-077 **2009 Grüner Veltliner "veltliner #1"** **+**
CORE-LIST WINE. This wine is just way too good. Sensational aroma that almost mimics the riper fragrances of a Renner; oleander and vetiver; the palate is light, or light-ish, and creamy and very beautiful, elegant and serene, full of sweet grain and roasted corn, but it all swishes away with a feather-touch. Among the "everyday" GrüVes, this is the classiest.

AWH-078 **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Heiligenstein"**
AWH-078H **2009 Grüner Veltliner "Heiligenstein," 12/375ml**
CORE-LIST WINE. I'm putting "Heiligenstein" in quotes because this is actually a Grosslage rather than the single-site vineyard you know from other growers. It's all very theological, and I understand these things, and it's still a murky mess.

Hannes is being asked (by other growers and friends) whether he might identify the contributing vineyards to this cuvée. One of them is Renner, made famous by Gobelsburg, and a 1er Lage. Hannes has thus far demurred, as he wants above all to have a simple offering – three GrüVes, three Rieslings.

I also like simplicity, but I'll stand with those who want to see great vineyards acknowledged.

This '09 is very fine. Euphoric aromas of lentil, sorrel, vetiver, iris and verbena, lead to a less obtrusively complex palate, more down-the-middle; vanilla, tonka bean; finishes elemental and dry. The neckline plunges yet the lady herself is shy.

AWH-081 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage** **+(+)**
AWH-081M **2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage, 6/1.5L**

Of the three producers I sell who have this great vineyard in common, Hirsch's are the most *drinkable* wines. You will think "This is fantastically good" more often than you'd think "This is profound." These also have a percent less alcohol than Gobelsburg's or Bründlmayer's.

Hannes bottles them late, and what I taste are barely developed tank samples. I can't remember the last time I tasted the finished wine in bottle and wasn't blown the *fuck* away by how sensational it turned out to be. But the notes I share have to be the notes I took.

The '09 is rusk-y, buckwheat, barley and mutton, yet there's another whole profile that's mineral and marjoram and parsley root, linked by a huge mineral-green wave; a powerful, even stern wine mitigated by its lush demi-glace richness.

AWH-079 **2009 Riesling Zöbing**

More masculine than either '08 or '07; drier and saltier; and again rusk-y, rye and oats, but with a soft minerality on the side of the palate, a gentle note of herbs. The empty glass just reeks of iris. I sense this wine will change into something more flowery and compact after it's bottled.

AWH-075 **2008 Riesling Gaisberg**

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AWH-075M **2008 Riesling Gaisberg, 6/1.5L**

The aroma is gorgeously flowery in the Gaisberg way; iris, wisteria, purple lilacs, and it's replete with Gaisberg's signature minerality; the wine almost works like a Nahe feinherb, absurdly detailed and complex. Gaisberg is what it means to be Riesling!

AWH-082 **2009 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage**

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AWH-082M **2009 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage, 6/1.5L**

As perfect a dry Riesling as you'll ever find; fantastically precise, juicy and salty, refined and exotic. Grand Cru exemplified!

AWH-076 **2008 Riesling Heiligenstein**

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AWH-076M **2008 Riesling Heiligenstein, 6/1.5L**

The '08 shows a ridiculous terroir, dance-of-the-seven-veils fruit, Turkish bazaar spices; again Nahe comes to mind (Dellchen, the lower slope of Hermannshöhle); it's a superb exotic Riesling from a great, great vineyard.

AWH-083 **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage**

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AWH-083H **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 12/375ml**AWH-083M **2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage, 6/1.5L**

As always this is more incense-y; it suggested some ultra-refined Auxerrois, in fact. The palate embodies the ethereal layer behind the flavors of other wines, almost an extra-terrestrial fruit and mineral, salt and spice; you know when a biologist discovers a new species? This is like discovering a *new flavor*, some creature of legend or myth, delivered on a foamy wave of iris and rose. The empty glass is pure great Riesling.

Y'all don't know of a lovely opportunity this portfolio gives you if you love terroir. You can stage tastings of Heiligenstein Riesling via Hirsch, Gobelsburg, Hiedler and Bründlmayer – you can stage tastings of Gaisberg Riesling via Hirsch, Gobelsburg and Hiedler – and you can stage tastings of Lamm GrüVe via Hirsch, Gobelsburg and Bründlmayer. Amaze your friends! Destroy the reluctance to accept terroir! Have 10-hour tantric sex – just like Sting! I mean, why wait??

AWH-084 **Riesling Gaisberg “Library Vintages” (1998, 2002, 2004, 2006)**

Here you'll get three bottles each of Riesling Gaisberg 1998, 2002, 2004 and 2006.

2006: *Oops, I seem to have used a naughty word in my notebook. “Not just stunning nose but fucking stunning nose,” I seem to have written. Oh dear, that's just so not me. Tightly packed mineral and wisteria, molten silver; the palate is almost constricting, crazily tight, ultraviolet; also leesy, and weirdly also chocolate and jasmine and tarragon; it's a wild ride of neon and flower and mineral; it seems to attach jumper-cables from the glass to your palate.*

2004: *This is a devilishly complex thing; spicy-salty aromas, ferrous and showing some of the '04s charred smoky notes; a sizzling spicy palate, thickly juicily mineral—don't ever let anybody tell you “mineral” is a euphemism for “unripe,” because this (and hundreds of wines like it) is about as lavish as wine gets, only its flavor dialect is mineral, not “fruit.” There's a note of not-quite-fully-ripe blackberry; the palate really swells and billow and sweetens, reaching a crescendo of lavish iridescent intensity. ++*

2002: *The 2002 is just screaming with great sizzling depth of mirabelle and raspberry. High-toned minerally nose and the palate has the usual sizzling precision and wonderful saltiness. ++*

1998: *It is astonishing to still be able to get this wine. Want to know why? Because the AUSTRIAN market was, shall we say, nonplussed by its (almost undetectable) residual sugar! Their loss is manifestly our gain, for this is an Everest among Austrian Rieslings, celestial, prismatically delineated fragrances. The palate is a drowning surge of solid stone. Then the fist-full of tight little sugar-berries. After five minutes in the glass, there are UNBELIEVABLE aromatics. Explosively tight and just infrared fruit. How does white wine get better than this? I bought some immediately to send to Hans-Günter Schwarz at Müller-Catoir; “You GOTTA try this!” It was the wine of the vintage for me. +++*

wachau

wachau

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

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

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

where the sun shines, along valley floors on loamy sand soils, gradually sloping upward over loess deposits and finally climbing steep horizontal terraces of Urgestein—once again, the primary rock soil containing gneiss, schist and granite, often ferrous (which may account for the “ore” thing I often use in tasting notes).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most of the growers in the Wachau have banded together to form the VINEA WACHAU growing association. I tend, as you know, to be rather curmudgeonly on the subject of growers' associations, but there's some good sense at work in this one. You're going to have to take that on faith, though, because you will be asked to

LEARN SOME TERMS.

Members of the Vinea Wachau have a nomenclature all their own to describe their wines. The least of them (referred to as “dainty” in the promotional brochure) is called **Steinfeder**, (after a local strain of grass), for musts between 73° and 83° Oechsle, always, dry and never

Finally comes the most fanciful name of all, for the best class of wine. Get to know Smaragd! Put a little LIZARD in your life!

higher than 10.7% alcohol. Steinfelder wines *can* be very attractive if they are physiologically ripe. Sometimes they seem misguided. Good ones, though, are little miracles, fresh and innocent, though too slight to ship abroad.

Next up is **Federspiel**, equivalent to Kabinett. Also

dry. Can be quite good! Often isn’t. Can be overpriced. Usually is.

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



The Danube

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

Peter and I drank a bottle of F.X. Pichler's 2002 Steinertal Riesling one night, and it was as marvelous as we expected it to be. I've long admired the glossy power of those wines at their

best. Yet when I looked at the words I was using to discuss it—it was showing well, it *performed* beautifully—I realize I felt like I was an *audience* for the wine, that I was separate from it in some crucial way. Perhaps this has everything to do with me, and it's by no means a slam on a highly laudable wine, but when I drink Alzinger's wine I have no such feeling. With them I feel included, roused, affectionate; I feel a thing akin to love.

Alzinger's wines are no more forceful than any of the other Wachau greats. They aren't longer, or riper.

What they do is take the serenity with which they're endowed and pass it upward through a kind of apotheosis, beyond which they are beatific and glowing. You wouldn't be surprised if the cellar master were the Dalai Lama. Alzinger's wines almost never push and assert; they are instead amazingly sanguine and calmly lovely. Their force is a force of kindness. They take you in. They do not strut. Yet if you are tempted to think I'm offering an elegant rationale for less-than-stellar wine, you'd be wrong. The magazine *VINUM* recently published the results of a 10-year retrospective tasting of most of the Wachau's GrüVe monuments, FX Pichler Kellerberg, Knoll Schütt, Hirtzberger Honivogl – that

crowd. You'll be interested to know Alzinger had the 2nd-highest composite score (90.7) which was .8 below the top.

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



Alzinger, son and father

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

shoved their way to the top of the masthead.

Leo Alzinger Sr. and Hans-Günter Schwarz (ex-Müller-Catoir) are friends. This news didn't surprise me in the least; both men are strangely angelic. "He is such a dear man," said Schwarz. "He called me one evening and said he had a question for me. Might it be possible for his son to do a little practicum here with me? And he asked his question and then was silent, and I wasn't sure if he was finished speaking. But then came, many seconds later, like a little peep . . . 'please'?"

I grinned in recognition. That's Alzinger. Of all the overlords of the almighty Wachau (with whom he indisputably belongs), Alzinger *must* be the sweetest and humblest guy. His wines, too, are loving and kindly, more like Knoll or Prager than like Hirtzberger or Pichler, but possibly the *silkiest* wines in all the Wachau.

This is the only winery I visit where I taste a lot of cask-samples. Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The beauty of his 2009s came as no surprise, but their purity of tone grows more striking with each passing year. It hurts how little wine we get, hardly enough for one *restaurant*, let alone an entire fire-belching behemoth

of a **country**. But, but . . . patience. Others were there first. I must humbly wait. Existing clients have their rights too. Rat-bastards.

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

STEINERTAL is the coolest among the Loiben Crus, both actually and metaphorically. It's small and hidden back – 5.5 hectares, divided in three sections, with only four proprietors I know of (one of whom has Muskateller planted; someone get me *that* to taste), of whom Alzinger owns the largest share. It's more or less the first terraces you see if you're driving in from the east and the Kremstal; indeed it's sheltered by the craggy cliff

of the Pfaffenberg. Steinertal makes *mark-ed* wine, "green" flavors, as estoteric as Loibenberg but in another register of nuances; green teas, herbs, limes, heirloom apples, often a naked minerality. It seems predestined for Riesling, and even Alzinger's splendid GrüVe can be mistaken for Riesling (at least until you taste the actual Riesling alongside). You could construct a fanciful vision of Steinertal taking a trip to the *Saar* and returning with the thought "I want to make wines like those wines."

This was the final visit I made this year, after eight solid days of tasting. An afternoon walk lay ahead of me, and a free day with Peter Schleimer and his boys. Someone had told me 2009 wasn't an especially successful year for Alzinger, and I knew he wouldn't have much wine, so I arrived in a workmanlike mood. Taste the wine, write down the availabilities ruefully, and then go out and play.

Not a chance. For Leo Jr. calmly proceeded to show me a vintage that absolutely floored me. The tasting tempo slowed inexorably. The quantities would be homeopathic. I didn't *want* to create a demand for these wines, but what could I do?

Alzinger at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

ALA-092 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel**

This has already won top prize in FALSTAFF among GrüVe Federspiels. One sees why, though I myself preferred the more elegant (and unavailable) Liebenberg. But this has the peppery thrust and forceful expressiveness to stand out in comparative tastings; it isn't a gentle wine, but it's more spicy and less green-beany than usual. It makes a point.

ALA-095 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd, 6/750ml**

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Leo has really stepped this boy up the past few vintages, and this has *some* of the taut geen aromas of Steinertal; walnut and rye rather than wax-beans; a thick dumpling of minerality; ample and adamant mid-palate meatiness. Impressive.

ALA-093 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml**

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Again quite graceful for a high-alcohol wine; meaty, *salumeria* aromas and flavors, rose-hips and wild-boar ham and an electric spicy palate wash – like you rode your tongue through a car-wash spray of liquid stone. I believe very much in this wine but would suggest drinking between Fall '10 and Spring '12, as it will be most attractive while it still has some baby-fat.

- ALA-101 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd, 6/750ml** +++
 Again that blazing *green*, like you knocked two flints together and waved a scarf of mint through the fire. On the palate a detonation of lime, hyssop, tarragon, that shoot streams of iridescence through the evening sky; the low notes are like a key-lime syrup you dipped a wintergreen leaf into. For me this is the GrüVe of the vintage.
- ALA-094 **2009 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel**
 This has the botrytis – or the as-if botrytis – tang of many '09 Rieslings at first, which then resolves into a fennely-mizuna sort of green in five minutes, and finally leaves a hyssop-y clean finish.
- ALA-097 **2009 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml**
 The soil is similar to Gaisberg: mica-schist and gneiss. Again the initial fragrance is deceptive, as the wine is a clear leafy stream of ruck-dust. I suspect a rare combo of botrytis *and* acidity is at play. The radish-y tatsoi nature of the site, as if you had the flavor of wasabi but not the heat, is strongly present.
- ALA-098 **2009 Riesling Höllerin Smaragd, 6/750ml** +
 Always the fruity one; a mirabelle-balsam-apricot liqueur, and there's the sense of some insanely fruity grappa in here. It resolves as a clinging echo of warm sweet grain and hedge-flowers. This dry wine is so pretty, I wonder where's the clamor for wines like it.
- ALA-099 **2009 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml** ++
 In its plummy overt way, this is mighty freakin' good Riesling, profoundly rich and salty and with its usual core of meaty fruit that gets more mineral and green as it adumbrates, ending as a wolfishly yummy Riesling that's like a salad of 17 edible herbs and flowers with a warm bacony dressing.
- ALA-100 **2009 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd, 6/750ml** +++
 Oh man, quite the *schnoz* on this guy; quite the palate – quite the wine. Stings so good. Riesling in the form of a Margarita. "Spicy" hardly describes it, because you get a mid-palate green sweetness like a potion of lime-blossom and a concentrate of verbena and *matja*. The finish is a botanical garden of herbs and edible plants.



nikolaihof-wachau

wachau • mautern

I was coming back into Mautern from a nice sweaty walk when I saw some commotion in front of Nikolaihof. They were loading a 20-foot container destined for Japan, and full (I was told) of Steiner Hund. “There goes your allocation!” Nikky said from his forklift. Christine was standing there with a very fine Japanese lady, and I was touched when her face lit up at the sight of me. “Terry, my goodness, what a surprise!” she cried. “*Such a surprise?*” I said. “You know I’m in town staying just up the street. “Oh yes, but we never see you until you arrive so punctually for your visit.” So we stood and schmoozed, and the Japanese lady and I exchanged congratulations that we got to work with such fine people and such beautiful wines.

Christine’s book is out. It’s a cookbook with recipes and philosophies from Nikolaihof’s restaurant. It’s in German of course, but you’d suss it pretty well, and it helps if you want to understand this family in depth. I confess I find them wonderful. That’s partly because they are never solemn, just committed. Nikki gives every appearance of being a cosmopolitan fellow, he speaks excellent English, knows the patter, and is certainly much better on the computer than I am. Yet we were sitting eating dinner when he appeared with a big *haunch* in his hand, its furry hoof still on, from a wild boar he’d shot the evening before. And if you harbored any expectation the young generation would somehow “modernize” Nikolaihof, it was Nikky who insisted on reviving the use of the ginormous 18th-century wooden press, which had become a museum piece.

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



Once we were seated one year, I asked Christine, “When are you happiest in your work?” I thought the question was straightforward. Others to whom I’ve posed it have said things like I like it best in the vine-

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Im Weingebirge, Vom Stein, Steiner Hund**
- **Soil types: Primary rock topped with humus or gravel, and eroded primary rock**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 35% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Weissburgunder, Malvasier, Neuburger, and Chardonnay**

yards, or I really enjoy the blending, it fascinates me to taste so analytically, or things of that nature. Christine seemed quite undone by my innocuous-seeming query. “Oh I don’t know how to answer a question like that,” she said, and “No one has ever asked me that question.” She was so shy I was unbearably touched.

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

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

They are biodynamic, and they live by the biody-

namic calendar. It's typical for Saahs to integrate their lives within a matrix of principles; they hardly seem to consider their wine as an abstract object but rather as an ingredient among many which grow in nature and transmit a life-energy of their own.

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

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

But I never saw it in blossom until last June when I took a group to Austria. The first thing was the sheer volume of *fragrance*, and then there was the palpable electricity. Literally, the buzz. Christine and I stood under the tree and listened to the bees. "There are probably four or five thousand bees right now within the tree," she said. "Did you know you could eat the blossoms? They're full of nutrition." She plucked one and put it in my mouth. I'd never eaten a linden-blossom. Never eaten a linden blossom while standing under a blooming tree with a thousand bees. Never eaten a linden blossom under a tree with a thousand bees plucked and fed to me from the hand of a friend. For Christine I suppose this was a routine if sweetly lyrical moment. But for me it was a bite of the life-force.

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity's sake I'll call it just "Nikolaihof") is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first Demeter-certified wine in the world. They have farmed and made wines organically for over 38 years; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Saahs are believers in organic production as a guarantor of superior quality. I myself am often asked whether I believe organic or bio-d creates superior wines, which is both a loaded question and an irrelevant one. Frankly I don't care if the wines are "better." Organic or bio growers are seeking a certain relationship with their land. Very often these sensibilities conduce to the making of excellent wines, but not necessarily. They are, however, quite healthy for both land and the humans who work it. Do we need to ask for more?

A study has been published which appears to prove the salubriousness of Biodynamic wines in general and Nikolaihof's wines in particular. Christine is very proud of this, and I'm happy for her. Yet somehow I'm less touched than she is, and I think I know why. I recall seeing a story in one of the magazines which said scientists

had isolated the health-giving compounds in wine and could make them available in pill-form. At which point it became very clear to me; we don't drink wine because it is (merely) "healthy;" we drink it because, in an holistic way, it is good for us. Not only for our discrete bodies, but for our whole lives and souls. That wine is in fact harmless and probably even healthful is something we already knew intuitively; it's a bonus, but it ain't why. I am sure Christine knows this too.

Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of 49 years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the secrets, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: "The secret of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology — which in any case barely exists — as in the special care of the vines." He quotes Saahs as saying, "You shouldn't shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself." Fermentation (natural yeasts) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time — up to 4 months — on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that wine is a food-stuff. "I like to drink wine, not study it," he says. "We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don't wait for over-ripeness." His wife inserts; "There's nothing charming about harvesting in November."



It takes more people to farm organically; the Saahs employ 10 workers for 20 hectares. They claim a conventional winery could do the work with four or five. They are happy, they say, to give employment to more people; "We are not in this world just to make money," says Christine Saahs. Among the 20 hectares of land are two meadows allowed to grow wild. "We learned if we did-

n't control the vegetation in these meadows that the most predatory of the plants would eventually overcome the weaker plants, so each year we mow the meadow twice. It levels the playing field," she added, looking thoughtfully into the distance. "We don't drive a big car, we don't take world cruises . . . but we do mow our meadows twice a year," she said, as if to herself. "We simply occupy this little form of skin and bones for a few years, but we need to nourish our hearts and souls by finding a home in our parts of the world and caring for this home."

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

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

Again we sat in the chapel and began the tasting. Again they sat me (embarrassingly) at the head of the great table, and again the spell stole over me. Believe me, I don't arrive waiting for this to happen; I rather think it won't. But it does, somehow. I wonder if it begins with the hug Christine gives me, which is just two seconds too long to be merely polite, an embrace containing kinship, an embrace that welcomes and accepts me. It is no small thing to be accepted by such a woman.

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

It's a shame that words like "sublime" can lose their music and force through squandering, and I know I'm part of the problem. But the quality of sublimity in Nikolaihof's wines has to do with their basic characters; hale, trustworthy, unaffected, substantive but never tiring, explicitly *connected* and numinous with a gentle force. A force of loving kindness. It isn't about making



Christine Saahs

you love *them*; it's about what they can do to ease your way, by whispering their tender steady reminder of the sweet secrets of the world we share.

One year Nikki took my colleague Leif on a tour of the place, and later Leif told me how often Nikki had praised his father and how grateful he was to inherit an estate in such superb condition. Since Nikki's arrival the wines have become more consistent. I don't know whether he's strictly speaking responsible; I rather envision a kind of dream-come-true of father and son working together, with both of them grateful, and it finds its way into the wines. The old rap on Nikolaihof was inconsistency, but the last 3-4 vintages have been wonderfully steady and searchingly expressive.

Christine is passionate. Some listeners find themselves feeling guilty for not emulating her principles, and the feeling makes them squirmy, and because of that they push it away and accuse her of being preachy. I've heard her speak and read interviews she's given, and I've never gleaned as much as a hint of moral smugness. She knows I myself admire her work and her principles but that I am not a biodynamic acolyte, and I work with many growers practicing "integrated" viticulture. Christine and I are friends, and if she wanted to preach she could easily preach to me; it's a privilege of friendship not to have to be "polite." But she never has. And I also think there's a general reluctance to *admit* how singularly beautiful these wines are. Or maybe we just don't understand them. We have grown used to wines that put on a show for us, but these wines don't. They walk alongside you, and suddenly you feel how much you wanted the company.

It is exactly that lit-from-within serenity that makes these wines so singular, and so precious.

ANK-091 **2009 Grüner Veltliner “Hefeabzug”** **+**
 CORE-LIST WINE. Why/how has this gotten so damn *good* since the '07 vintage? Christine thinks it's because the years have become riper. “We haven't made a Steinfeder in many years,” she said. The name means “sur lie” and the wine is never racked, bottled off the gross lees. “I call it my 11am wine,” Christine says. This gorgeous '09 has leesy grip; it's saline and also semolina-sweet, with an amazingly spectral finish that's like washing down the entire periodic table of elements with a shot of liquefied sea air. The tertiary finish is so solid you swear you could chew it. Yet, blissfully – 11.5% alc. 11am indeed!

ANK-088 **2009 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel**
 The texture of heavy silk, a hint of nettles and edible flowers; a deliberate spread of flavors, its silky rivulets carry lovage here and sorrel there and cucumber and fennel there-again, all into a leafy-smoky finish that combines, almost weirdly, weisswurst and mussels.

ANK-071M **2007 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel, 6/1.5L** **++**
 In 2008, it was my *wine of the vintage*, and extraordinary in many ways; first, when has a *Federspiel* ever been this sublimely expressive? For this is unbelievably good wine; focused, snappy, straight-lined; rhubarb and jasmine aromas; the palate is smiling and energetic but not hyper, rather lively with an inner calm; long, “sweet,” luminous, all white flowers and asian pears; it's entirely *Riesling-like*, and unlike any GrüVe I've ever had.

ANK-092 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd, 6/750ml** **++**
First offering. With its modest and helpful 12.5% alc; a fragrance of rusks, oats and oyster-shell; a gentle entry leads to a huge spread of grip and mineral, yet also a mealy “cask-y” sweetness. This is an utterly loving, gentle being with formidable inner steel.

ANK-066M **2006 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd, 6/1.5L** **+++**
 One of the all-time great GrüVes I have ever tasted: it seems riper, woodsier, more mur-mury than the early bottling, which was more whispery and shade-cool; it has an enveloping embrace of sweetly beaming intensity, and the serene clamor of great wine; it has stomach *and* backbone, and it is one complex and rich stockpot of flavor.

ANK-074 **1993 Grüner Veltliner “Vinothek,” 6/750ml** **+++**

ANK-074M **1993 Grüner Veltliner “Vinothek,” 6/1.5L**
 By now you know this singular estate has been holding certain wines back, *in cask and without sulfur*, until they are deemed ready to bottle. There have been Rieslings (the supernal 1990) and GrüVes (the amazing '91), and now this.

The 1993 in the glass was bottled in early April 2008, directly from the cask in which it lay since fermentation. It begins by tasting woody, and then becomes roasty and protein-y and fatty, like the cracklings of a suckling-pig roast. It then gets leafy and the teensiest bit root-y, like celeriac; a full year in bottle has actually made it fresher and fruitier, albeit with its *Jurasienne* touch. (If it were Jura it would be the best wine ever *made* there.) The secret-sweetness and the woody patina are just ravishing. It's settled into its new home and has started to glow.

I asked if there was a candidate for the next Vinothek bottling. “Actually there are several,” they replied. “But we want to surprise you.” Good: I like surprises.

ANK-072M **2007 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel, 6/1.5L**
 This Riesling is snappy and herbal in the '07 way, breezy and fragrant, with a capacious enveloping flavor, a little minty, marjoram, focused and lovely.

ANK-093 **2008 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd, 6/750ml** **+**
 First a note about these sites, which aren't exactly *climats* but rather brand names registered to Nikolaihof and which correspond to certain vineyards. Vom Stein is always more rugged, meatier, more cooked, whereas Im Weingebirge is more dainty, flowery, more finesse, such that even its GrüVes can speak in a Riesling dialect. This shows the meaty character of the site with the lithe silky texture of '08; it's white iris, wisteria, regular-old purple iris; a sleek little acupuncture-needle of core and a hint of the mossy oolongs.

ANK-077M **2006 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd, 6/1.5L** ++
 Remarkable herbal-balsam fragrance; spicy and finely flowery; violet, lily of the valley, but also meaty, gelatinous like a veal shank; you taste the stock and the carrots and the celery and parsley, you taste the simmer and the satisfaction. It's a wine of appetite.

ANK-080 **2007 Riesling Im Weingebirge Halbtrocken, 6/750ml** ++
 With 11.8g.l. RS it's too "sweet" for Smaragd. The wine itself of course is perfect, though I'm sure it will perturb all the marketing twits little idiot requirements plus challenge the prevailing notion of what makes a Riesling delicious and useful. This is a wry, sweetly mineral, flowery, charming, ticklesome, complex wine that will be *TEN TIMES* more flexible at the table than the drier ones. Give it a few minutes in the glass and watch it crescendo into a shower of petals and pebbles.

ANK-089 **2006 Riesling Steiner Hund "Reserve," 6/750ml** ++
 And now the **first look** at this masterly '06, giving the roasted-grain vinosity of the vintage with the esoteric herbs and minerals of this great site; a suavely expressive version of this wine that was so ringent and iridescent in '04 and so stunningly fruity in '05. It's a *loving* version, you could say; all of its signal complexity reaches to you from within an embrace. This vineyard is existentially unique, as if it had its own magnetic field. Druids would have built their megaliths there. Maybe at night a UFO lands silently and the little space dudes get out and do some magic, I don't know. But I know of no other great wine that seems so unknowable, yet also so overwhelming.

ANK-076 **2002 Riesling Burggarten "Jungfernelese," 6/750ml** ++
 It means the "virgin" vintage. Haunting 2002 aromas sing sweetly from the glass—*what* fragrance this vintage has developed! The wine is dry—although unbelievably shimmery and brilliant; white tea, plum blossom, a ghostly mineral—the 2002 *Champagnes* are like this. Otherworldly juiciness and a flowery smokiness; just a great '02, wonderful now and from now on.

ANK-097 **1999 Riesling "Steinriesler"** ++
Riesler is an archaic name for Riesling, as can be seen from old labels, one of which is reproduced for this singular and gorgeous wine. It is in fact a *Federspiel* Vom Stein – "We wanted to try a long cask-aged wine that wasn't Smaragd ripe," they said. It was bottled this year, in 2010.

In effect this is a perfect mature Riesling with almost unbelievable length and shimmer, more birch and balsam than the normal '99 beeswax, but some wild wolfish sinew and smoke here. I tried *three times* to spit it and couldn't, and I don't know that I can enjoy a wine any more than this one.

AN ANCILLARY NOTE:

There's a Riesling they began making in 2005, from the vineyard contiguous to Steiner Hund, called Klausberg. It's above and oblique to Pfaffenberg also – a Kremstal vineyard – and you can look down *into* the Hund from it. Saahs obtained the land over a decade ago, but it needed time for its conversion to Biodynamics.

The '05 is enormously promising, showing the unique smoky peachy banana fruit of the vintage with the ragged sinews of this urgestein site; it's less elegant than Im Weingebirge and less arcane than Hund, but in its hewn-from-the-cliffs style it makes a meaty statement – a veal shank of Riesling you *eat* with your hands. There's a fine '06 in the wings also.

So, why don't I offer it? Because the production is tiny – about 1000 bottles only – and in order to retard demand they have it priced 50% higher than Steiner Hund. I wish I didn't need to cooperate with the stifling of demand! But I can't honestly justify the upcharge. However, if you want it, you shall have it. Just ask.

ANK-23 **Hollerblutensirup (Elderflower Syrup)**

hans reisetbauer

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

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

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

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



Hans Reisetbauer and his stills

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

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

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

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

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

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

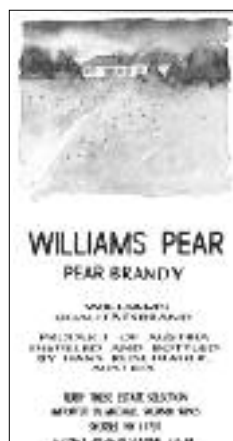
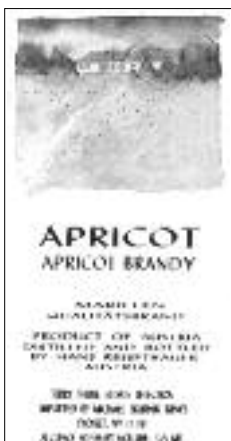
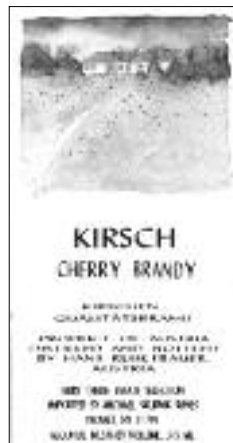
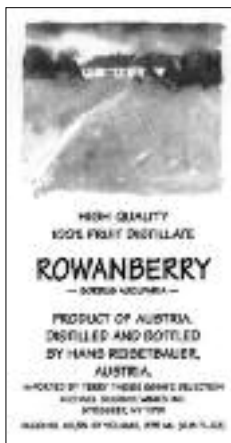
I'm just an *amateur*, I must stress, and I'm not especially well-informed, but that said, what strikes me about these spirits is their honesty and power. They're not especially seductive. If they were Wachau wines they'd be F.X. Pichler rather than Alzinger.



Young pear trees at Reisetbauer

Reisetbauer offerings:

- XHR-012 **Sparkling Apple Cider**
- XHR-001 **Plum Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-002 **Williams Pear Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-003 **Apricot Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-004 **Cherry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-006 **Rowanberry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-009 **Raspberry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-011 **Wild Cherry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-013 **Carrot Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-014 **Ginger Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-010 **Mixed Case Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
*(Pear, Apricot, Plum, Rowanberry, Raspberry,
 & Wild Cherry)*
- XHR-015 **Whisky, 6/750ml**
- XHR-023 **Blue Gin**





Working the harvest in full motorcycle gear must be tiring!



A field of Rapeseed in full bloom.

