



AUSTRIA

INTRODUCTION



My feelings are always mixed. It's an absolute riot of Spring when I'm there, every blossom blossoming and all the trees with that fleeting liquid green and the rapeseed fields blazing yellow and gardens singing with irises and acacia trees heavy with flowers, and it couldn't be more lyrical and I couldn't have less time to enjoy it. But why should I be mad? I'm sitting indoors, sure, but I'm tasting great wine and hanging out with congenial and admirable people, and if anyone should be mad it certainly isn't me. And yet; all that great wine, among the greatest white wine on earth, and such a tepid welcome for it. And yet; I don't do it for the results, I do it for doing it, because I love the work and it's a privilege to do what you love. You see? Mixed feelings.

Austria has taken a firm place in the market, but this is a double-edged sword. Its stature is seemingly durable, but it is small, it is minor, and it can safely be disregarded. It often suffices to include "Austria" by dint of a token selection of wines that don't begin to exploit the very large gifts this wine culture has to bestow on us. This makes me a little crazy. Not long ago I was in a restaurant while the staff were gathered to taste a new wine they'd just received. I'm a friend-of-the-house, and was offered a taste. It was a decent, solid European wine, I wouldn't

have minded drinking it but wouldn't have had a second thought for it. On the way home it struck me, powerfully, that I can offer twenty or thirty wines of greater quality for that price, from this "Austria" place that so many of us merely glance at. Those wines would have been actively delightful and memorable, yet they live in the umlaut-ghetto and have to cede space to lesser wines from "hipper" places.

This is also true of Germany—and by the way, the restaurant I spoke about is a great supporter of both categories, lovely people whom I wish I could clone—but Austria is considerably simpler than Germany. In Germany you have to deal with a theological degree of obscurity and confusion about what it actually is as a wine culture. Not so in Austria.

In Austria, the overwhelming majority of white wines are entirely dry, and those that are not dry are nearly always dessert-wine sweet. In Austria, the overwhelming majority of red wines are ripe and "viable" by international standards—not cool-climate curious—and they comprise a vitally healthy community of warm, dark-colored, medium-weight fruit-and-mineral-driven *food* wines.

You'll have heard of most of the grape varieties, but what's the point of the ones you've heard of? What makes Austria cool are her own grapes: Grüner Veltlin-

er, Blaufränkisch (those two above all), Zweigelt, St. Laurent, alongside some of the greatest Rieslings on the face of the earth and excellent Pinot Blanc, Muscat and (even) Sauvignon Blanc. I often think, if we were only *now* introducing these wines to the market, y'all would fall upon them like salivating wolves. That they have been here for a generation (plus) makes them wines you suppose you can safely disregard.

That is a fatal mistake. If you care about offering your customers the best wines you can find, excellent values, quirky individual characters, compelling complexities, great wines cheaper than any other great wines in the world, you are derelict in your duties if you don't dive into these wines in a very big way.

Grumpy old fucker, ain't !!

Austria's greatest contribution to the wine world is its native and signature grape variety, Grüner Veltliner. Most of you know it exists, yet there's a kind of stink to it, as in something that "used to be trendy." Think of the way you're discovering all these hitherto-unknown cool things from all over the place, and how much fun it is. That was Grüner Veltliner in the late 90s and early "aughts." And you don't want to repeat what those guys did; you want to do new things. Got it, and sympathize.

The problem is, what should have happened was to recognize GV as a classic, whereas what did (too often) happen was it got swept into the rubbish pile of the previously fashionable.

You're not gonna like what I'm about to say, but in the service of truth I have to say it. Not one single thing that's since been discovered, trumped, lionized, promulgated, put on wine lists and talked about with giddy delight, not ONE. DAMN. THING. has been nearly as excellent as Grüner Veltliner. Put any of them in my face, and I'll just keep annoying you; Jura? Love them, not as good as GV. Timorosso? Very cool and interesting, not as good as GV. Doesn't matter what you push upon me; you are ignoring *much* sweeter and lower-hanging fruit in order to clamber to the top of the tree and pluck inferior material.

So I'm asking you to look again. Taste seriously and see what your dollars (or your boss's) are actually buying, and then really, please, *do* make the best case you can that there's better wine for the money than GV will give. I want to hear it; it will help me. If you're right, it will humble my sad smug ass, which anyone will tell you is a good thing.

But I don't think you can. No one can.

The "marketing" of this point can seem a little needy, and I suppose it is, because we've been saying for twenty years that Grüner Veltliner ages fabulously, and ability to age is how we know to take a wine seriously, or so I've been told. An august panel was convened one October in New York, to taste a bunch of mature GVs; Aldo Sohm was on it, David Schildknecht, Jancis Robinson, Willi Klinger, and for some reason, me. My guys at Skurnik staged another tasting in January, of Rieslings and GVs from the Kamptal going back to 1969. I thought the point was made, but I was already sold. The only way to know how the tasters felt is to see what they do, whether they decide to take GV seriously as opposed to ensuring the few token wines are duly stocked.

Austria is also a markedly good producer of red wines, from three native varieties I'll describe in a few pages. These wines are not simple, but neither are they routinely grandiose and complex. They are wonderful medium-weight food-friendly fruit-driven wines. They are distinctive and individual. They get what wine's supposed to do at the table and in our lives. They're not afraid to be delicious. If you're someone who likes Foradori's basic Teroldego more than the Granato, your mind is ready for Austrian

red. (And speaking of which: Lagrein? *Love Lagrein!* Blaufränkisch is better.)

This doesn't even address the Rieslings, which stand with the world's best *dry* examples of the variety. They have more body, somewhat less acidity, more succulence and more "exotic" flavors than the good Trocken Germans. (Those in turn have perhaps greater precision, more digital focus, and a "cooler" feel, but the two are more alike than they are different.) And while there's still a distressing proportion of severely gnarly rasping dry German Rieslings—fewer than before, but *not none*—this is not the case in Austria. The worst you can say about an Austrian Riesling is that it's nondescript, whereas the worst of the Germans are painfully shrill.

AN INSIDER-Y RANT YOU CAN FEEL FREE TO IGNORE (THOUGH IT'S KINDA DELICIOUS...)

One symptom of Austria's maturing as a wine culture is they're starting to fart around with committees and rules. But before I go further, a disclosure; I am innately suspicious of collective action, because it very often devolves into "politics" and even when it doesn't, a group enterprise is too often dictated by its least smart members, and even when *that* doesn't happen, the group becomes a self-perpetuating mechanism. It exists in order to demonstrate its need to exist. It does that by taking actions. Often those actions are useful at the beginning, but having produced a bunch of useful actions, most groups keep going instead of disbanding while they were ahead. And the actions they take become more and more obscure, metaphysical and abstruse. They start to do harm.

Clearly my wariness arises from a quirk of my particular temperament. Yet it's also, let's say, not inaccurate. I prefer to contemplate a world in which individual persons are doing the finest most beautiful work they can, and to observe the aggregation of all that personal passion into a pattern and a current. It makes for a kind of de facto movement, but each single person's work is unsullied. Gather those individuals into a conference over some weekend, give the movement a name and a platform, print brochures and business cards and start planning the next conference, and I don't think you've improved things very much. "Being a movement with a name" takes time

away from doing the actual work, it often seems. But, yes, I am skeptical of collective enterprise (except of course in the realm of the body-politic). So take what I'm about to say with that in mind.

The otherwise sensible and laudable *Traditionsweingüter*, a group consisting of growers in the Kremstal, Kamptal, Wagram and Traisental, has been diddling with rules, regs and proscriptions regarding members' top single-site "reserve" bottlings. It was fine, in my opinion, to have classified vineyards, they've done as defensible job as can be done, and I support the idea in principle. I support this group in general, actually, and only take issue with their latest shenanigans. To wit: they want to forbid their members from selling the top tier of wines—so-called "DAC Reserve" wines from *Erste Lage* (first growth) sites before September of the year after the vintage. They also wish to forbid those wines from being tasted *at all* by anyone except visitors to the wineries, until they are bottled and offered for sale. That means you, cutie.

Let's delve into the thinking here. I suppose the overriding goal is to discourage these wines from being vinified to be presentable too early. *But why?* We are supposed to accept the absolute value of these "important" wines needing a pre-determined amount of time before they are ready to be sold. I do not accept that value as a one-size-fits-all proposition. Some growers' wines need more time than others, and the idea that one can mandate a minimum plays into two unattractive tendencies. One, to wrap these wines in an effulgent aura of Great And Serious Intent, and two, to encourage a weird sort of machismo I have noticed, whereby some growers are proud of how long their wines need, as though this was ipso-facto preferable to them being drinkable sooner. Well maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but I reject the idea as a *diktat* or a holy writ.

Perhaps it's a question of marketing or of leveling the playing field. That is, if grower-A's big-deal wines are being sold in May, it puts grower-B at a disadvantage if his wines aren't ready until September. But does it? Here's another assumption you can't take at face value. Are consumers really that helpless? Can't they suss that some guy's wine takes longer than his neighbor's? So what if a given grower's "first-growth" wine happens to taste good and be ready to sell after seven or eight months? If he has damaged that wine's aging capacity, isn't that ultimately his problem? Eventually observers will observe—this dude's wines don't go the

distance. In essence—“Big wines that are presentable young: are you being *cheated*?” Film at eleven.

Why does any of this matter? Because the poo-bahs don't even want the wines to be shown off-site, except to professionals under strictly curtailed conditions. That means I can't let you taste them when we make our rounds in June. And that in turn means I am in effect asking you to decide to buy these not-inexpensive wines *sight-unseen*. I know how accurate and enticing my tasting notes are, hee-hee-hee, but come on, really? They will ask, what's the fuss? You make another offer in January, show them then. Yes, if they're still available!

One can always disregard the rule, I guess, if one has an outlaw's disposition. But in that case why be a member of an organization in the first place? Or maybe you just flout the regs and the devil take the hindmost, except that they *fine* you if they catch you, and the fine is big enough to sting. You could, I guess, refuse to pay it, and then they boot you out. In my option you'd be better off, but that's just weird old me.

I proposed, only somewhat in jest, that the committee charter an Airbus A-380 to fly 500-600 of us over to Austria, since we're only *permitted* to taste these wines there. Hey, I didn't make the rules. I just want you to be able to taste at least some of these wines before you hand over your coin. See *unintended consequences, law of*. In any case, we have proposed a modification of the prohibition and asked for dispensation to show you the wines pending a final decision.

So, sigh....it was nice while it lasted. Twenty three years ago when I first offered Austrian wines, the culture was so stirring, so fresh, idealistic, oxygenated; it was heady and thrilling. Sure they experimented with “international” style reds, and with over-endowed behemoth whites, but they retreated from both those things (a few of the whites can still use some work...) and right now, looking at the wines alone, there is no healthier wine culture in the world. None. Thus it is dispiriting to see them groping for evidence of lofty intent by repeating all the mistakes of neighboring wine cultures throughout Europe; strait-jacketing appellation laws, and systems superimposed over the existing (and sufficient) truths of the actual wines, systems which must now be explained alongside the wines. None of it is necessary and none of it is helpful, and this mischief with the first-growth wines is only the latest in a sorry chain of well-intended postures

whereby Austria seeks to demonstrate that She Belongs. Guess what? She belonged already.

* THE 2017 VINTAGE *

Unlike Germany, there was no Spring frost, and like Germany it was an early harvest, and unlike Germany the growing season wasn't especially complicated and the growers said they had a fairly easy time of it. Like Germany the wines are ripe and strong, in contrast to the tensile yet lissome '16s, and like Germany there is light and shade, and it isn't predictable.

In general, for white wines, 2017 is decidedly a Riesling vintage. That doesn't mean the Grüner Veltliners are mundane; it means that they are very good but Riesling is often seriously fabulous. The growers showing the best collections of GV are both growers who make very little Riesling—Ott, and Ecker. It's fair to say that 2017 is not a “collector” vintage for GV—as if “collectors” collected GV, however much they ought to—but it's an entirely satisfactory vintage with more than isolated high points. In the old days the trade used the word *useful* as a euphemism for “forgettable,” but I'm going to use it more precisely: the '17 GVs will do all the job you could ask of them (and the Liters punch absurdly above their weights), but the Rieslings will send your soul flying.

This presents me with a quandary. GV outsells Riesling. By a lot. Riesling is the best wine grape in the world but it seems to confuse a lot of people. People somehow manage to maintain their equanimity facing hundreds of *far* more confusing wines, but find impressively creative and incoherent reasons for abjuring Riesling. Reasons they themselves contrive. Baricades they themselves build, before which they stand, defensively bemused. Yet there it is: 2017 delivers a large number of seriously amazing and potentially **great** Rieslings, all of them DRY (so we get rid of the brainless shibboleth about “How do you know if it's dry or sweet?”), all of them—not some, ALL—better values than nearly any other dry wine y'all think is great. So OK, my world and its strange windows, through which it seems I must look.

2017, being a strong vintage, will produce lusty reds and big-shouldered whites from varieties other than GV and Riesling. Yet even then it has surprises up its sleeve. The Muscats and Sauvignon Blancs are truly and improbably remarkable. I thought I'd find them brusque, but

no; they're focused, direct and beyond tasty. Glatzer's basic SB was so exceptional I saw no reason to trade up to his single-vineyard. Nigl's Muscat is the best he's ever made.

There's an anecdote I heard a couple times. Many growers started by picking GV, to get the everyday wines, but suspended picking it because Riesling was exactly a *point* and they wanted to seize the moment (and the grapes), which entailed resuming the GV harvest when the Rieslings were finished, and this *may* have been a little too late, and cost the GV some vibrancy. It would also explain why some of the best GVs came from growers with just a little Riesling.

To sum up, 2017 is a vintage of volume and big bones. It's larger in scale than 2016, more muscular and less fleshy than 2015, much cleaner than 2014, and less elegant than 2013. Riesling often excels in years like '17 because it so easily resists a tendency to mere brute strength, and '17's Rieslings will (and should) be compared to the greats of '15 and '13 for many years. Close observers may surmise a resemblance to 2012, which would be apropos, though '17 is more mineral.

Ah yes, the M-word. Minerality is an abiding partner in all the best '17s, yet it is never blatant, and it is often more basically rocky or stony than it is mineral. I use the latter word to denote a complex *mélange* of non-fruit-or-herb-or-flower-or-spice flavors that is deeper and more inscrutable than simple rocks and stones and scree and dust. Minerality in '17 is like an ingredient crucial to a dish, but which you don't taste discretely. 2017 leads more with herbs and leaves and iron, and then comes fruit and then comes mineral.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

This year it's hard to identify a winery-of-the-vintage, only because most wineries excelled with one variety or the other but rarely both.

But there *is* a winery-of-the-offering. There are reds and whites from several vintages to consider. There is also a thoroughly lovely story and a markedly agreeable guy. I will go into detail in his profile, but attention must be paid here, for the full arrival of a young grower who is clearly a peer of the best estates in all of Austria—and so the winery of this offering is **PRIELER**. Up, down, east, west, everything he showed me was ideal, polished, graceful, expressive, and effortlessly aristocratic.

GREAT COLLECTIONS OF GRÜNER VELTLINER:

ECKER, in his forthright and unaffected echelon, has never shown such a steady hand over his full range of GVs.

OTT, whose wines I tasted on day-1, when I assumed everyone's GVs would be as good as these were, only to learn that Ott was truly exceptional.

GREAT COLLECTIONS OF RIESLING:

GOBELSBURG, like that's a big surprise!

NIGL, coming off the heels of his super-nal 2016s, Martin is making a statement these days—no one is better than him at his best.

ALZINGER

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE 2017:

It isn't the "best" wine, but it is the most amazing display of a wine rocketing above both its class and any preceding example. It is also *available* and *not expensive*, which should make you glad. So, the wine of the vintage is **NIGL'S** literally unbelievable **Riesling Senftenberger Piri**. Yup, just the basic Piri. 12.5% alc—Federspiel weight. It brought me back to a similar selection I made for the German 2008s, when I nominated Von Othegraven's Altenberg Kabinett, two wines that seem to offer every possible beauty and virtue in the form of bonsai, miniature, indelible.

We have a little music box we splurged on many years ago. It's a lovely piece and I'd run back into a burning building to save it. Behind the little dancer are four mirrors angled to seem as if there are a dozen of her. She twirls her upper body, and her legs move gracefully. It seems absurd to be as moved as I am, watching her, but first it is so delicate and innocent, and then the miracle that a human being *made* it, with god knows what painstaking and fastidious care, all that loving effort to produce a music box to delight a small child. I have to be a big ol' softie, because I have cried more than once watching my little dancer. And I thought of her when I tasted the Piri, everything you'd ever want, and little enough to cup in the palm of your hand.

THE GREATEST RIESLINGS (USING CONVENTIONAL CRITERIA!):

GOBELSBURG Ried Heiligenstein Riesling Erste Lage.

NIGL Ried Hochäcker Riesling Erste Lage—and amazingly, also the Ried Goldberg Riesling Erste Lage.

HIEDLER Ried Gaisberg Riesling Erste Lage.

THE SINGLE GREATEST RIESLING IN THIS OFFERING (NOT OFFERED PREVIOUSLY):

GOBELSBURG 2016 Tradition.

THE GRÜNER VELTLINER OF THE VINTAGE:

OTT Ried Stein Grüner Veltliner Erste Lage.

With high honors to **Gobelsburg** Ried Renner Grüner Veltliner Erste Lage, **Alzinger** Ried Steinertal Grüner Veltliner Smaragd, and **Hirsch** Kammerner Ried Gaisberg Grüner Veltliner Erste Lag.

THE SINGLE GREATEST GRÜNER VELTLINER IN THIS OFFERING (NOT OFFERED PREVIOUSLY):

GOBELSBURG 2016 Tradition.

BEST AMONG THE LITERS (AND THEY'RE ALL OUTSTANDING IN 2017):

BERGER.

THE TOP VALUES IN THIS OFFERING IRRESPECTIVE OF PRICE POINT (IN THE ORDER I TASTED THEM):

ECKER GV "Schotter."

OTT GV "Der Ott."

GOBELSBURG GV (from the Schlosskellerei).

GOBELSBURG Riesling (from the Schlosskellerei).

BERGER Riesling Ried Spiegel.

SATTLER Zweigelt Klassik.

GLATZER THREE wines: the basic GV, the "Dornenvogel" GV, and the Sauvignon Blanc.

THE BEST PINK WINES:

Tied for top honors, two wild-eyed disobedient and downright obstreperous

Rosés—**SCHROECK'S** "Biscaya," and **PRIELER**.

THE BEST ORANGE WINES:

I do not sell orange wines.

THE BEST RED WINE:

PRIELER 2015 Ried Goldberg.

THE MOST LIP-SMACKING SEDUCTIVE RED WINES:

SATTLER 2017 St Laurent "Klassik."

HOFER Zweigelt 2017.

ALL THE GELBER MUSKATELLERS ARE WONDERFUL BUT THIS ONE'S THE BEST:

NIGL.

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 ripper 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 met-

amorphous 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. Hirsch's twin-peaks of Gaisberg and Heiligenstain are both classed as Urgestein sites, yet they're quite different in flavor.

THE QUESTIONS OF ORGANICS

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

The Austrians have a new and highly enlightened system called *Sustainable Austria*, which certifies producers who meet its criteria. It's similar to Fair And Green, which I also admire. I urge you to look it up here: www.sustainableaustria.com, and I think you'll agree that examining this thorny question holistically does the world greater good than to insist on one element exclusively.

Or so one would think. Rather distressingly, there seems to be some sniping among certain sectors. Certified biodynamic producers take issue with the merely organic. They even take issue with alternate bio-d certifiers. Both bio-d and organic producers take issue with the "sustainable" certifiers, whose criteria they find to be too dispersed and fuzzy and to do sufficient good. I have always thought that environmental conscience conducted to a humanistic tolerance in general, and that organic and bio-d growers were an abnormally loving bunch. I may have been naïve. Of course if you actually *perform* all the extra difficult work of those protocols, you can be forgiven for resenting others who glom onto your values with blurry "sustainable" certifications.

Yet I have to ask, is this really about the environment, or is it perhaps more about marketing? Bio-d and organic are, after all, *brands*, and brand holders are justified in protecting their brand-values against interlopers with "lower" standards. I get it, I understand it, it's not unreasonable—but it isn't pretty. Are they more concerned with the earth, or with the turf?

My position is to encourage the grow-

ers 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.

CRITERIA FOR ROSÉ SELECTIONS

The category is both intriguing and perilous. Who knows if and when it may implode? Nearly all of my growers in Austria make a rosé, and all of them are at the very least attractive. They join an ever-more crowded stream of plausibly appealing pink wine, albeit these wines are truly attractive. And yet what purpose do they serve? More saliently, what purpose do they serve for you and me?

I'm starting to insist on two things. One, the rosé has to be interesting and distinctive, and two, it has to be *unlike any other rosé in the offering*. I want to line all of them up and have no redundancies. I walk away from some perfectly good wines. To the extent I think about it, I'd like to have the most interesting portfolio of rosés in the market. Perhaps I do already, but I'm not the one to judge.

In the process of selecting for interesting wines, I've found myself frustrated with the limitations we ourselves place on rosés. You know them as well as I: they have to ship very early, they have to be drunk in summer, they're DOA the year after the vintage.

I mean really, what a crock! I'm drinking Prieler's 2015 rosé these days, and it could stand another year or two to reach its peak. I selected a 2016 rosé from Künstler for which I got all kinds of blowback from my colleagues ("All we'll do is bring it in and close it out!"), but I don't care. If rosé is to have any staying power beyond its current adorableness, it has to show the virtues of all the wines we think are serious: vinosity, stamina, development potential, and character. Nearly every rosé in this offering is a **year-round wine** that will age at least 3-4 years.

AUSTRIAN RED WINES

The last issue of *Wine & Spirits* had a piece on Chianti Classico in which several wine lovers in the trade lamented the ban-

ishing of those wines from fashionability. Someone said it was all-Beaujolais-all-the-time these days, and wasn't it a little absurd? Of course it's absurd; it's human beings! Even in the wine world—a place one might have hoped would rise above the standard prevailing pettiness—it's all about the trend, dude. I think it's pathetic. Actually I think it's *fucking* pathetic, but I'm not gonna change the world. The glom goes here, the glom goes there, and all the glommers are glancing over their shoulders to be sure they're not sucking dust when the glom has glommed to the next "thing."

I've benefited from this, inadvertently, with Champagne, but even in that jolly place they're drawing fatuous battle lines between what's deemed "hip-and-desirable" and what's supposed to be *fuddy-duddy*. If actual basic **taste** plays a role in any of this, it's awfully well hidden.

How does this all pertain to Austrian reds? Well it's simple. They have not been anointed with the fetid spray of hipness by whoever it is who does the anointing. And yet if we only consider the *wines themselves*, we have to admit—or we would have to admit, if we were honest—that these wines are delicious, desirable, available to do a job not many red wines apply for, and they're also unique, particular rather than anonymous, good value, and did I say delicious?

In today's Austria there is a decisive move away from international varieties, from overripeness, from excessive use of wood, and from all the failed experiments with those worn out genres that prevailed in the 90s and 00s. Those growers were insecure, and sought to gain cred by giving the world a type of wine the world was already drowning in. And so they looked around, and asked the true, salient questions. What do we have? What is ours alone? What can we do uniquely and how do we do it beautifully?

What seems to be true is, Austrian red wines straddle a line between "warm" and "cool" styles. They are rich and ripe—most of them make 13.5% alc without chaptalization. Most are dark in color. Most have the physiological "sweetness" of fully ripe fruit. Most are glossy and polished. But *most are fruit-driven*, medium in weight and **FOOD FRIENDLY**. Partly by dint of geography and partly by choice of grape variety, these are structured wines that seldom carry the stewy heat of hot-climate reds. Finally, most use wood as a seasoning and a nuance, because they got bored with overtly woody wines that taste the same as everyone else's in the world.

And most important, Austria's reds are *delicious*. There's that word again. I see tasters finding (or dreaming) all kinds of virtues in the hipster wine-of-the-week, whatever quirky little beast comes from some obscure place that gives people bragging rights for "discovering" something previously—and often deservedly—unknown. Because if we are really honest, we have to acknowledge that some wines are obscure for very good reasons; they aren't that good. "We make this wine as it's been made for 1100 years, by passing the juice back over grape seeds that have been eaten and shit back out by a ferret," and while that may be an interesting story, it's probably a lousy glass of wine.

With even a modicum of selectivity, which is where I come in, it is almost always a yummy, helpful, substantive and yet charming glass of wine from Austria. They're made from three native grape varieties that barely grow anywhere else. At least one of them offers all the angular quirks you could ever crave, but it won't insult your intelligence or your palate. Another is absurdly delicious. Yet another is entirely compelling and fiendishly hard to grow. Here they are.

Blafränkisch is the one with the highest up side, making nearly all of Austria's most important reds. The best of these are among the world's great red wines—not, perhaps, the greatest, but certainly the great. That echelon is represented here by PRIELER'S Goldberg and Marienthal single-vineyards, and by KRUTZLER'S iconic Perwolff.

Blafränkisch is essentially the wine Sauvignon Blanc would be if it were red. It rarely has a lot of "fruit" but it seems to have every possible berry and cherry, and if you taste bilberry, juniper, huckleberry, blackberry, black raspberry, black cherry, regular old cherry, I won't argue. BF also seems to have every herb under the sun, and I mean *under the sun*, as it tastes as though the herbs were hot when you plucked them. If you're an imaginative type and you write "weeds" or "garrigue" you're also getting the signal. If you smell and taste cracked black peppercorns, you're in. BF will appeal to the lover of Cabernet Franc, and if you're a habitué of Old-World Malbec or Tannat, you're also in the ballpark. It also feints toward Cabernet Sauvignon though in Austria it is far more interesting.

Its flavors are highly focused because it has the highest acidity of any important red wine—as high as Champagne. When it's ripe enough it brings a lavish and satisfying juiciness to its precision and clarity, and for a wine as un-seductive as

this one is, it gives a great keen pleasure and scratches an itch few other reds can reach. It is a "vertical" red, not opulent; nor does it murmur or soothe. It's exciting and dynamic. It is also sensitive to soil, and is a reciter-of-terroir in a way I think can only be equaled by Pinot Noir. (Curiously, certain BFs start to resemble certain Burgundies when they're about 6-9 years old.)

BF has the widest quality spread of Austria's big-3 red grapes, reaching the greatest heights but also—when it's poorly vinified or wasn't ripe enough—giving gnarly unhappy wines that aren't very nice. But anyone who loves *Riesling* should be making a beeline for BF, and I am baffled by any curious wine nerd who looks past this variety in order to alight upon manifestly inferior stuff. (Jura reds? *Really?*)

Sankt Laurent is Burgundy-plus. It resembles a Burgundy that was cut with 10-15% Mourvèdre (or in other words, pre-war Burgundy...), offering the sweet roundness of Pinot with the darker barkier flavors of southern Rhônes. The basic wine from SATTLER will show you the pure fruit with no wood at all.

You say it the German way; it sounds like "zonked cow rent." Though it resembles Pinot, it's not genetically related. But like Pinot, it is hard to grow; indeed a lot harder. It's a vineyard prima-donna that won't flower if it's the least bit miffed, and which gives a tight cluster of thin-skinned berries liable to rot, and so it needs a lot of canopy management and yield control and bunch thinning. No grower makes a lot, and the only reason anyone makes any is because it tastes amazing. When you get a good one it will cover you in hugs and kisses, and you will gloat inwardly at the money you saved over the Burgundy you were gonna buy. If you think along lines of smoky, "blackened" Burgundy, you'll know what to expect.

Last there is **Zweigelt**, which is a 1933 crossing of BF and SL named after the man who created it. Zweigelt is both blessed and cursed by its insane attractiveness, and is sometimes relegated to beautiful-airhead status. If you skimmed the sweet top-notes off of Syrah, and left the earthy/animal stuff behind, you'd have Zweigelt. Considered a "workhorse" grape, if it yields too generously you get a sweet-scented St Amour or Regnie sort of wine, but if you crop it too thin you get a kind of opacity. It's tempting to just render it thoughtlessly because it is so tempting, but I'm seeing a lot of people asking "Just how good can this variety be if we really probe into it and see what potential it has?"

I can show it to you in many idioms, from all-steel to full-on "serious" wine vinification, but what you can *always* expect is a wine that smells gorgeous and enticing, sometimes feinting toward its BF parent and other times toward its SL parent, and almost always growing rounder and more plummy with air. It seems to exist only to give joy, but many examples don't stop at joy, but offer several dimensions of dustiness and complexity, always staying fruity and seeming to always be hale.

You could say Zweigelt is like Schiava, Blafränkisch is like Lagrein and St. Laurent is like Corvino, if that helps. I'll throw in the umlauts for free.

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

There's a developing story that concerns the remarkable improvement of the red wines from regions once thought to be white-wine only. Maybe it's climate change. But after the whole French Paradox thing broke, lots of growers felt they had to make a token red wine or two, just so the customer wouldn't have to go elsewhere for them. Most of those wines were pretty anemic, and a few of them are still pretty clunky. But more and more of them are viable, attractive and very tasty beings. We don't sell them very much, because (I think) you prefer to spend your red-wine Dollar on a grower who specializes in reds. Makes sense. But you're missing out on some very tasty numbers.

Herewith a list of reds-from-white-wine growers, which I plead with you not to ignore:

HOFER
ECKER
SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG
BERGER
SETZER
BRÜNDLMAYER

HIRSCHMANN



REGION / PRODUCT

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 coarse, scorched flavor.
5. Relative gentleness or roughness of mashing. The seeds are mashed as they roast, and the more tender the mashing, the more polished the final flavor.

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

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

STORING AND HANDLING

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

THE ASSORTMENT

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

Leo Hirschmann makes the La 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 **250ml** bottles, ideal for retailers who'd like to get the experimental impulse sale; the oil can be priced below \$20 in the lil' bottle.

OAT-003 (12/250ml)

OAT-007 (12/500ml)

OAT-010 (6/1.0L)

PRIELER



REGION/SUB REGION

Leithaberg “DAC” / Schützen

VINEYARD AREA

20 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Goldberg

(slate)

Seeberg,

Sinner

(limestone, mica schist)

Ungerbergen

(limestone with pebbles)

Marienthal

(limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

30% Blaufränkisch

15% Cabernet Sauvignon

14% Pinot Noir

10% Chardonnay

10% Merlot

10% Pinot Blanc

8% St. Laurent

3% Welschriesling

Georg Prieler—affectionately known as “Georgie” by his friends, which is basically everyone he knows—had a steep learning curve. When his father retired, it was his sister Silvia who was assumed to be taking over the estate. Then she opted to return to her original career as a scientist, leaving things in the uncertain but intrepid hands of her kid-brother, keeping herself on speed-dial as needed.

Georg was game and eager at first, and not so much unsteady as uncertain, and so he started out by maintaining what was already being done. After a year or two he was palpably settling in, not so much “improving” as gaining perspective and experience, more able to see the big picture and more driven to create and enact a strategy.

By year-three he was certainly the Man In Charge, and he was starting to make the changes and adaptations he has envisioned. The wines improved steadily (they had always been good) and the end-goals began to clarify. You could perceive what Georg was doing and observe his progress.

Georg will tell you that it’s a never-ending process, which of course it is, but this year I felt, strongly, that his estate had reached both the quality level and the identity he had planned and wished for. In the glass it expressed as a form of serenity. The great ones always make it look easy, right? The estate’s Cabernet Sauvignon—among the best in Austria—is being discontinued. The barrique-aged Chardonnay has long since bitten the dust. The reds in general are infinitely more polished and less gritty than before, while the whites become, not more powerful, but richer. And don’t even get me started on his Rosé, which is among the most singular and interesting wines of any color in this offering.

So, Georg, wow. You have a steady hand, my friend. You’ve refined your wines in line with your vision, and your vision is clear. This is a superb group of wines you showed me last week. You’re my **WINERY OF THE VINTAGE**, but never stop being so cute and funny, OK?

2017 Rosé Vom Stein

+ +

12/750ml | AEP-142

About 95% Blaufränkisch (which accounts for its mineral, length, structure and the “wildness” Georg intends for it) and a little either St. Laurent or Merlot to dash in some zaft. The 2017 is exceptionally rich, vivid and minerally; a fine, serious wine that happens to be pink. Fetching aroma, red beets and sweet rhubarb; three dimensions here; dialogue of fruits and savors, mineral bouncing off spices (cloves and cardamom); Heidi’s *Biscaya* is more giddy and extravagant while this is more starched and serious. Both are magnificent and are full citizens of the *wine* world, not squatting in some ghetto of the trivial.

2015 Blaufränkisch Ried Johannishöhe

12/750ml | AEP-132

More open of course with a year in the bottle; this is a perfect starter-BF with weight and juiciness; not too brooding, not too ingratiating, light-footed and wholesome.

Later this year we’ll move into a 2017, which will be richer and which has “+” potential. But I’m in no hurry to see the end of this deft and poised 2015.

2015 Blaufränkisch “Leithaberg”

+ +

6/750ml | AEP-135

Leithaberg is the name of the little massif of hill that’s the border between Burgenland (to the south) and Carnuntum. The south-facing slope is decently steep and the soils are limestony. Some years ago a group of growers set about to use the name to denote “reserve” quality cuvées that would demonstrate as much mineral flavor as possible. Oak wasn’t forbidden but its *flavor* was. The idea was the variety *in its soil*. Both reds and whites were made.

The program seemed to shape-shift, and the name “Leithaberg” was affixed to the (dreaded) “DAC,” and so now it’s used by everyone. I don’t know about the other growers, but for Prieler it constitutes a classic mid-range wine, which paradoxically is over-endowed in “poor” vintages when the top Crus aren’t bottled.

In ‘15 it’s an immensely seductive wine, with as much glowy energy as the variety can show; long, truffley, salty and replete with ore and spice; the finish is dark chocolate and skirt steak. From the two sites *Pratscher* and *Breiter*.

With a little time in bottle, this has grown silky and transparent, leaning in a “Burgundy” direction. Powdered graphite, violets and berries.

(There’s a slim, angular 2016 en route. “It actually has a white wine texture,” said Georg. It’s more pure *Blaufränkisch* than the rounder ‘15; spicy, more tannic, less velour, but it’s an articulate and particular BF, with more breeze and freshness, and an evanescently lovely finish.)

2015 Blaufränkisch Ried Marienthal

+ (+)

6/750ml | AEP-148

The Ch. Montrose of BF, this is a lava-flow of iron and carob and gamey-ness and blood. This cask-sample is loaded, chocolatey, a little agreeably funky; coco-nibs, pepper and, improbably, roses. It’s available in September but we’ll start showing it in January. This Grand Cru makes a large-scaled wine with lots of earth and savor. Whereas.....

2015 Blaufränkisch Ried Goldberg

+ +

6/750ml | AEP-149

One of Austria’s true icons of BF, it shows as much graphite as three bottles of Brunello you’d somehow concentrated, forced into a syringe and injected intravenously. It has a truly noble

fragrance; it would do high honor to Cheval Blanc, if you’d steeped it with violets and grape-hyacinth. A swollen minerality comes on and clings and clings; the empty glass is pure ripe *kirsch*, and with air the whole thing deepens into winter truffles, and the texture grows appealingly juicy. This ‘15 is seriously polished and refined even as it’s vividly minty and herbal, yielding to sweet rivulets of finish, by which you know you sit with royalty.



2017 Chardonnay Ried Sinner

12/750ml | AEP-150

A perfect vintage of this, riper than '16 but not exactly stronger. Just bigger-boned; if anything it's more *mineral*, mineral bound with muscle, though the texture is almost creamy. Want to serve a Chardonnay and respect yourself in the morning? (Chablis doesn't count!) Try this beauty.

2017 Pinot Blanc Ried Seeberg

12/750ml | AEP-151

Richer and a bit quieter than the Chardonnay but with quite a bit more mid-palate, oleander, straw-richness, sweet corn especially in the narrower glass (I usually taste from two different glasses); a kick of spicy delicately mineral brilliance underscores its grainy vegetable richness, like ripe summer squash on the grill.

2016 Pinot Blanc "Leithaberg"

12/750ml | AEP-134

The best white wine from Georg's era to date, and developed impressively from last year into a creamy-leesy langoustine-y beauty. Just 13.1% alc (applause!), it recalls the best Pinot Blanc from my new friend Dautel (in Germany) in its perfect integration of stones and scallops and corn, and the textural contrast of sweet-leesy flesh with the sweetness of impeccably fresh skate-wing.

HEIDI SCHRÖCK



REGION/SUB REGION

Neusiedlersee-Hügelland / Rust

VINEYARD AREA

10 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Vogelsang,
Turner

(eroded primary rock, mica slate,
limestone and sandy loam)

GRAPE VARIETIES

25% Weissburgunder
25% Welschriesling
10% Blaufränkisch
10% Furmint
10% Grauburgunder
10% Zweigelt
5% Gelber Muskateller
5% Sauvignon Blanc

Last year I remarked that a couple of Heidi's wines were starting to show "natural wine" flavors, and this trend has continued into this year's collection. Perhaps it's the influence of her son, who's active in the winery these days (as demonstrated by a Pet-Nat that wasn't to my liking), and maybe it's the natural (or "natural") outgrowth of Heidi's own development. In either case—and with apologies to Heidi for hijacking her text to write this little essay—I have some thoughts.

First, the word. *Natural*. It's a good word, a useful word and even a lovely word. Shouldn't we be a lot more annoyed that it's being corrupted, debased, and stripped of meaning and beauty? After all, there is a whole world of natural wines that taste wonderful and wholesome, and if I were a person who made such wines, I'd be furious to have the word *natural* used to include a lot of truly filthy wines. I'd want no association whatsoever with wines like that. "Don't include me with *that* gaggle and don't associate me with *that* mentality," I would feel.

A small tangent: I'm not bothered by the oft-heard argument that the very word "natural" is contentious, because it suggests that other wines are not natural. That's unreasonable, in my view. It is we who choose to infer it, for the sake of our position in the discussion. Any other word that might have affixed to this ad-hoc movement would have had similar rhetorical baggage.

"Wholesome" suggests unwholesome, "pure" suggests impure. Only, perhaps, non-interventionist is "clean" because there's nothing inherently wrong with in-

tervention, but the term is cumbersome. So let's allow "natural" to exist as a catch-all for a many-faceted community.

My point is, some of those growers ought to be dismayed if not outraged at the crimes perpetrated by other growers, and which throw big stinky piles of muck on what used to be a truly good word—natural.

A young sommelier at a prominent Austrian restaurant poured my friend and me two glasses of orange wine during the course of our dinner last week. We hadn't requested them - but there they were. I tasted hopefully (maybe this would be the first one I ever liked!) and skeptically (but maybe it wouldn't), and the wine was just *meh*, not actively repugnant but with no redeeming virtues I could discern. I searched for a neutral thing to say, as the young man eyed me expectantly. "This isn't my type of wine," I finally said.

"I knew that," he replied. "I just wanted you to taste it." I asked him what he liked about the wine, and he told me. None of the virtues he described were actually there, but if you start from a warped frame of reference you follow your internal logic, and in his world there were many things to like about the wine, all of which he described by misusing words in the distorted mirror of his origin-point. But I soon began to feel irritated. If he knew I wouldn't like the wine, why did he foist it on me? I was trying to eat a good meal with my friend, and he has to come to the table with his agenda? That doesn't seem hospitable.

I admit I'm not a deep student of these kinds of wines. I generalize from my

chance encounters, which are frequent but random, and if those encounters are anything to go by, there's a lot of dubious wine around, a lot of muddled thinking, a *whole* lot of Orwellian double-speak and even a few big lies. These have the effect of making caricatures of what ought to be a force for good in the wine world, and in the world overall. When I think of the good wines in this portfolio that could stand under the "natural" umbrella, it is clear where the lines are, because these lines are present even in my "natural" estates, and some of their wines are on the wrong side of those lines.

I don't like and will not accept mousy wines, wines that smell like moth-balls, wines that smell like band-aids or nail-polish remover or other unpleasant aldehydes, and I also do not like wines that smell like shit or vomit. There is

no earthly reason these wines should be thrust upon innocent drinkers, people who buy and offer them should be ashamed of themselves, and if you want me to believe such basic flaws are the consequence of "naturalism" then you need to learn how to *think* and to use language properly.

This is more vexing because when such types of wines succeed, they are uniquely beautiful. Precious. Calming, reassuring, soulful. Which brings me back to Heidi Schröck.

Heidi's wines arise so ineluctably from the woman she is that there's no border between human and wine. They breathe the same air. I have written long tributes to my friend of 25 years, and I'll let them stand. A lot of you know her, and if you know her you remember her, because she makes you feel like a person, she reminds

you what humanity is, or can be. She does it without effort; she just demonstrates what warmth, thoughtfulness, lusty humor and dignity look like. Her wines, too, make their natural ways in the cellar. They shape-shift from year to year, they never seem like aesthetic specimens she has fashioned to produce a reaction. They are animate, and like most animate things they have good days and not so good days. Will I sacrifice predictability for truth? Yes—up to a point.

Please understand this in order to understand Heidi's wines: you can't serve them too cold. They thrive at cellar temp. They need to spread their arms and exhale. They have spaces within them, and they seem to be wrapped in a fine cool gauze. They are the kinds of wines that go part-way to food itself.

2017 Blaufränkisch Ried Kulm

12/750ml | AHS-200

I asked to taste this first, before my palate would be distorted by a bevy of young whites, which do damage to the reds that follow them, usually. I've wanted to offer a Heidi-red for years. And finally I had to ask myself, why do these always smell so good yet taste so tannic? Well *duh*, the problem was stupid me.

This is an utterly classic BF, recalling the Leithaberg of Prieler. The vineyard was "planted by Emma, Irma and Millie in 1955," on a gentle slope based on (the usual) sandy loam and limestone but with veins of gneiss and mica-schist; it's a happy *bomb* of BF, juice and spice and classic complex peppers and molten dark chocolate.

2017 Weissburgunder

12/750ml | AHS-201

Equally good out of two different glasses; broad and salty in the big bowl, denser and fruitier in the tulip, but oyster-shells in both, flowering-fields and mint. One of Heidi's best-ever vintages of this, and an argument for Austria's pre-eminence as a Pinot Blanc producer.

2017 Furmint

12/750ml | AHS-202

This has been leaning "natural" or in other words, aldehydic, and I'm not sure I welcome it. You may feel different if your palate is "conditioned" to these elements. I personally think Furmint is inherently exotic enough and should probably be made scrupulously. In the tulip it was like a chewy and somewhat edgy-funky Chenin, quite dense in texture, with only an inference of chamomile. Heidi won't be surprised to read this, as I spoke with her about it. She knows I don't want her Furmint to be *modern*, just on the safe side of funky.

After all, Furmint is uniquely precious. It's analog like Chenin but belongs in the family of floral whites, like Riesling and Petit Manseng and Amigne. It has high acidity and ripens very late. Signature flavors touch on chamomile, linden, rosewater, blown-out candle. It is gentle but unruly. You can't predict it, even from bottle to bottle. It is soulful and elusive and beautifully enigmatic, at least in Heidi's (usually) tender hands.

2017 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | AHS-203

The fruit was exceptionally ripe this year, and so it was partly mash-fermented and all of it was aged in wood. Thus it's not as definitively outlined as usual, and decidedly more exotic and not at all grapey. Though it's entirely Gelber, it has Ottonel elements, hibiscus and such-like, and a sideways reference to lemon and allspice. It's another glance toward natural-wine parameters.

2017 “Phoenix...aus der Flasche”

12/750ml | AHS-204

It's a *gemischter satz* that used to be called “Vogelsang” but had to change its name for almost certainly dumb reasons, or in other words, marketing or the “DAC” crap. The label shows the eponymous bird rising from the bottle. The idea is encouragingly rebellious but the (halbtrocken) wine is charming and quite yummy. It's Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay (for the final time; the CH is grafting over to Furmint, (bravo) and it's fruity in the best way. It tastes curiously like Champagne—a Marne valley Blanc de Blancs—straw, hay, cheesecake; you could call it chummy. It's a maker-of-friends.

2016 Grauburgunder

12/750ml | AHS-186

2017 Grauburgunder

12/750ml | AHS-205

The '16 is drawing down now. It's slimmer than the more Romanesque '17. I like it more, but the '17 is truer to type. One of the eight barriques is new; the wine shows sandalwood, star-anise, beef *jus* and the crusty piece at the end of the roast. It's acceptably woody.

2017 Rosé “Biscaya”

+ +

12/750ml | AHS-194

The wildest of my wild-child rosés is entirely breathtaking in 2017, and is about to receive a Very High Honor in the most serious wine magazine in Austria.

It's maybe a smidge less exotic than the '16, but it's still frickin' exotic. It's richer. The finish is literally extraordinary. It's spicy and vinous, with an insanely complex interplay of savories and florals. It now consists of *nine* varieties: Lagrein, Teroldego, Petit Verdot, Syrah, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Cab-Sauv, Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt, and tastes as though it was stealthily made by extraterrestrials.

HEIDI'S SWEET WINES

2015 Spätlese

6/375ml | AHS-207H

It's pleasantly buoyant and fresh, more sweet-straw than fruit as such. Some 15-year old Champagnes have this fragrance.

NV Beerenauslese

+

6/375ml | AHS-206H

A remarkable wine—100 liters of each vintage since 2001 as a “solera.”

The aroma is basic burnt caramel, but the palate is complex, savory and lovely. Just 8.3% alc, it's truly “honeyed” but artisan herb honey, not the nonsense in the plastic bear. A serious sweet wine.

2015 Ruster Ausbruch “On The Wings Of Dawn”

+

6/375ml | AHS-189H

After last year's “best-ever” edition of this quintessential Ausbruch, this '15 isn't far behind—if behind at all. I have all kinds of trouble putting young sweet wines into words, but this one's creamy and typical, a crème of papaya, mango, overripe peach and banana.

2014 Ruster Ausbruch Turner

+ +

6/750ml | AHS-175H

The cuvée is half-half Furmint and Sauvignon Blanc. Absolutely sensational aromasça dream. Botrytis at its noblest. The palate is sublime. Fresh in a form of fantastic weightless intensity. While such wines are often (to me) over-rich, this is like a soufflé of comice pears. Luxury and snap and delicacy; truly a miracle wine. The “Wings” is corporeal, but this wine is half human, half ghost. Skims the senses like a little waving scarf.

SATTLER



REGION/SUB REGION

Neusiedlersee / Taden

VINEYARD AREA

15 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

5,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Gravel with brown earth and sand

GRAPE VARIETIES

60% Zweigelt
30% St. Laurent
10% Syrah,
Cabernet Sauvignon,
Weißburgunder (Pinot Blanc),
Welschriesling

Erich did such a canny job of managing his inventory, very few people noticed that he made no wine from the 2016 vintage. The culprit was frost. In 2014 he lost most of his crop to hail. He is a testament to fortitude.

This is especially true because of the kind of wine he makes. He's the antithesis to show-offy wines. This man likes pure, generous, ripe fruit, and he feels no need to pimp it up with the usual embellishments. In this sense he is typical of what Austrian reds are becoming. A culture with "something to prove" is a culture making clunky overdone wines, brought to us by insecure growers who don't know how to trust what they actually have to contribute.

Cards on the table: *I love* these wines. They are not modest, they are not self-effacing, they are not tepid or anemic or being flim-flammed as "elegant." They are generous, hospitable, big-hearted wines driven by fruit, and grown in a warm place. They do not have the tensions of cool-climate reds; they have the *grace* of smart warm-climate reds.

It's admirably simple here. It's St. Laurent and Zweigelt, in regular and reserve qualities, and a rosé that's made from their *saignée*. Occasionally in a copious vintage a bit of the reserve wine is separated and sold as a single-vineyard old-vines cuvée (named for Nick Cave songs).

The basic wines are made in steel only. Zero wood. The St. Laurent especially is guaranteed to trick even the most cavalierly confident blind taster. Many many people have commented to me when tasting that wine, "Wow, this is a really deft use of oak," to which I've had the inexcusable delight of responding "Right, because there *isn't any*, which may be the deftest use of all." Imagine tasting all that smoky roundness and all those tertiary vinous flavors and all they do is come from the grape!

Right now I can only show you the rosé and the two basic wines; the reserves are still in (large) casks and will be bottled in late 2018 and offered in January '19. So we do suffer a brief hiatus for those beauties, but meanwhile we can console ourselves with....



2017 Zweigelt Rosé

12/750ml | AST-068

It's generous, zaftig, bursting with fruit, vinous and made to last a few years; it isn't fragile or perishable. It's the perfect wine to drink with the season's first fresh wild sockeye salmon. He doesn't make much and we take almost all of it, so if you got some be very happy. There's just a smidge remaining.

2017 St Laurent

12/750ml | AST-065

Super fruit, and the marmalade richness of a ripe year; indeed the fruit borders on bombastic, as welcoming and even seductive as this wine can be; plums, spare ribs, tobacco; lavish yet not opulent. Bottled unusually early (January '18) so it's more developed than we normally see it. He needed the wine!

2017 Zweigelt

12/750ml | AST-069

This is ridiculously tasty! Every single fetching element of Zweigelt is crammed into this; it couldn't fathomably be yummiier. No *true* hedonist should be without it.?

SÜDBURGENLAND

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

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

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

There's a sort of sub-village on the hill above the sleepy village of Deutsch Schützen, called *Weinberg*, which contains all the winery cellars and Heurigen, dotted over the gentle upward roll. Only the Eisenberg itself is dramatic; the rest of the region is gentle and pretty.

There's a local wine specialty called *Uhudler*, which is actually made from *vitis Labrusca*, but it's the remarkable Blaufränkisch that concerns us here. There are three acknowledged elite growers:

Szemes, UweSchiefer, and Krutzler, and supporting them are a host of fine country wine estates, at least one of which—Wallner—is very fine indeed.

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

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

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

In the interim, though, we've had to contend with another application of the dreaded "DAC" nonsense, which is covering the wine lands of Austria like a plague. I'm sure they don't care what I think, but to the degree my rantings cross their minds they probably figure they'll wear me down. Eventually it'll be settled fact and we'll get used to it just like we get used to any number of unwarranted things we put in the drawer called "Life's little irritations." I promise you, I won't get used to it, ever, because it is (or would have been) such an avoidable calamity.

WALLNER



REGION/SUB REGION

Südburgenland / Deutsch-Schützen

VINEYARD AREA

8 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

2,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Deutsch-Schützen Weinberg

(profound, medium-weight to heavy loam over slate in deeper layers, some iron oxide)

Eisenberg

(light to medium-weight loam and sand mixed with slate and iron oxide)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Blaufränkisch

13% white grapes

7% Zweigelt

5% Cabernet Sauvignon (cuvée only)

3% Merlot (cuvée only)

2% St. Laurent

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

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

Though Wallner grows Zweigelt and St. Laurent (as well as a little Cab and Merlot), the Blaufränkisch is obviously front and center, and it’s the wine I’ll concentrate on.

Wallner will make you smile. Wallner will make you very nearly laugh out loud. But Wallner will also make you pause at times, because these wines, as happy as they are, are not *jolly* or boisterous.

Gerhard believes in keeping back-vintages around as long as possible, to show what Blaufränkisch is like when out of its infancy. I like his young wines, but I’m going to show you these vintages as long as I possibly can.

This year I tasted Wallner and Krutzler cheek-by-jowl and off-site, as I’d been trying to get at my respective visions of the two estates. Though Krutzler is counted among the “nobility” of the region, he himself is unpretentious—no one preens in this little hidden corner—and everyone seems collegial and neighborly. Yet it is clear when tasting the two estates that Wallner is more yummy and Krutzler is more polished. Put another way, Krutzler is admirable and Wallner adorable. Krutzler’s wines impress my cerebral probing palate, which responds to their finesse, craftsmanship and intelligence. They are of course also tasty wines, but for the nth degree of tastiness we plopp ourselves down in front of a glass, or preferably a *bucket* of Wallner. Not that those wines lack finesse or craftsmanship; just that they deliver a more overtly sensual joy, which I think is valuable in the context of the very *particular* Blaufränkisch.

Wallner is also rather below-the-radar, which actually makes me happy. I’m not as a rule a “proud” guy, but I am proud of this selection, because this man is the real deal and his wines return jaded old me to some primordial bliss of just smacking my damn lips over a glass of wine.

2013 St Laurent

12/750ml | AWL-031

Gerhard had just blown my mind with his *white* Blaufränkisch (not enough wine to justify shipping, alas!), and then he goes and charms me with this fetching St. L. How does anyone walk away from a wine like this? Great roasty aromas, earthy in the best way; super primary fruit and an iron twang below. Generous and hearty but not remotely rustic. Grillin' some burgers? Upgrade the dreck you drink on your deck!

2015 Blaufränkisch

12/750ml | AWL-038

This is as charming as Blaufränkisch **ever** gets, with the dark-bread savor typical for Wallner and the sweet berries of BF; great length and varietal spice; it's still angular as BF is yet it's cuddly and glad, it's a glad, flowing wine.

2016 Blaufränkisch "Eisenberg DAC"

12/750ml | AWL-042

(It's on the label, I *have* to reference it!) The wine was three weeks in the bottle when I saw it, but if BF has a "pretty" side it is this. Almost flowery, certainly charming, but dustier and more angular than, say, Glatzer's equivalent. Sweet tannin, and no need to wait for it either—it quivers to be drunk now.

2015 Blaufränkisch "Eisenberg DAC Reserve"

(+)

12/750ml | AWL-043

A youthful shroud to get through, but 2015 makes sweetheart wines down here, and the dusty sweet-cherry fruit pierces the tannic membrane and mixes with the rampant pepper (Madagascar in this case) in a mélange that's textbook BF.

2013 Blaufränkisch "Eisenberg DAC Reserve"

+

12/750ml | AWL-032

I liked this last year and I love it this year; again it's the sweet and alluring side of BF, resolving to berries and pepper and roasting lamb juices on the savory long finish, which nips with a snap of mizuna.

2013 Blaufränkisch "Namenlos"

+

12/750ml | AWL-035

His best cuvée of BF; old vines (40 to 90), done in hogsheads a few of which are new. It's the classic case of the biggest wines being best in the lightest vintages, and this wine is slimmer and more elegant with another year in the bottle. It shows a strong graphite note usually only implied, and it's more pure **BF**, less a generic *Tête-du-cuvée*. It was pungently mineral in the Zalto "Bordeaux" glass, which I can endorse for BF in general (which also does well in the Riedel "Chianti Classico" shape).

KRUTZLER



REGION/SUB REGION

Südburgenland / Deutsch-Schützen

VINEYARD AREA

10 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

5,833 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Deutsch-Schützen Weinberg and Bründlgfangen

*(profound, medium-weight to heavy
loam over slate in deeper layers,
some ironoxide) ;*

Eisenberg

*(light to medium-weight loam and
sand mixed with slate and ironoxide)*

GRAPE VARIETIES

84% Blaufränkisch

8% Zweigelt

3% Merlot

3% white grapes

2% Cabernet Sauvignon (cuvée only)

A few years ago I had a moment of euphoria while tasting what seemed like the dawn of a new “era” at Krutzler, less broody more fruit-forward wines, friendlier wines, more comradely. I thought he showed cojones to walk away from the Affect Of Significance and concentrate instead on deliciousness. I asked Reinhold Krutzler if my impression was correct, if this was a deliberate course-correction of his, and he confirmed that it was.

The following year the wines had reverted, mostly, to the way they were. I wondered about this. The wines were mostly just bottled—were they bottled earlier last year? I don’t know. What I think I know is, when I see the wines it is either too soon after bottling, or at big tastings when my palate is over-stimulated and distorted. Perhaps I receive a false impression? Maybe I like them better in cooler vintages, when they’re more transparent and graceful? I do think these are wines of a type wherein I’m a minority, someone who doesn’t “get” them. I see other tasters full of admiration, and suppose I am at fault.

But maybe not. I feel as much admiration as anyone does, and I felt it again this year. These are wines of a very high class, and while I often find them opaque, that could easily be my own fault and not the wines’.

The splendid stature of the “Perwolff” is easy to grok, even when the wine’s young. It’s the everyday wines I want to feel chummier toward. Because this is legitimately an Icon-domain in Austria, and I wonder at my adequacy when I’m cool toward what should be the most approachable wines on the table.



2017 Blaufränkisch

12/750ml | AKR-037

(One month in-bottle) Reinhold is doing less mash-time and also seeks lower alcohol for this, his “basic” wine. The results were obscured by bottle-muteness, but even somewhat subdued there was plenty of BF twang and a lot of polish for an entry level bottling. Quite earnestly spicy, weedy and dark.

2017 Blaufränkisch “Eisenberg DAC”

12/750ml | AKR-038

(cask sample) In fact this is 90% from the *actual* Eisenberg, which stood for a bona-fide place before it was applied to an appellation system. A lot more character here, and also a lot more tannin; it’s a broody peppery guy who represents the particularity of the region, all the way to the iron-like Sarawak pepper flavors. Juicy angular finish.

2016 Blaufränkisch “Eisenberg DAC Reserve”

(+)

12/750ml | AKR-040

(cask sample) The aroma is completely lovely and the wine is rather obscure on the palate, until that aroma returns on the finish to show a Perigord-truffle complexity. Bottling often focuses wines like this, and it’s in bottle by the time you’re reading these words.

2016 Blaufränkisch “Clemens”

+ (+)

6/750ml | AKR-041

From the *Reihburg* vineyard, among the region’s greatest, this is a small bit of what would have been the iconic “Perwolff” which was almost entirely lost to hail. I was bemused at first—it was fine wine of a “type” I tend to dismiss (sweet fruit, lots of tannin, “oodles of toasty oak”) but as it breathed it showed a true essence of BF in all its depth, structure—and I mean structure; the wine has 6g/l acidity!—and grinning-iron complexity, billowing impressively in the glass.

GLATZER



REGION/SUB REGION

Carnuntum / Göttlesbrunn

VINEYARD AREA

54 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

25,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Rosenberg,
Kräften**

(calcerous clay)

Haidacker

(gravel, loam and clay)

Altenberg

(gravel and clay, with high lime content)

Schüttenberg

(sandy loam and gravel)

Bärenreise

(sandy loam and clay)

GRAPE VARIETIES

37% Zweigelt

17% Blaufränkisch

12% Grüner Veltliner

10% Merlot

8% Cabernet Sauvignon

5% Weissburgunder

3% Sauvignon Blanc

2% St. Laurent

2% Pinot Noir

2% Syrah

2% other

Glatzer will be (Lacón) certified organic with the 2018 vintage. Yes, Glatzer, whom many of us think of as a supplier of wines of, let's say, modest consequence. Walter himself, who is in classic midlife, would like to change that.

I got a little spooked. The man has made many dozens of the most helplessly delicious red wines I have drunk in the last 25 years, and I kind of don't want that to stop. Walter is thinking of legacy, and has reached a point you will have reached (if you're my age) or will soon reach (if you're my son's age) where you ask "Is this all I want to do in the time left to me?"

His ambitions are immediately apparent in the whites, which are by far the best they have ever been. This I applaud and am grateful for. But I pleaded with him, please don't make the reds be "serious," affected or earnest. There's nothing trivial about deliciousness! But in fact I'm a little divided about all this. My friend isn't a trained puppet who has to keep making the wines I happen to love. He's a man who charts his own destiny. I respect him for wanting to find his touchstone. Maybe, I suggested, he can make some of

the wines "important" and let the others keep being delicious? Yes, he said, that's the plan. So, well, <whew>.

I've known Walter Glatzer, sheesh, since I started with Austria; even before, as he was one of the first growers I met while I was forming the first portfolio. He's a hearty kind of fellow, and his wines are nothing if not extremely friendly, but this doesn't arise from a choice to be "unpretentious." Glatzer seems to be missing whatever DNA-strand is responsible for high solemnity, or whatever it is that tempts people to strut. At one point I might also have seen them as charming "little" wines, and defended their virtues—as I still would. But today I think they have a richer claim to stake. Far from being "little" wines, I believe Glatzer's wines show that substance is certainly compatible with deliciousness, and that too many growers have ventured too far from basic sensuality when they form their wines. You could erase 90% of the so-called "serious" red wines from the earth and I wouldn't even sigh. But a world without these cooing beauties? That would be poverty.

2017 Zweigelt “Rebencuvée”

12/750ml | AGL-229

Both this and the basic Blaufränkisch offered below were markedly aloof and “cool” for ‘17s. I expected more effusion. I’m not bummed, mind you; just that these wines, both classic in the truest sense, have a polite reserve and seem at this time to be introverts.

2017 Blaufränkisch

12/750ml | AGL-230

Here you watch the finish to see the varietal typicity. I expect these will open up, but they’re certainly somewhat fruit-evasive for such a ripe vintage.

2016 St. Laurent *Altenberg*

12/750ml | AGL-231

(From organic grapes) This is as fine and even minerally as St Laurent can be. Polished, almost crunchy, a lovely ‘16 and a seldom-seen profile for SL, but Walter has the touch with it, and his SL is never wild or feral.

2015 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”

12/750ml | AGL-223

There is a wine between the basic Zweigelt and this one, and it was delicious, and I knew it would suffer the fate of so many in-between wines: everyone wants either the “best” one or the “cheapest” one, and the luckless one in the middle is forlorn and neglected. It was gorgeous, though, and somebody will love it.

And yet, this. It is the most transparent and elegant of all the *ripe* vintages of this wine, even more so than the ‘13, and it is dripping with class; like a super-refined chocolate with violet petals, rare duck in a clove-scented jus, and sweetheart tannin gives it a tactile texture.

2015 Blaufränkisch Reserve

12/750ml | AGL-224

His best BF since the 2009 single-vineyard *Bernreiser*. It’s as glissy and slippery as BF can be; if the variety has an enticing face, this is it. Yet with every bit of the varietal focus and all the purple flowers, only less of the weeds and gorse. The finish is irresistible! Out on a limb: ***IF YOU ONLY BUY ONE BF FROM THIS OFFERING, BUY THIS ONE.***

2015 Blaufränkisch *Bernreiser*

12/750ml | AGL-233

Oh boy, this isn’t just a sweetie-pie, it’s a fascinating and enticing beast, as seductive as BF can be, as though you took all its angularity and weediness and napped it with a tasty *jus* and a chocolate dust. A lot in reserve, and I may come to regret the lack of a “plus.”

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/750ml | AGL-226

Yes, 2017 is patently successful for the lighter GV’s, but something else is up with this. It is entirely *stronger* than it’s ever been, even in other ripe years, and in contrast to the sometimes earnest nature of ‘17s this wine is frisky, albeit solid and big-boned. Utter vetiver. Magnify its usual qualities by a factor of 2.5; the “plus” is for sheer vigor.



2017 Grüner Veltliner “Dornenvogel”

+

12/750ml | AGL-228

A telling moment occurred. The wine is a *sponti* (the German slang for spontaneous ferments) and spent a long time on its fine lees, and when I lifted it to my nose it smelled for all the world like.....Mosel Riesling. And it made me wonder: how much of that aroma is ineluctably Riesling itself, and how much are the *sponti* and fine-lees aromas? I mean, here's a Grüner Veltliner about a thousand miles away from the Mosel, and “Mosel” is all I can smell.

I like those aromas, very much. But an even more subversive question has to be asked. Is the *sponti* aroma always the same? Is it an ingredient that actually obscures terroir? The naturalistas won't countenance such a heresy, such is their preoccupation with yeast. And I am not proposing it as any kind of Great Truth. It's just a question no one has asked.

Eventually the *sponti-lees* blanket recedes and we get a big-ass GV with moderate alcohol and a big leesy-fluffy texture leading to a doughy finish. It's a rad dialect of GV and a way cool wine.

2017 Weissburgunder

12/750ml | AGL-234

Chalk, oyster shells, basmati rice and corn. The texture is zippy and the flavors present a dialogue of ginger and jicama, yet the finish is as juicy as the pan *jus* from a slice of pike-perch you just sautéed.

2017 Sauvignon Blanc

+

12/750ml | AGL-235

A super-fine expressive vintage of this, with the variety's oft-found loutishness pleasantly restrained. It's herbal, almost flinty, emphasizing currant leaf and redcurrant itself. It could almost be Scheurebe (a compliment), and shows wonderful solid savor. I adore this wine; it's the best that “basic” SB can be, and I'll put it up against any other SB at its price.

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.

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 entire Weinviertel is known, as Germany’s Rheinhessen is known—as the up and coming new region, DACs and related nonsense notwithstanding.

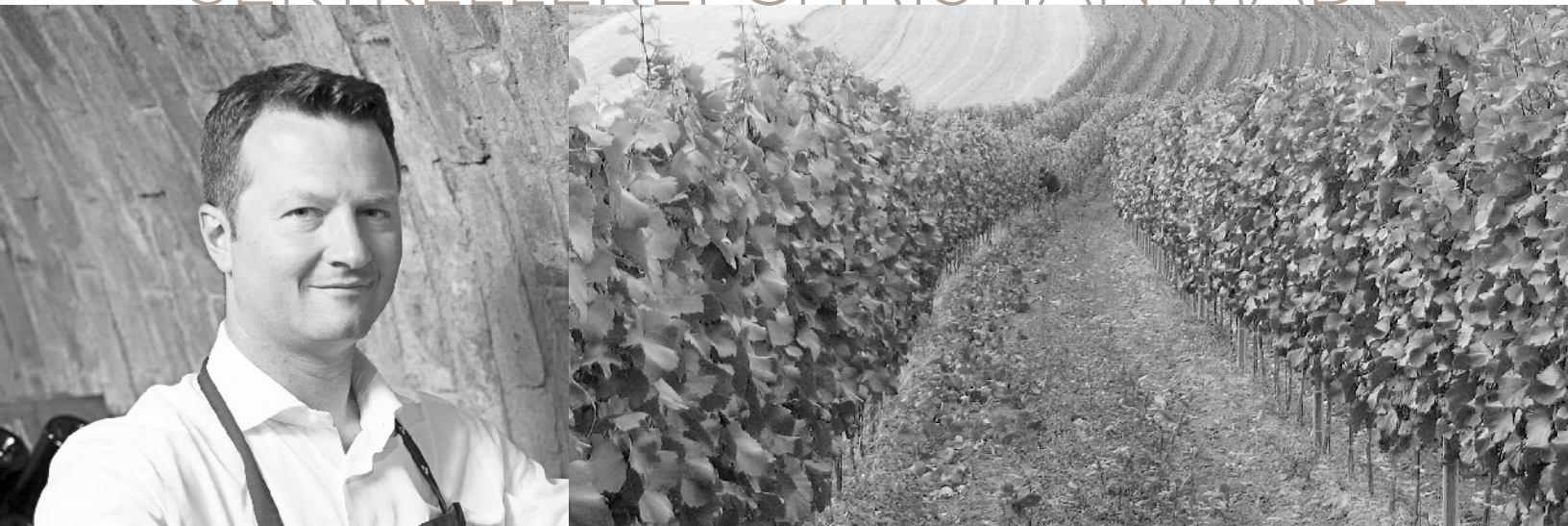
This started maybe 20 years ago, when the first wave of young growers applied modern methods and made far better wines than the innocuous plonk which came before. Attention was duly paid. But with repeated exposure one began to want something the wines weren’t giving. They were certainly “contemporary” 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 ur-

gency 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.

The region has been, let’s say, detected, by intrepid writers on the scent of a story, and the story they’re tempted to tell is about the mavericks and innovators, the growers with an “angle.” That’s cool; everyone likes folks who stir things up. I myself have been drawn to what I’d call the deep classicists, that’s just the way I am, because it is clear to me when the wheel does *not* need reinvention.

SEKTKELLEREI CHRISTIAN MADL



We crossed wires last year, the result of which was we didn't obtain any wine. That shall change starting now.

As best I can tell, Madl is the only producer in Austria who only makes sparkling wine. With his entrance, and with the ever-burgeoning assortments from Bründlmayer, Gobelsburg, Nigl and Nikolaihof, we're becoming a kind of fizz junction. This young gent is a freak for fizz; a bunch of my growers know him (and he disgorges the excellent Sekt from Schwarzböck) and all were tickled to hear I'd included him.

He's located in Poysdorf, northeast of Vienna almost at the Czeck border. He began in 2003, after apprenticeships in Champagne, Germany and Luxembourg. He picks everything by hand in small cases, and only the free-run juice is used for the MADL Sekt. (A second label makes use of the *taille*.) He does all the cellar work himself, by hand, and strives for the longest possible *tirage*. As is often the case in such instances, the wines are concussed after disgorgement and need 6-9 months on the cork before they re-emerge. He makes his own *dosage*, using cane (not beet) sugar.

The wines age beautifully.

He prints disgorgement dates on the label. We didn't even have to ask him to.

It's a teensy operation, a twig over 3 hectares, growing Welschriesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, GrüVe, Zweigelt and Riesling. A small amount of still wine is made, which I hope to taste soon, but we came in search of bubbles this time. If you go to this page: www.sektkellereimadl.at/Neues.htm you can see his many awards and accolades, which you can glean even if you don't read German. In a recent VINARIA tasting of Sekt, Madl took three of the top-5 places, including nos. 1 and 2.

This is what's called a "boutique" producer (I prefer the word *bijou*, especially when I extend my pinkie.) and he can't afford to wait to release the wines until well after disgorgement. I've tasted old examples and can attest to how effing delicious and serious they are, when they're in the proper shape. But I chose conservatively, at least for now, until I can see how the wines "show" over here, especially at tastings.

A final word: his motto is **50 handlings per bottle**. The guy's a fanatic, just the kind I like.

“Von Den Weißen,” Brut 2013

6/750ml | AMD-001

An assemblage of several white varieties, most saliently Welschriesling; deg. March 7 2018, and still resembling Marne valley Champagne but with the hay and zucchini twang of Welschriesling. Still, look at this; the “entry-level” wine is on the lees four years!

Zweigelt Rosé, Brut 2013

6/750ml | AMD-002

Deg 4/27/18 (like, a week before I tasted it) yet it was entirely expressive and massively original. It isn't elegant or noble but has a spazzy energy and fruit like you *never* tasted. Then in the glass it shape-shifts, getting richer and more sedate, less bubble-gum, more citrus and herbs—totally fascinating. The puppy energy leads to a sort of repose and balance. A curious equipoise of energy and calm, along with flavors like few other wines.

Cuvée Speciale Brut

6/750ml | AMD-003

Deg 2/2018, and suffering from it by dint of a stubborn reduction that eventually fades. Combines 2011/2012, 50-50 CH/PN, so a classical profile. This is where tasting the older wine was revelatory; it revealed (I hope) the potential seriousness below the current funk. A little risky, this selection, so c'mon dude, reward my faith.

SCHWARZBÖCK



REGION/SUB REGION

Weinviertel / Hagenbrunn

VINEYARD AREA

24 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Kirchberg,
Sätzen**

(löss)

Aichleiten

(flyschgestein with löss)

Hölle

(flyscht)

GRAPE VARIETIES

50% Grüner Veltliner

15% Zweigelt

10% Gelber Muskateller

10% Riesling

5% Merlot

10% other

The estate straddles the line between the “DACs” of Wien (Vienna) and Weinviertel, which makes for some, let’s say, whimsical labeling issues, but the home village of Hagenbrunn is at the edge of Wien in any case—over here it would be an exurb or even a far-suburb. It’s warmer than most of the Weinviertel, and there’s an unusual soil called flysch—“Deposits of dark, fine-grained, thinly bedded sandstone shales and of clay, thought to be deposited by turbidity currents and originally defined as rock formations on the northern and southern borders of the Alps,” according to the Free Dictionary.

Schwarzböck is a successful and well-regarded estate within Austria, and over the years I have liked and even loved many of the wines. Two “situations” have arisen; one, that I haven’t known from year to year *which* wines I’ll like, and two, that many of the “important” wines have crept north of 14% alc, which is bothersome to me.

And apparently also to them. The last two vintages have been free of it. Both are exceptionally successful collections, and we’re slowly whittling down to a sustainable assortment, to be augmented by bits and pieces of compelling one-offs as circumstances compel.

What does this family of wines taste

like? Well hmmm.....modern but not squeaky-clean or sterile. Fruity but not as much “sweet” fruit as, say, Setzer. Vivid but more zaft and body than, say, Ecker. They are closest in mouth-feel perhaps to Berger.

But the larger story is told via this anecdote. We have a restaurant customer in Minneapolis who bought a case of Sekt from here, and as soon as she tasted it she was dismayed only to have eleven more bottles. Could she get more? Sure thing! And the point is, in the overgrown thickets of this portfolio there are—no shit—probably almost a hundred excellent wines that only need a modicum of attention paid to be seen as the gems they truly are. Someone happened to order Schwarzböck Sekt—how almost odd! I wonder why. (Maybe she has a cat named “Schwarzböck.”) Maybe my tasting note spoke to her. Maybe she’s just smarter than the average bear. So as you, dear customer, are ho-humming your way through the “no-names” in this portfolio, play a little game with me. Just eenie-meenie-miney-mo a single wine, any wine, totally random, wherever “mo” happens to fall, and buy a case. A mere case! Taste the sucker. Did I mislead you, or did you just make a discovery you were ready to breeze right past?

2016 Zweigelt Bisamberg (Wien)

12/750ml | ASB-094

I dare you to try to resist this. You can't, not when you taste it. Classic black-cherry and flowery peppers (Tasmanian, Madagascar) and violets. In its humble way this is *perfect* wine, the antidote to the worst of the "natural" wines, like Naxalone for crud-wine overdoses.

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | ASB-089L

What to say? The wine is *on the money*. Exactly what it should be. Richer than usual but still fresh. Prototypical.

2017 Grüner Veltliner "Vier Zeiten"

12/750ml | ASB-087

Looked at as an analog to, say, Glatzer, this one is less tensile and juicier, more lentilly, fruit-driven and polished, if less racy and strong. A light big wine that isn't simple; delicate peppery finish.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Sätzen

12/750ml | ASB-091

Technically this is also "Weinviertel DAC" for whatever grand significance that entails. Old vines (some over 60) in sandy loam over flysch, from Hagenbrunn where the winery is located. Just bottled, it shows pepper and mizuna, nettles and wild herbs and crushed rocks. Classic in the most correct sense.

2018 Riesling Ried Achleiten Reserve

12/750ml | ASB-095

This **late-release, first offering** is almost demure, a discreet and typical '16, whose refined aroma implies rather than announces; an edge of herbals, a mirabelle note, less the fruit than the *schnapps*. In a way this is a *pure* Riesling in its very absence of particularity.

2017 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | ASB-088

The estate is justly known for its always-excellent Muscat, and this '17 is all elderflower; almost gentle, not bracing, but a big silky caress, as delicate as Ottonel might be, but infinitely more refined.

2014 Riesling Brut SEKT

12/750ml | ASB-080

A new disgorgement (12/2017) again by Madl, it's a *huge* sleeper in this offering. Full-on flowery aromas, "doughy," charm and charm and more charm, pumpernickel and iris, with a finish like yeast and kiwi.

+

H.u.M. HOFER



REGION/SUB REGION

Weinviertel / Auersthal

VINEYARD AREA

20 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

16,600 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Freiberg

(*löss with loam*)

Kirchlissen

(*löss with clay*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

53% Grüner Veltliner

13% Zweigelt

9% Riesling

8% Welschriesling

4% St. Laurent

3% Weissburgunder

2% Gelber Muskateller

8% other

FARMING PRACTICES

Bio-Ernte Certified Organic

Auersthal is just barely beyond Vienna's northern suburbs, in a dead-still little wine village.

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

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

The wines are what I sometimes call scrupulous. They're not as sweet-natured as Setzer, not as creamy as Schwarzböck, not as brilliant as Ecker, but they are some parts of all those things, right down the middle. They're articulate and expressive. And they tend not to sell out within a year of the vintage, which is wonderful when Hans has great vintages like 2015, though his '16s were remarkably rich and full for that vintage.

Most of you know this grower from his GV Liters, but while he's too nice a guy ever to kvetch *What about my other wines?* I'm not that nice and I don't mind kvetching. **You need to see how good this grower is!**

2017 Zweigelt

12/1000ml | AHF-099L

Rich and plummy, as though it had St Laurent in it (in a sense it does, as SL is a parent of Zweigelt); quite lush for a “basic” Liter wine, with almost a New World fleshiness.

2013 Zweigelt “Klassik”

12/750ml | AHF-089

This started out round and berried, velvety and typical, with a warm earthy touch, but with bottle age it’s grown plummier and more ample. Apart from which it’s great to offer a Zweigelt that isn’t relentlessly primary; you can see how it leans toward an almost Burgundian roundness as it develops.

2015 St. Laurent

12/750ml | AHF-088

This is as gorgeously seductive as ST-L ever gets, and even tasting it at room temperature (73°) doesn’t compromise it, warp its structure, intrude on its freshness or create that spirit-y thing over-warm reds can do. It’s a perfect mélange of fruit and wood, in this case 2nd-use barrique. +

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AHF-092L

The last 2-3 vintages have shown a marked improvement, stronger and richer. . By the way, he will move from crown cap to screw cap, for a very good reason: the screw-cap bottle *weighs less, which means it costs less energy to produce and to ship*. How nice to see this humble producer of a cheap Liter caring about his environmental impact, while the Great And Lofty gods of Germany’s VDP are still allowing **STUPID HEAVY PRETENTIOUS BOTTLES** to be used for their Grosses Gewächse.

2017 Grüner Veltliner “V.d.R.”

12/750ml | AHF-094

This is a cuvée of several vineyards which used to be called (translated) “from the vineyards,” but the panjandra who craft the exquisite new wine regulations in Austria have determined that the unwary consumer, seeing “vineyards,” might think this came from just one “vineyard,” so the old name *Von den Rieden* is now made into an acronym which I have wasted all these damn words explaining. The wine itself, usually light, is a big boy of 13% alc in the ripe ‘17 vintage, and is replete with smoky oleander in the ‘17 way. Vetiver emerges alongside brassicas and sorrel, and the wine shows extract density with air.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Freiberg

12/750ml | AHF-090

This is Hofer’s biggest most apricot-y GV and it’s often best in “normal” vintages—like this one. Wet cereal aromas are racy and wonderful and inviting; the palate has a lovely dialogue of green and yellow, aloe and wintergreen conversing with mirabelle and cox-orange apples. More detailed and spicy than in bigger vintages. Notes of balsam emerge along with orchid, oolong tea and sorrel. Really a polished, beautiful wine. +

2015 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kirchlissen

12/750ml | AHL-084

As long as he still has it, I’m buying it. This is the best wine Hofer has ever made; chervil, anise-hyssop aromas; highly refined palate shows a balsam sweetness; the whole herb garden is grinning and beaming. *Dicht*, clarity, length, comparing favorably to Nig’s loess GVs—yes, even the Alte Reben, amazingly. I have it in my cellar and have drunk it several times, each time wondering whether I’d find my early praise too fulsome, but no: this is superb GV by any standards, and also a **RIDICULOUS VALUE**. ++

2017 Zweigelt Rosé

12/1000ml | AHF-084

Tender and delicious and effective and long.

2017 Zweigelt Rosé

12/750ml | AHF-095

This is restrained and serious, with *true* fruit and texture, like a not-very-sweet smoothie of strawberry and rhubarb.

SETZER



REGION / SUB REGION

Weinviertel / Hohenwarth

VINEYARD AREA

30 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

16,700 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Laa,

Eichholz

(*löss over alluvial gravel and limestone*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

50% Grüner Veltliner

30% Roter Veltliner

20% Riesling,

Pinot Blanc,

Chardonnay,

Sauvignon Blanc,

Zweigelt,

Merlot

What *does* happen with the wines in the middle? The ones that aren't rowdy and galvanic, but also not cerebral or arcane? I often call such wines humane, or gracious, or civilized, but that makes it sound like the way you have to act during the first dinner at your girlfriend's parents' house. I receive an actual tactile sense of pleasure from cordial, charming wines, but that's because I insist on having the time to pause and appreciate them. It does come down to time. Charm is a thing we cultivate.

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15 minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the summit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure löss terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram.

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

The question is whether craftsmanship, intelligence and charm are things we value enough to pay for—to pay anything

for. We pay for "greatness" and we pay for "value" but when we buy a Setzer wine I would argue we're paying for a kind of humanity and civility. Do you value good conversation? Then what would you say if someone observed *What's the fuss? All you did was sit and talk?* You'd say, "You don't understand, clearly," and you'd be correct. And you'd start to know why I feel these lovely wines are less cherished than they ought to be.

Yet for all my effusions on behalf of moderation and charm, Setzers have fallen prey to excessive alcohol in their "top" wines, about which we have a good-natured disagreement. I prefer those wines in light vintages, when their strength is welcome, but in strong years like '17 they spill over the banks—to me—and I don't know what functions they might serve. They're also a curious throwback to a style that's being abandoned by many other growers, except to the degree it sometimes can't be helped.

I view Setzer as, at best, a maker of *beautiful* wines, and perhaps they view themselves as makers of *powerful* wines at least at the top end. After all, it's the big boys who establish an estate's reputation, and it's quite possible I view them through a subjective prism that isn't quite accurate. I wonder what the years will bring. Meanwhile, I offer the wines I prefer, hope that Setzers are OK with that—but I *am* offering one of the mighty ones, the one I found most interesting, so you can taste it and decide for yourselves.

2016 Zweigelt

12/750ml | ASZ-102

Taste this and see what I mean when I say “delicious and *civilized*;” This ‘16 is as elegant as always, spicy, dusty, too ripe to be trivial but not so ripe as to be solemn; it’s a structured, violet-y, black cherry and tobacco leaf wine, redolent of right-bank Claret.

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | ASZ-099L

In keeping with the general success of 2017 for these guzzlers, this one is vivid, ripe and delightful!

2017 Grüner Veltliner “Ausstich”

12/750ml | ASZ-100

(DAC) This is a ripe, elegant wine, perfect in its moderate way, with some of the virtues of the great 2013s—focused spice, classic pepper, brassica and boxwood, some of the ore-like flavor of many ‘17s; a lot of strength delivered in this measured graceful form. A wine like this isn’t a *challenge*. It will not “stun” you. A wine like this is a *friend*.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kirchengarten Reserve

6/750ml | ASZ-105

Here’s that big-boy I said I’d show you. Grown on *buntsandstein*, it’s alcoholic—to my taste obtrusively so—but it does have originality; markedly green top notes and a kind of *sauvage* pepperiness that brought Provence to mind, like mustard-greens and mints.

Maybe I am a pill about high alcohol, I don’t know. I explore the subject at length in my new book. But I drink or taste maybe a thousand wines in the course of an average year, and I swear to you, it happens no more than once or twice that I taste a wine I find to be graceful and harmonious and learn it has over 14% alc. Something seems to start at just that level that I find coarse and brusque. “Rude-ripeness” is my private term for it.

2017 Roter Veltliner “Wiener Symphoniker”

12/750ml | ASZ-103

This will explain it: www.austrianwine.com/our-wine/grape-varieties/white-wine/roter-veltliner/

It isn’t a mutated Grüner, though it tastes like an *aspect* of GV, the shiitake and roasted pepper side, without the citrics and leaves. The vine requires a dedicated grower, and its proponents are more like “protectors” than just vintners. I didn’t go in search of it but it kind of found me, via Setzer (and Ecker), and when I like it I offer it to you.

This is the lighter of two RVs Setzer makes. Typically for me I prefer the “little” one in big vintages and the “big” one in little vintages. This is also the house wine of the orchestra after which it is named. (I’d like to hear them perform after imbibing one of Setzer’s giant GVs north of 14%....) It’s a fine light RV that clings in a minerally wash on the palate, after a fervid aroma of braises and sandalwood.

WAGRAM

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

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

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

ECKER



REGION / SUB REGION

Wagram / Kirchberg-Mitterstockstall

VINEYARD AREA

20 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

11,600 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Steinberg

(weathered primary rock)

Schloßberg,

Im Wasn,
Mitterberg

(löss)

Mordthal

(löss with high lime content)

GRAPE VARIETIES

50% Grüner Veltliner

15% Zweigelt

12% Roter Veltliner

5% Riesling

5% St. Laurent

5% Weißburgunder

4% Sauvignon Blanc

4% Gelber Muskateller

This is modern wine at its best. The wines are so fine and charming they are almost amusing.

But oof, that word “modern.” Is it ever misaligned with the zeitgeist. Modern, yuck, technology, precision, and god help us, *cleanliness*. How do we square that with the atavism we so smugly cultivate?

But you know, I have Nikolaihof also in this portfolio. The two estates would appear to be diametrically opposed. Can I possibly square that circle?

Somehow, yes. Because nothing in my experience has ever insisted I have to *choose* between those styles. I seem to love them both. I *insist* on loving them both.

Such a position might confuse the seekers of screed, but my only dogma is to have no dogma. Every single opinion I hold about wine is based on what I receive as delicious and beautiful, and on the accumulated experience of four decades. If something transpires to topple an opinion I have formed, my opinion changes. If not, it doesn't.

The joys of Nikolaihof do not exclude the joys of Ecker. You have my pity if you

think they do, because you are limiting your access to pleasure. And for very bad reasons.

When I taste a vintage as superb as 2017 is at Ecker, a basic joy begins to compound itself until I'm feeling an acute delight. It's what I felt when I first read Shaw, or whenever I hear an especially clear and articulate speaker (or writer); an acute relief that anything can be said after all, that the world of obscure and abstruse ideas can finally yield to transparency, to clarity. As one blazing clear, gorgeously vital wine follows another at Ecker, delight finally gives way to euphoria. For me this is an experience of soul. Of affirmation and gratitude.

And 2017 is the best vintage I have tasted here. You really ought to lunge toward these wines. Nor will they hurt your budget. Everyone you serve them to will adore you. They are the taste of the bounce in your step. They are when you're flirting and you know it's working. They are the taste of giddiness, of magnetism, they are the moment when speech turns into music.

2017 Zweigelt

12/1000ml | AEC-125L

“Brambly,” one might say. Blackberries-plus; the wine smells like nature at its warmest and sweetly animal; it isn’t a “sweet” Zweigelt, it’s more rose-hips and *groseille*.

2017 Zweigelt “Brillant”

12/750ml | AEC-124

You want to know what pure, sweet fruit tastes like? It tastes like *this*.

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AEC-113L

Though I show it first we actually taste it last, after the big guys that precede it, not as a palate-reset but to show how it holds up. *It holds up*. In 2017 it’s crisp but not as racy as lighter vintages.

2017 Grüner Veltliner “von Mitterstockstall”

12/750ml | AEC-115

It’s become a “village” wine so that the classifiers can rest easy and no innocent consumer will be duped into thinking it’s a single-site. The wine itself is *perfect*. Wee and winsome and ludicrously tasty and sneakily long. Loess GV at a tiny apex of sublimity.

2017 Grüner Veltliner “vom Schotter”

12/750ml | AEC-120

It means “from gravel,” and the wine, for all its mighty 12% alc, shows astonishing substance, lentilly length, legume and sorrel and balsam into a finely salty herbal finish. All the things to love about Ecker!

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Steinberg

12/750ml | AEC-121

Primary rock now, a soil that’s rare in the Wagram. Another hulking colossus at 12.5 alc, it’s like salt and pepper in a single grinder; it has a core of rocks and talc and a nettle-y umami, some mizuna but not brash; sweet resin like a fresh Christmas tree, and mineral coats every scilla of the palate. At this point I was groping fruitlessly for a wine to leave behind.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Schlossberg

12/750ml | AEC-116

Back to loess, a prototype for Wagram GV. The wine is *total* wet-cereal and straw-hay sweetness; it’s toastier than the Steinberg (though both are made in steel), showing dill, caraway, chervil, the “serious” face of loess.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Mordthal Reserve

12/750ml | AEC-117

His oldest (well over 50) vineyard, on clay and loess, it often makes his most impressive GV. Vinified in large acacia casks—the wood is more porous but less obtrusive than oak—this is Ecker’s best vintage since 2013 and an excellent GV in its Viognier-like profile; it’s like roasting green beans until they get “sweet;” a small glass makes it explosively minty and the large glass makes it a magnolia-sorrel liqueur. It’s a big (13.7alc) wine but graceful; weight without heaviness.

2017 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | AEC-114

This is *racy*! Twitchy and edgy but fully ripe, not catty or incomplete; lots of elderflower riding over the lemon-thyme and opal basil notes. Offers a ton of flavor for its flyweight 10.5% alc.



2017 Riesling

12/750ml | AEC-118

I don't recall a better Riesling from here. Best from the smaller glass, where it's stylish and shows wintergreen, lime and melon.

2016 Riesling Ried Steinberg

12/750ml | AEC-108

As far as I know this is Ecker's maiden-voyage with single-site Riesling, and this *urgestein* vineyard would seem to be perfect. Again I was brought back to Nigl's *Piri* wines, the ivy and ore and mizuna, plus the neon clarity and saltiness. A new era for Ecker Riesling?

2017 Roter Veltliner Ried Steinberg

12/750ml | AEC-123

Ecker's another of the grail-keepers of this variety, and this wine smelled like when you sweat yellow peppers you fire-roasted atop the stove; sweet spring onions too in a complex herbal mix; smoky balsam, super-sweet pea pods swirled with a dill butter.



REGION / SUB REGION

Wagram / Feuersbrunn

VINEYARD AREA

28 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

25,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Feuersbrunner Spiegel,
Feuersbrunner Rosenberg,
Engabrunner Stein**
(loess, Gföhler gneiss, sand,
chalk, and red gravel)

GRAPE VARIETIES

90% Grüner Veltliner
10% Riesling

FARMING PRACTICES

Respekt certified Biodynamic

Bernhard Ott's wines join the wines of Heidi Schröck, Ludwig Hiedler and Nikolaihof (in this portfolio at least) as being what I call "analog," that is, marked by a certain warmth in contrast to the chiseled surgical clarity of other kinds of wines. Analog wines take longer to understand because they're not explaining everything to you. They articulate in different ways. You need to let them build up over several years before they accumulate into a narrative you can repeat. In the interim you call them "rich" or "creamy" or, in Ott's case, corpulent, capacious and generous. Dionysian, not Apollonian.

Being with Bernhard at his estate in Feuersbrunn is a little like being with the Saahs' at Nikolaihof, in that it isn't just another "winery-visit," but rather an immersion into an entire environment that has a larger context than you expected, seeming to encompass not only the human world, but all of the world. You're invited to participate, not only to observe, and certainly not only to act as an audience. Instead you walk into a family's vision of life, a microcosm of the world they desire and have made for themselves.

He is now fermenting 100% *sponti*, which makes sense. The '17 vintage was crafted by the wine-gods to be perfectly aligned with Ott's style, and this was the best consistent collection of GVs I tasted this year.

I think we still don't really grok these wines over here, though they're selling very well. Of course the basic GV (Am Berg) is laudable, but to really "get" these wines you have to move up toward the Crus, and ideally *into* the Crus. Ott, most vitally and purely, is Rosenberg; it isn't only his icon-wine, it's also the man himself in the form of Grüner Veltliner, among which it occupies a unique place. That said, I have even greater sympathy for his Spiegel and Stein bottlings, which show the lift and precision that scratches my particular itch.

Two things stood out: one, the leap in quality this year between *Am Berg* and *Fass 4*, and two, the abiding quality of *Der Ott*, which is the sort of vestibule before you walk fully into the house of the Grand Crus, but which shows all of their virtues except power.

FIRST, AN OUTLIER....

2017 “Rosalie” Rosé

12/750ml | AOT-067

This rosé is named for Bernhard’s daughter. The wine is a little rude (in a welcome way!) from the tulip glass and more conventionally wild from the Zalto “Universal” (which I’m on a 1-man mission to rid the world of) where it showed more spice and eucalyptus. An early picking of Zweigelt, yet it’s the opposite of ingratiating. Friends-of-Ott will eat it up—and it’s a wine you eat as much as drink—but seekers of a “pretty” pink experience—beware!

COULD USE A HEADLINE THE WAY THIS IS ORGANIZED

2017 Grüner Veltliner “Am Berg”

12/750ml | AOT-064

Best from a smaller glass, and best served “quite cool.” It was spicier and more peppery from Zalto; it’s muscular but not a body-builder type. Some phenolics apparent. Analog. A decent intro to Ott, but be aware it isn’t a pixilated “modern” GV.?

2017 Grüner Veltliner “Fass 4”

12/750ml | AOT-065

Bernhard considers this the first among his “serious” wines for the table, and it’s a big step up in ‘17; it has warmth and concentration. Better in the tulip; shows a pleasant oxidative nuance, lentilly and bone-brothy but still transparent. An earlier bottling is more lentilly with a definite loessy “sweetness,” saltier and longer.

2017 Grüner Veltliner *Engabrunn “Edition Paula Bosch,” Kamptal* +

12/750ml | AOT-068

Here’s where the fur starts to fly. This “village” wine is new in the lineup, and it’s all nori and a classic big-rocks GV; crushed stones and pepper; the black-soil gneiss gives a lot of salty lift and green-tea grassiness; in effect this is a *mineral terroir* wine where the inherent varietality of GV comes second.

2017 Grüner Veltliner “Der Ott” +

12/750ml | AOT-069

A wonderful edition of this, recalling the outstanding 2014; beautifully herbal with inferences of stone; savory, like roasting 5 different breads in a single oven; crusty like the end-cap of a roast; peppers, cardamom, allspice; I love its gentle force.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kirchtal “Edition JRE” +

6/750ml | AOT-075

A special bottling for the “JRE” restaurant-group, it’s a single-site but not (yet) classified. The highest-elevated site in Wagram, mostly red gravel with an island of loess in the middle. It’s a sprightly wine, a lot of relief; savory as in barley or faro or corn meal, white quinoa, basmati, mint and spice and coconut and ginger.

THE GRAND CRUS

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Spiegel Erste Lage

6/750ml | AOT-070

+ +

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Stein Erste Lage

6/750ml | AOT-071

+ + (+)

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Rosenberg Erste Lage

6/750ml | AOT-072

+ (+)

Oh how I *wish* I could sell these as a set. It's how they make the most sense.

In the real world, SPIEGEL is completely glorious; complex, high toned but juicy, glaringly *white* somehow, like Sherry soils—it even has a Manzanilla snap—with three registers of complexity; fruits, savories, exotics, spices and mints. Vigorous and in every way richly satisfying.

STEIN is over the regional line in Engabrunn in the Kamptal; and it sits on (mostly) the so-called Gföhler gneiss, and will remind you more of Kamptal GVs than of Ott's expected style. Which compels me to wonder...how much of what I infer and (perhaps glibly) conclude about Bernhard's style has to do with his particular soils? Because this wine really wouldn't be out of place at, say, Bründlmayer.

In many ways it's the Klaus or Achleiten of the Kamptal, darkly doughy and fervently spicy and rocky, like braising a thousand years of terroir, all dozens of the stones and pebbles, into a stock that grows savory and absurdly intricate, adamantly so. It's *ripped* in body and as wild as though it had rolled naked through a garden of herbs.

ROSENBERG of course is the icon, a wine one doesn't grok until the fullness of time does its full-time thing. And the tardy one is also subdued today; duck and Szechuan spare-ribs and yet also a sort of thousand-year-old pear and the herbs of ancient bushes and a peek-a-boo of stones. Has its oft-seen roasted pepper element and a long salty finish.

2017 Riesling Feuersbrunn

12/750ml | AOT-073

+

Have to readjust the palate a moment...OK, there. We're into elderflower and apricot in this village-wine, with a mid-palate jab of subtle mineral, into an endless tactile finish of stones and apricot blossom; a sophisticated Riesling with striking persistence, yet it's indirect the way Dönnhoff's *Dellchen* sometimes is. Hiedler's Rieslings hold the other end of this string also.

2017 Riesling Ried Kirchtal

6/750ml | AOT-074

+

A "drinky" and perfect dry Riesling that's utterly and thoroughly *good*, rock-dusty, no effort to seduce, just dust and talc and marjoram. "Nothing is better than that which is good." And this is entirely pleasurable dry wine.

KREMSTAL & KAMPTAL

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

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

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

NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

These are the preeminent Riesling Grand Crus of the Kamptal, and they stand among the greatest land on earth in which Riesling is planted. They're contiguous hillsides, each the lower slopes of the Mannhart-hills, but they're dissimilar in crucial ways. Heiligenstein is higher and broader-shouldered (thanks to Peter Schleimer for that image), and probably just the slightest bit warmer. Soils differ also—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.

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

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

Indeed if Riesling got the respect it deserved, both sites would be studied as obsessively and in such detail as great vineyards in the Côte d'Or. And if the sky fell we would all catch sparrows. But two things bear mentioning. First, both vineyards (but especially Heiligenstein) have different exposures as they follow the mountainside, and there are distinctions between, say, Zöbinger Heiligenstein and Kammerner Heiligenstein. Second, these sites have many proprietors, and while you can't make mundane wine from either of them, there's unexceptional stuff to be found. Of course, in pages other than these...

BERGER



REGION / SUB REGION

Kremstal / Gedersdorf

VINEYARD AREA

18 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Gebling

(löss and gravelly löss)

Steingraben

(clay-marl-löss rock)

Leithen

(löss and rock)

Haid

(deep brown earth)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Grüner Veltliner

15% Zweigelt

9% Riesling

5% Chardonnay,

Malvasier,

Cabernet Franc,

Welschriesling

1% Gelber Muskateller

Erich has been accepted into *Fair 'N Green*, joining such wine luminaries as Clemens Busch, Georg Breuer, Dönnhoff, Leitz, Melanie Pfister (in Alsace), Theo Haart and Karthäuserhof, among others. The organization certifies based on admirably holistic criteria, and not only in the vineyards. They set standards for fair wages and contracts, decent housing for workers, advanced safety training, water and power usage, waste management, carbon footprint, even transport. All of this seems to me to be much more helpful than the fussy preoccupation with yeasts and sulfur prevailing in some of the *Naturalista* community.

And I'm proud of Erich Berger. He's an unpretentious man, and most of you know him from his most unpretentious wine (The GV Liters), but his wines and he are more serious than we seem to give him credit for. Sure, the Liters "sell themselves," and yet I can't fathom Erich ever taking it for granted.

It isn't in his makeup. I can see each year how serious he is to ensure this wine is still performing for me. I mean, it's a modest wine he can't make more than pennies on, yet he cares about it because he's made of caring. I'm moved by the humble decency of taking care that this little wine is still good, is always still good. It takes just as much caring as it does to ensure a great wine is indeed great. But the difference is that everyone notices the great wines; you get trophies and awards and 'tout le monde' wants to buy you a beer. Here your caring goes un-remarked upon. I suddenly remembered a thing I hadn't thought of in years. Once I was at

a carwash that did some detailing of the outsides and insides, and as I was waiting for my decidedly cheap-ass car, I observed all the very nice expensive cars the guys were working on. But they took the same care with my funky beat up Accord hatchback as they did with the Caddies and BMWs, and I was extremely impressed. "Thanks for respecting even my crappy car," I said. "Just doin' it right," they said. That's it: just doin' it right. So while I am very proud and happy to offer and sell this LITER wine, I have to wonder why so few of its customers are curious to see what else Erich can do. "If this wine is this good then how must the better wines be? They don't cost all that much more..."

Berger is the last in what I'm starting to think of as my Trilogy Of Charm—which would include Setzer and Ecker—and I suppose I'll just spend my cranky old-coot years fussing and foaming at how little we appreciate wines like these. This isn't such an issue with "civilians," normal wine drinkers, but the closer you get to the profession the more we seem to detach from our instinctual pleasure centers. To be sure, great wines warrant all the attention we can spare and all the words we can offer. But there are wines for which words are irrelevant; they just taste good and we love them. A classic example is Berger's Loessterassen GV. It's in the middle of his range—the accursed middle—and all it does is taste addictively wonderful. It could be a proverbial desert-island wine because you would never get tired of it. While we rise to the demands of great wines, and are happy to, the companionably tasty wine asks nothing from us. We

can relax with it. It is hale, easy-going, and it keeps us company.

Yet for all that I argue for the virtues of modesty with respect to Berger, Erich himself has a serious and ambitious side that emerges ever more vividly. So there's that. But in fact the moment of revelation came about when he opened a bottle of 1993 GV, to celebrate our quarter-century doing business together. It wasn't a "big" wine—I think it had 12.5% alc—but it was

completely excellent. Perfect, and perfectly good, and in laudably superb condition, even while it was still a friend to drink, as Erich's wines almost always are. So if ever you are tempted to dismiss this estate as a mere giver of "Modest wines Terry happens to like," do think again. There is a world of beauty below the stellar (and above the mundane), and it is the world most of us live in most of the time, and *wines needs to relate to that world as*

a citizen (of it) and a companion (to you and me), and most wonderfully, the business of "judging" wine in that world will not let you consider intensity at all, but only beauty. The "how" of how it tastes.

If great wine inspires reverence—and it can—then good wine inspires affection. Shall we banish this wonderful thing from our lives as we grope heedlessly toward the Great and Powerful. The *Oz wines*? Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!

2016 Zweigelt

12/1000ml | ABG-173L

This is, improbably, better than the 2015, richer and rounder though it's also transparent and shows a dusty fruit. Curiously vinous for a wine so (ostensibly!) light.

2016 Zweigelt Ried Haid

12/750ml | ABG-176

Done in large acacia casks. If red wine can possibly be more charming than this, I'll be truly astonished. Violets, Tasmanian pepper; racy fruit pulled taut but crammed in, and a surprisingly complex finish.

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | ABG-170L

Super-pretty aromas lead into a *perfect* edition of this, the best of all the GV-Liters in this year's offering.

2017 Grüner Veltliner "Loessterassen"

12/750ml | ABG-171

In my fantasy I've been asked to present one wine with which to affirm the existence of GrüVe. I have my choice of many dozens of mighty and profound examples, whereby I can demonstrate that GV can also be "great." But that's almost too easy. To affirm that GV belongs among the finest grapes from which white wine is made, and that it should be uniquely cherished for its particular gifts, I'd prefer to present this *average* wine, the kind of wine a careful caring grower can make in any good vintage and that sells for the price of hamburger, not filet mignon.

One swirl, one sniff, one taste, and the doors swing open, and GV is welcomed into the elite. Even this simple wine? *Especially* this simple wine.

The '17, however, isn't quite so "simple." It's riper than usual (13%) and shows the peppery sternness of the vintage, less wet-cereal than usual but still on the genial side. Just not gushing—only inviting. Grainy and sweet-straw and brassicas.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Reienthal

12/750ml | ABG-167

Another new site for Berger, it's on deep loess and makes a big impressive GV along lines of Nigl's Alte Reben; big, smoky, like a demi-glace of lentil with focus and character; stovetop-roasted yellow pepper, both the charred skin and the flesh sweetness; zucchini and oyster mushrooms. With a year in the bottle it shows flowering-field and oleander, the Viognier side of GV, a rich wine in a slim vintage, just what I love.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Wieland Reserve

12/750ml | ABG-174

A "classified" site on calcereous sandy loess, it gave Erich the best GV he's ever made with the remarkable 2014.

This one is oaky. It was aged in 2nd-use hogsheads, and while the oak is deft, not blatant, it is decidedly present. The longer the bottle is open the more the wood recedes, and a honeyed fruit emerges. It's light-footed and graceful for an oak-wine.



2017 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | ABG-172

Extroverted, with all its elements written in bold; the basil and elderflower especially, yet it also has a diaphanous lightness and a birdsong trill. It only *seems* fleeting, though: a delicate but definite finish comes pouring back in twenty seconds (or so), as if you'd eaten elderflowers right off the bush.

2017 Riesling Ried Spiegel

12/750ml | ABG-175

We were joking that I always prefer the (lighter) Spiegel in ripe years and the (richer) *Steingraben* in slim years. Here we go again.

The "plus" could be from fragrance alone. The wine is entirely lovely! All of 12.5% alc, it recalls the 2015 in its lavish yet interior profile; green (balsam, lime, aloe, yerba maté) and silvery, cool shade on a warm day. It has a sly richness and density, a complex finish of spices and hyssop and mineral. In its calm profundity and thorough character it is the very emblem of Austrian Riesling.

NIGL



REGION / SUB REGION

Kremstal / Senftenberg

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

25,000 - 30,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Senftenberger Pellingen,
Hochäcker**

(mica slate, slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

40% Grüner Veltliner

40% Riesling

5% Sauvignon Blanc

5% Gelber Muskateller

10% other varieties

A few years ago I was tasting Martin Nigl's Muscat with him, and he asked if I knew the Muscat from Müller-Catoir. "Know it? I import it!" I am likely to have replied. Martin had tasted it at some wine fair and came away impressed, and I was so pleased by the synchronicity, I didn't register the clue he had provided.

"Clue" to what? To a way of understanding the wines that I hadn't considered. Nigl is spirit-kin, I think, to Martin Franzen and the team at Catoir; both seem to want to make clarity even more clear, make reality even more real, to pass through a portal of vividness to see into a fuller mystery of flavor. Now, I don't think Martin Nigl would agree that this is what he's doing, but he might be willing to humor me that it's the *effect* of what he does, and it's telling that he perceives it in Catoir's Muscat, that is, in someone else's wine. Nigl is a matter of fact fellow to all appearances, and his tempo is brisk when he shows me the wines. I have to slow things down and

often ask for a second pour. The wines are just *too complex* to grasp quickly, at least for poor old me.

Indeed when Nigl's on a roll, as he has been the last several vintages, I doubt that anyone else's wines are more brilliant. He fits into a group of producers I'd call "contemporary" in their desire for a kind of *gleam* of flavor, digital, micro-pixelated, urgently transparent and lucid. Among this "family" (Gobelsburg, Bründlmayer, Ecker) Nigl's are the *ne plus ultra*, and the experience of tasting them is pure and absorbing. I start out being excited by the sheer articulacy of the wines, but soon I am calmer—as I get used to the "temperature" of the experience—and finally I am entirely stilled. The world is filled with quiet. It's like looking at a diamond through jeweler's glasses, or arranging mirco greens on a dish with those little chef's tweezers. These wines can seem to show a hidden world.

I'll start at the fringes and work toward the magnificent collection of Rieslings.

2017 Zweigelt Rosé

12/750ml | AFN-307

The wine is beautifully firm and bracing. No *charmeur*, this. You sense it could quench thirst if you ran out of water, but it also full of substance.

2017 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | AFN-308

This feints a little toward Riesling, or like the single-vineyard wine of Catoir's; it doesn't have the absurd humor of Muscat but instead is serious and vinous.

2017 Sauvignon Blanc

12/750ml | AFN-317

Serious and subtle; you wish more Sancerre were like this; salty and dense; all the elements are there but none is emphatic. You could even call it elegant.

SEKT Brut de Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | AFN-270

This is now mostly 2014, with a minimum of three years tirage; it's disgorged as-needed, little bits at a time. Zweigelt/PN/CH, and still crisp and tasty and offering amazing VALUE. It's a hidden gem in this portfolio.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein

6/375ml | AFN-318H

A wonderful, vivid, classic Eiswein; it could almost be German. 150° Oechsle, acidity around 8.5g/l and RS roughly 150, so it's not massively sweet or cloying, but instead it's varietally TRUE and shows a tensile richness. It's a perfect restaurant "dessert" wine; it's "drinky" and tastes like Eiswein.

“GROONERS”

2017 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

12/750ml | AFN-306

A classic vintage. A Goldilocks vintage, just-right, not too lean and not too overstuffed, with lentil and green bean, fresh and full.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri

12/750ml | AFN-309

Total love-fest Urgestein GV, with more pure tapioca and dough than usual, its iris-y and nettle notes discreetly in the background. Somehow this wine is both adorable and intricate. WTF do you do to bring *that* off?

2017 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

12/750ml | AFN-310

The loessy terraces down-valley near the Danube, where this wine comes from, usually give it a certain gracious fruitiness combined with old-vines intensity and strength. Yet the '17 is (or seems to be) rather stern and adamant, impressive but less gorgeous than it's been at other times. A long, ferrous finish, the wine may be bottle-sick and its fruit will likely emerge, and then I'll feel really stoopid.

2017 Grüner Veltliner “Privat” Ried Pellingen Erste Lage

6/750ml | AFN-305

A really fecund, flowering-field sweet funk; it's adamantly spicy in the Zalto (Universal) and more fading-flower in the tulip. A big important GV, it's earthbound at the moment, but bottling could well focus it.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried *Herzstück von Kirchenberg Erste Lage* +

6/750ml | AFN-312

Staring in the 2010 vintage Martin has bottled this wine separately when its volume warrants; otherwise it's gone into the "Privat." From the hotel's parking lot a pathway goes toward a small terraced hill with a church at its prow, and this wine hails from those terraces. There's never a lot of it.

The '17 smells glorious. The big wet-tree and tobacco-leaf element of GV; crusty like the surface of a *gratin* and also with the cheesy char; spicy, eggplant on the grill; impressive and serious.

RIESLINGS

2017 Riesling Dornleiten +

12/750ml | AFN-313

It's winsome and cooing in its sweet cressy way. Has a Styrian sort of sap and savor, and a tickly of nippy mineral texture. A lovely miniature of Austrian Riesling.

2017 Riesling Senftenberger Piri + +

12/750ml | AFN-314

As a rule this wine falls through the cracks; it isn't the cheapest and it isn't the "best" and since we make such commodities of wine, we don't often consider how it might taste or what quality-price equation might be entailed.

But you can't do that with this '17. The wine is *too good*, too ludicrously good, the best vintage I've ever tasted. It's my **WINE OF THE VINTAGE** and it is bottled birdsong.

A haunting inner perfume announces its arrival and distinguishes it from the simpler *Dornleiten*. White iris and woodruff aromas; the wine dances in liquid ripples over your palate; underlying ore and sorrel and sweet ginger. Literally extraordinary expression for a "delicate" wine of just 12.5% alc, it is PEERLESS Piri, and shows not only that beauty is more important than impact, it sometimes has nothing to do with impact.

2017 Riesling "Privat" Ried *Hochäcker Erste Lage* + + +

6/750ml | AFN-315

In great vintages this is one of the world's best Rieslings. Yes, you read it right—one of the world's best.

It's a plateau above the Pellingen, on a complex soil in which the original loess eroded and exposed the bedrock of marble, amphibolite, paragneiss and mica schist. Because it is flat it stores water, and because of *that* it is stunning in dry vintages. I cannot, honestly, drink the 2013 without weeping. (Even if I'm also watching wrestling!)

This '17 presents minerality at first, yet a celestial and complex fruit permeates everything. As intricate as it is, and as mineral, it's also lyric and sprightly. I started to write down its associations, or as many as I could grasp, and then I got angry. *What* was I doing trying to deconstruct this miracle? Instead I steeped myself in it, and then I was happy again.

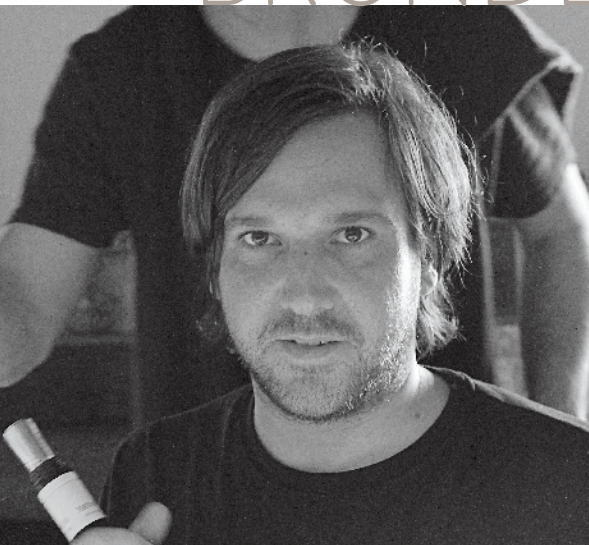
2017 Riesling Rehberger Ried *Goldberg Erste Lage* + + +

6/750ml | AFN-316

Amphibolite seems to give a kind of Sauv-Blanc twang to its Rieslings; we see it again in Hiedler's *Steinhaus*. Usually this bottling is something of an "extra" in the sequence. It's a relatively new acquisition of Nigl's, and I've offered it because it's a fascinating terroir variation. Often I've worried it made the offering too crowded.

This '17 overcame me. It's certainly the best vintage yet. The caraway-seed thing is still present but now in the form of a flan; the wine is more determined and less lyric than Hochäcker, playing in a different key, but there's a ton of balsam and iris, solid phenolic strut and scratch, and finally just absurd length.

BRÜNDLMAYER



REGION / SUB REGION

Kamptal / Langenlois

VINEYARD AREA

80 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

33,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Berg Vogelsang,

Loiser Berg,

Steinmassel
(primary rock)

Käferberg

(marine sediments on primary rock)

Heiligenstein

(Permian rock)

Lamm

(Loam on Permian rock)

GRAPE VARIETIES

38% Grüner Veltliner

19% Riesling,

43% Pinot Noir,

St. Laurent,

Chardonnay

and other varieties

FARMING PRACTICES

ISO 22000 Sustainable

It's never easy to make great wine. But it is at least less hard if yours is a small estate, where you can afford to pay fastidiously individual attention to every wine, all the time.

That makes the achievement of Bründlmayer all the more impressive. They are among the greatest estates in Austria, and I would argue they're among the very greatest white-wine producers in the entire world. Willi Bründlmayer will remonstrate with me over what I'm about to say, but his achievement is all the more impressive because his estate is—by my itty-bitty small-batch standards, rather.... sizeable. And yet no one makes *better* wine than Willi's best, and few (if any) people make a larger number of them.

From the very beginning of working with Willi—25 years now—I have thought in sonorous terms about his wines. I've used words like *timbre* to try and describe them. Any composer knows that key-signatures have characters, and those people will appreciate this analogy: If Gobelburg's wines play in D-Major, Bründlmayer's wines play in E-Major. D-Major is more chiming and bright, while E-Major is more handsome and full.

Willi's wines also have a nebulous yet definite quality of *class*. And class is hard to define. It bears upon a certain simplicity, but it isn't simple. It feels effortless but it isn't. It's richly satisfying but it's hard to say why. It may seem to have little to do with the reasons you buy this wine and not the other one, or with what you choose to drink, but at last you stumble upon it and find you can't resist any more.

Class will give you pleasure deeper than joy or amusement.

Timbre is the way an instrument sounds, or more accurately, the way a given player makes it sound. The great players seem to release an almost fluid sonorousness from an instrument. It purrs for them. I often receive this image spontaneously when I taste Willi's wines. And I think if you put these things together you arrive at elegance, which is another wine-word you can't deconstruct. When *you* taste them, you'll find you respond from the richest aspect of your temperament, or else you'll barely respond at all. These wines won't put on a show for you, but they will deliver a calm grace and a genial loveliness.

There's also a distinct sense of the estate firing on all cylinders. They have a new cellarmaster exclusively responsible for the red wines, which had long been behind the whites in quality. The sparkling wines, already among Austria's best, have gotten even better. The entire team is stellar, and I'd use a word like "noble" if the whole thing weren't so energetic and fun.

Back-vintages are available, offering a chance to see the wines with at least a bit of bottle-age, and retarding the impulse to lunge after "the new vintage." I take the luxury of fashioning an offering from the best wines available to me regardless of vintage, and this year it was quite propitious, as 2017 was markedly (and unusually) backward here.

I'll list the wines in the order I tasted them: reds first, then dry whites (by variety), then sparkling wines.

RED WINES

Great things to come here based on cask-samples, but for the moment I'll repeat two beauties from the 2015 vintage. These were the first stirrings of a change in style whereby the wines would be "warmer" than they had been.

2015 Zweigelt Reserve +

6/750ml | ABY-413

This one is classy, silky, refined and smart, with a deft balance of fruit, concentration and wood. Really splits the difference between aristocratic and *yummy*.

2015 Pinot Noir Reserve

6/750ml | ABY-414

There was a regular PN that had rather more cool green-pepper notes than I appreciated, but this wine is truly rich, not merely assertive or show-offy with barrels; sweet fruit, a little dusty, silky tannin, a real slip-and-slide PN, classy and not affected.

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

These divide into 3-4 layers or echelons. There's the very light ones Willi prefers not to send abroad. There's the everyday Kamptaler Terrassen. There are two mid-weight single-vineyard wines, and then there are the big wines, starting with Alte Reben and moving to the blockbusters of Spiegel, Käferberg and Lamm. I try to cull a selection that isn't unruly, but it isn't always easy. When multiple vintages are available I often take the newbie and either the oldest or the best-drinking among the bottle-aged. You'd be forgiven for thinking it's all a Teutonic chaos but in fact there's a method and at least a striving for pattern and form. And merciful heavens—the wines are good!

2016 Grüner Veltliner Kamptaler Terrassen

12/750ml | ABY-400

2017 Grüner Veltliner Kamptaler Terrassen

12/750ml | ABY-428

2017 Grüner Veltliner Kamptaler Terrassen

12/375ml | ABY-428H

We will ship '16 as long as we can while waiting for the '17 to recover from bottling. Always a mélange of young vines in top sites alongside wines from little scrips and scraps of small parcels it'd be senseless to vinify separately. The '16 is surprisingly rich and fine; sorrel and lentil aromas lead to one of the wet-cereal yellow-fruit white tea and jasmine rice editions of this, a wine that straddles the line between sweet-grass and balsam and ripe fruit elements.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Loiser Berg Erste Lage + +

12/750ml | ABY-436

I left this behind last year in favor of the "other" single-site *Berg Vogelsang*. Now I'm mighty relieved to still have access to this masterpiece. The site is a high elevation, windy, with extreme thermal cooling at night; it would seem pre-destined for Riesling, and even this GV seems to speak with a Riesling brogue. Paragneiss, mica-schist, amphibolite dominate in the soils. The result is a GV original; this '16 is rich and sorrel-y, secret sweetness, balsam and aloe vera; it has virtually *no* GV signature and is more like a full-fleshed Riesling, and whatever it is it's magnificent.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Berg Vogelsang + (+)

12/750ml | ABY-402

This '16 is as fine a wine as I've ever tasted from *Vogelsang*. Spicy but not spiky, the wine is almost creamy and it's completely delicious; mineral and silk, clear and caressing.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

6/750ml | ABY-431

+ +

2014 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

6/750ml | ABY-368

+ +

This wine is the entrée to the world of blockbuster GV's, and as we're between vintages of the Lamm—the greatest of them all—these are quite a consolation prize.

The '16 is graceful and classy, with the silky flow of the vintage, delicious as opposed to powerful. Rich yet weightless. The acme of elegance.

The '14 is It's gorgeous, delineated, animated and rich, salty and long, GV at its brassica best. It's *insanely* complex now, like a salad of 50 leaves with walnut oil and a vin jaune vinegar dressing.

2016 Grüner Veltliner "Vincent's Spiegel"

12/750ml | ABY-430

The flat vineyard is basically gravels over a loess bedrock, tending to give solid stony wines. Vincent (Willi's son and a force in his own right) has been making them strong and often woody, GV in its White-Burgundy facet. But this '16 is mostly surprise right now, a wine bursting out of its jacket, buttons popping and flesh escaping its confinement. It wants time to reconcile the current misalignment between the muscular wine and the sleek vintage.

(Similarly the 2017 Ried Käferberg will be offered in January, though this seems to be balanced and juicy even now.)

RIESLINGS

2017 Riesling Kamptaler Terrassen

12/750ml | ABY-434

Herbal and minty (in the Zalto), right now it's lean and likely bottle shocked, but it promises to be one of "green and zippy" ones.

2016 Riesling Ried Steinmassel Erste Lage

12/750ml | ABY-437

+

Soils are similar to Loiser Berg, as are exposures and microclimate. You don't come to this wine for hedonism; you come to be drenched in minerality. Metaphor or otherwise, a wine like this presents a tangible volume of definite flavor that *isn't* fruit or flower or vegetables or savories, so if it isn't "mineral" it might as well be.

In this wine the mineral, herbs and mint are in ideal proportion; aloe and sorrel again, but firm and snappy and secret-sweet.

2016 Riesling Ried Heiligenstein Erste Lage

12/750ml | ABY-419

+

The entry to a lofty world of greatness, this "basic" wine from a truly great Riesling vineyard. (It's sorta like going to the best concert ever but sitting in the back...) In any case, I buy it for my own cellar and find all that I need for rejoicing. The '16 emphasizes a mid-range, toasted nutmeg and cinnamon, trumpet mushrooms just as they start to caramelize in the pan; plantains and papaya; the top notes are a bit nebulous but the mineral is more tangible. Lovely now, this wine is very much *en-route*.

2016 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage “Lyra”

+ +

6/750ml | ABY-424

2015 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage “Lyra”

+ +

6/750ml | ABY-390

2014 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage “Lyra”

+ + +

6/750ml | ABY-359

A special cuvée from only lyre-trained vines, showing in Willi’s words that “You don’t need old vines to give great Riesling.” He adds, “The greater leaf surface gives increased photosynthesis, protects the grapes, and besides, it looks like the vine is throwing its arms up toward the sun.”

Comparing Lyra with Alte Reben is an abidingly fascinating exercise. In hot years Lyra often prevails, when A.R. gets too ripe. In most years it’s lovely to look at what I call “above ground flavors” (in Lyra) versus “below ground flavors” (in A.R.), but this doesn’t always mean the Lyra is *fruity*. Often it is quite herbal—this is, after all, Heiligenstein.

Indeed Lyra has gotten deeper as the vines age, and the distinction between the two siblings is sometimes ambiguous or woolly—at least until you taste the Alte Reben!

I’m offering three vintages and you ought to buy them all, especially if you’re a somm, because the relative extroversion of Lyra will better prevail over the distractions of resto dining. (Alte Reben is for meditation, or just sitting there weeping.) The **2016** is atypically *green*, herbal, but scintillating. This facet has always existed but here it’s front & center; a penetrating intensity of herbal, silvery mineral notes, reminding me of an Alzinger *Steinertal*. The **2015** is rapturously seductive, lavish, erotic, enveloping; the blinds are drawn, the candles lit, the bodies anointed with fragrant potions...party’s on. The **2014** is god help me even better, albeit much less voluminous, yet its inner sweetness has the promise, not of a wild night, but of life-long love.

2016 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage Alte Reben

+ +

6/750ml | ABY-423

2014 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage Alte Reben

+ +

6/750ml | ABY-361

2012 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage Alte Reben

+ + +

6/750ml | ABY-319

The litmus test here will be the ‘14. The little orphan vintage that nobody loved. In fairness, many of those botrytis-y Rieslings weren’t easy to love—but: “If there is a great 2014 Riesling, I have it in my glass,” one of us said as this wine was tasted. No *“if”* about it, friend. This is a great Riesling.

Not “in spite of” 2014—because of it. Bründlmayer has made any number of splendid wines over the past quarter century, but I’m here to testify: nothing should make them prouder than this very Riesling.

It’s an apotheosis of green depth, primordial; a forest-floor the sun barely ever touches. *Perfect* balance and deliciousness in a sapid green vein of pure mystery. The seeker finds his way to this, doesn’t understand it, and is happy. Sits with it. Imagines the old monks who created Chartreuse. Thinks of the meadows, wafting the breath of the warm afternoon, and the blender sitting while the dark comes on.

Beautiful, inscrutable, it is the wine of some new language.

Compared to this mystic being, the **‘16** is easily and tangibly marvelous. Sublime all the way to the adamantly stern finish, the wine is still billowing, starch and salty on one side, silvery-herbal and pear-blossom on the other. It’s a wise child who started speaking late but suddenly had a 400-word vocabulary.

The magisterially great **2012** is all herbs and stones and hay, all in an ever-shifting mosaic; exceptionally pure, Gregorian, woody, even spicy and minty; it’s Riesling asserting every one of its flavors that aren’t flowers or fruits.

The wines make the most sense as a unit, each fitting over the other’s shadow like a palimpsest.

A short note to my somm friends. I know your wine programs are agents of hospitality first and foremost. They’re not dissertations into the Very-Meaning-Of-Wine-Itself. Yet I also know that these wines form a whole that’s *enormously* greater than the sum of its parts, and that some of what prompts you to buy are cerebral or conceptual concerns. If you drink these Rieslings together, a door is flung open and your knowledge of wine is catapulted forward as if you’d been shot from a trebuchet.

BACK TO EARTH-ORBIT, SORT OF

2017 Gelber Muskateller Ried Rosenhügel

12/750ml | ABY-438

A big ol' Muscat with around 13.5 % alc, in a Burgundy bottle. That said, what it tastes like is Uerziger Würzgarten most of all, sassafrass and licorice, more a "GG" than the expected little Muscat frisky-snookums. Taste it next to Loewen's Herrenberg GG to truly fuck with your mind. A weirdly long and serious Muscat, the grape goes its own way within these walls.

DER BUBBLES

The family keeps growing (and there's a Blanc de Noirs on the lees we'll probably offer after it's disgorged.) In general Willi's Sekt is closest to Champagne of anything in Austria. Some would say of anything outside of Champagne. It was isolated and pioneering when I started selling Austrian wines; in the interim other producers have "caught up" with it in basic quality, but no one has really managed to equal its malty polished gracefulness.

Sekt Extra Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | ABY-272

Sekt Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | ABY-439

Sekt Rosé Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | ABY-273

Sekt Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | ABY-336

The **Extra Brut** was disgorged 4/2016 (as last year), 2013-base and 50-50 CH/PN; it's quite Marne Valley, a little brash, but flavor.

The **Blanc de Blancs** is all CH, deg 10/23/17, all 2013; it has a super aroma, deft use of wood, lovely fruit, misses only the last puff of Champagne's polish, but there's true stylishness here.

The superb **Rosé** excels in sheer grace and deliciousness. Deg 10/2017, still 2014-based, PN/SL/ZW.

Finally the **Brut**, deg. 3/2017, 2015/14 base, it's the wine at its best, not "sweet" but showing a kind of mélange of honey and Reggiano. No schnitzel should ever be without it.

SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG



REGION / SUB REGION

Kamptal / Gobelsburg

VINEYARD AREA

49 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Steinsetz

(alpine gravel and löss)

Gaisberg,

Renner

(primary rock with mica slate)

Grub

(löss)

Lamm

(calcareous loam)

Heiligenstein

(gneiss desert sandstone with volcanic particles)

GRAPE VARIETIES

55% Grüner Veltliner

25% Riesling

7% Pinot Noir

7% St. Laurent

7% Zweigelt

2% Merlot

FARMING PRACTICES

ISO 22000 Sustainable

I referred to a dinner I had with Peter Schleimer earlier in this text, and a young sommelier who insisted on pouring us an orange wine neither Peter nor I had requested. We also had Gobelsburg's 2008 Riesling "Tradition" on the table, a wine I have in my cellar but which is always a privilege to drink. *There* is a natural wine! I'm about to vent some spleen here, which Michi Moosbrugger will surely not endorse (look away a minute Michi please) but when you taste the wine of an *adult* producer with a *serious* idea in his mind and a genuine curiosity in his heart, you have to wonder at the fatuous fools playing at wine with their inane little "orange" games. Applause for the gentleman in this portfolio who discontinued his amphora program; it didn't pass muster (though it collected a few "high-90" scores along the way from tasters who had temporarily misplaced their wits or forgot what *wine* was supposed to taste like).

Remember, that comes from me alone. Michi would rather I were more temperate and respectful, I'm sure.

Rant over.

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 deter-

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

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

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

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.

There's a diligence and a curiosity about Michi that I admire very much. His wines don't just happen. He has a guiding idea for all of them, and his approach is deeply craftsmanlike. He also seems to think in what I might call Monk-time (and I don't mean Thelonious, though that's in the mix also) in that his vision includes a tactile connection to the past and future, and he's not making "items" to obtain *this* score *this* year.

His "contemporary" wines are hued a little differently than those of Bründlmayer, the style to which he's most closely related. Both families of wines are detailed and pixilated, but Willi's are more silvery and Michi's are more color-saturated, and specifically more *green*. They radiate clarity, candor and vitality, and they'll flirt with you a little. The old-school wines—what I'd call the *ancient* wines—are not entirely under the control of their host. They began more redolent and studiedly

woody, but they've probed deeper layers of late, and I have the sense they are gradually unlocking mysteries so obscure that none of us knew they were there.

All of this is to say that I am *moved* by the sight of a serious conscientious man who is making the world more beautiful. It is always stirring to witness such care. And of course, the ordinary concerns of the world are duly dispatched, and we spend time talking about numbers and labels and the needs of the day. But I wonder, after I leave, what goes through Michi's mind about the wines. He tastes them all along with us. I taste and say what I have to say. I always drive away in a kind of thrill, and a little guilty; I alight upon a year's work like a migrating bird, I sit on my branch and sing and preen and then I fly off again. He puts the bottles back in the fridge, he knows I loved them (I couldn't hide it even if I wanted to), and there it was: his work.

REDS

2016 Zweigelt Schlosskellerei Gobelsburg

12/750ml | AZZ-352

Classy! Violets and blackberries and refined dusty tannin; has some of the rectitude of '16 but is juicier and smokier from a tulip glass—the Zalto Universal destroys it, as it does too many other wines.

2015 St Laurent Reserve

6/750ml | AZZ-338

This isn't so much "Burgundy-plus" as it is "Chateauf-minus." Minus the high alcohol, minus the feral and the sweat, but decidedly like an ethereally delicate southern Rhône, or even St. Joseph. More grace and less char than usual. Indeed, a year later this is turning into rather a civilized beast.

2015 Pinot Noir Reserve

6/750ml | AZZ-347

Herbal and savory; the oak is discreet and the texture is seductive and velvety. More rose-hips than violets, more tomato than cherry. Neither garish nor overt More Garnacia or even Mencia than Tempranillo. Just an elegant and singular PN.

BUBBLES

Brut Reserve, N.V.

6/750ml | AZZ-302

Deg 9/2017, based on 2014, PN is "15-20%", Riesling around 20% and the balance is GV, and these proportions change as needed. This is a super complex iteration of the cuvée, even keeled but full of veggie-mojo; silky and polished but could *never* be mistaken for Champagne. Roasted summer squash makes it pure Austrian.

Blanc de Blancs

6/750ml | AZZ-315

15% CH, 30% Welschriesling, 55% GV, deg 10/2017; it is very different from the regular Brut; higher-toned, more cereal and raw dough, jasmine rice and tapioca and sea-spray and rice pudding. "Sweet" low tide.

2004 Brut "R.D."

6/750ml | AZZ-291

I have this in my cellar now and can drink through a bottle thoughtfully, and I'm here to tell you: this is the best sparkling wine I've ever had apart from Champagne. It's a new disgorgement 7/2016—so ten years of tirage—no dosage but the usual modicum of RS after tirage (which no one ever talks about, especially not the zero-dosage crowd); this has outstanding character, articulation and complexity. It has all the 2004 wet forest leafy flavors, with lime and woodruff; it's less "antique" in flavor than the '01 was; it's fresh and thready, complex and salty, crunchy yet with a deep green verberna sweetness. Just when I thought my mind was anchored, there it went bogging again.

The Brut "R.D." is pending disgorgement. It will be vintage 2008, and should be superb. The 2004 is masterly!

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

2017 Grüner Veltliner Schlosskellerei Gobelsburg

12/750ml | AZZ-349

The wine is, dangerously, far too good for its "echelon;" this one has lovely lift and brightness for a '17; sweet rice and goat milk butter; animated and *delicious*.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Langenlois

6/750ml | AZZ-354

I was wary. Yet another wine? Sure, I understand this is a "village" wine to lead in to the Crus coming up, and I appreciate how Michi didn't want to jump from the negoç wine directly to *Steinsetz*. But whew, we got a lot of skus as it is....

But I really can't just walk away from a wine this good. Lavender, hyssop, sassafras; the wine is chic and vamping but not ingratiating; classic iris and boxwood and a finely peppery finish. It lets you into the vestibule of the mansion of the top wines, with its strong spicy finish and silky texture.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Steinsetz

12/750ml | AZZ-355

It grows ever more gracious and complex as the vineyard ages; the old radishy-minty briskness is still present but now aligned to a new juiciness and starchy jasmine-rice flavors. The site, remember, occupies a rolling plateau on alluvial soil from the retreating Danube, with lots of big rocks the ancient river dragged down from the Alps.

The '17 actually returns to the radish yet the wine is more deeply juicy and animal—like pheasant—though it's minty and mentholated above a richly herbal *fond*, as in a sauce reduction where both depth and brilliance are heightened.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Renner Erste Lage

6/750ml | AZZ-360

The vineyard lies at the foot of the Gaisberg, on eroded gneiss with a lot of paragneiss, mica and amphibolite, all under a blanket of loess. Its wines are as good as the *Lamm*, which is a warmer site giving wines of greater amplitude and stature. Yet Renner's quality of flavor and complexity of nuance are incomparable, and I often have it next to the Lamm just to make sure I'm not being diddled by my subjective preference for minerality. I'm not. The '16 Renner was the best-of-the-vintage in VINARIA, Austria's most serious wine magazine.

This '17 is toasty and still rather turbulent, less the usual steely backbone and more the roasting bread in the final five minutes. Mineral salts and minty peppers, but the wine is still organizing itself.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm Erste Lage

+ + (+)

6/750ml | AZZ-361

Lamm as a rule is buckwheat-y, rusky, savory but not thick, like a vegetable-veal stock with barley, yet oddly also like lamb itself. ("Lamm" doesn't mean lamb, but is rather a dialect word for "loam.") It is a great wine though virtually without fruit per se. Its poise of gloss and power, intensity and outline, mass and transparency are emblems of the paradox without which no wine is truly great.

If Renner commences the birds to sing, Lamm commences the wolves to howl. Yet this '17 appears to be a stunning and almost gentle version of the powerhouse. Vetiver, secret sweetness, and the dark-dough rusiness is still incipient. As always it's rich yet sleek, focused but strong.

2016 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition"

+ + +

6/750ml | AZZ-367

Look, just leave a little space around you. Even as much as a moment. Send the server away. Hold the food. Slow it down. Otherwise this great being will run-off like rain in a thunderstorm. You need to make space for the wine to absorb, into you, into your senses and your heart. We tasted it after the Riesling Tradition. It has more drama and affect than that wine. An overt kick of spice. Yet it photographs your aura. A great deal of the crux and meaning of beauty is sitting in my glass right now.

RIESLINGS

2017 Riesling Schlosskellerei Gobelsburg

+

12/750ml | AZZ-350

I had a feeling the fur would be flying when even *this* "modest" Riesling was this good. Gobelsburg's was the first *group* of Rieslings I tasted, and it was an awakening. This '17 is probably the best-ever vintage of a wine that's sometimes clipped—but not now! It's grainy, juicy, rampantly fun and drinky but still in its sun-warmed hay and herbal form; scrupulously delightful, a seriously mineral and archetypally *Austrian* Riesling.

2017 Riesling Zöbing

+ +

6/750ml | AZZ-356

Oh come on: this good at the village-wine level??? Flowers and grains and rocks and herbs and all in a seduction of salts with a wicked hint of RS; over and above all expectations and probabilities.

2017 Riesling Ried Gaisberg Erste Lage

+ (+)

6/750ml | AZZ-363

Gaisberg for me is always a moonlight wine, as if somehow the grapes ripened at night when the moon is waxing. Its manifest complexity is sometimes behind a veil. It takes at least 5 years to reveal itself, and is best in warm vintages., like this one. It takes the ethereal and "cool" elements of Riesling and makes them shimmery and weightless.

2017 Riesling Ried Heiligenstein Erste Lage

+ + +

6/750ml | AZZ-364

A great, great vintage of this "rock of the saints." All of them are singing in the morning sunlight, in their odd unforgettable harmony, a celestial music, gentle and questing, and even as the sweet force washes over you, there's forgiveness and love in the air.

2016 Riesling Tradition

+ + +

6/750ml | AZZ-366

Here was one of those moments; must I really say anything right now? I get flickers of "the way it tastes" and then am lost and absorbed once more. Like a warm, moonlit silence, mysterious, melting, inexplicable yet consoling, and evidently also eternal as the wine will *not* vacate your palate.

In principle this is based on old vines in the Gaisberg (as the GV is based in Renner), and one wonders if the oxygenated vinification is indeed best suited for Gaisberg. Certainly these wines seem to summon its essence.

HIEDLER



REGION / SUB REGION

Kamptal / Langenlois

VINEYARD AREA

28 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

16,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Thal

(sandy löss and loam)

Kittmannsberg, Spiegel

(löss)

Steinhaus

(gneiss with amphibolite)

Heiligenstein,

Gaisberg

(sandy weathered soils)

GRAPE VARIETIES

63% Grüner Veltliner

15% Riesling

6% Chardonnay

6% Weissburgunder,

Pinot Blanc

2% Sauvignon Blanc

8% Zweigelt,

Blauburgunder,

St. Laurent,

Sangiovese

I sometimes wonder whether we really understand Hiedler. We've been conditioned to respond to the "brilliant" styles of wine as exemplified by Nigl, Bründlmayer, Gobelsburg et.al. and we understand how to absorb the antique atmospheres of Nikolaihof (or Ott or Schröck), but Hiedler seems to escape our notice in some way. I don't see why. The wines ought especially to appeal to aficionados of the "natural" sensibility. That's their dialect, *and* they're clean. They are also direct, forthright, jammed with flavor, and hail from great terroirs.

I've been with Hiedler since the beginning, always happily and always with out-sized pride of association. I *like* that the wines speak a radically different dialect than the colleagues' wines do. I love how almost "opulent" these are, and most of all I adore how clear and shapely they are, even with their effusive richness and oleaginous textures. We can easily surmise how the other growers' wines work—we know that language—but it's much harder to fathom how wines as plush as these can also be so refreshing and so palpably structured.

The wines are riddled and jammed with soul and personality, there are no other wines like them, and you know what? We underrate them, you, me, all of us.

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

As the generations shift here—and we're in that poignantly sweet moment when both generations work together and dad lets go of a little control, just a little, each day—the wines should only change a little. Ludwig Jr isn't as friendly to botrytis as Dad is. He seems to want to pick earlier to gain structure and lower alcohol for the wines. But I don't see him abandoning the vinous bombs for which the estate is beloved. Just a little fine tuning around the edges.

THE GVs

2017 Grüner Veltliner “Löss”

12/750ml | AHL-237

Among the starter-GVs I offer, this one is the creamiest, and I'd suggest it for the taster who isn't sure he "likes Veltliner." And yet this '17 is unusual and seems to herald a change; it's less tapioca and oatmeal and corn-sweet, and more brassica, racier, closer to Bründlmayer in style, like a somewhat more muscular Kamptaler Terrassen. Whether this is a vintage thing or a harbinger of things to come remains to be seen. In the interim, we have *vigor!*

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Thal

12/750ml | AHL-238

Usually this is GV rendered as Semillon, with a little hot paprika shaken into the mix. The '17 is certainly a big smoky voodoo beast, real wicca-juice. It's like you're about to leave home for a few weeks and you cooked all the veggies you had, especially the peppers and eggplant, with cinnamon and nutmeg, and then you sucked on a Ricola eucalyptus candy, and then you top-applied Timut pepper, paprika and marjoram to your veggie-mess. And then you served up the joyful slop, wrecked your shirt, licked your lips, licked your partner's lips, and let someone else wash the dishes.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kitmannsberg Erste Lage

6/750ml | AHL-239

It's always been the blue-eyed child in a family of brown eyes, a kind of neo-classical structure with Delphic columns and strong muscular lines. And this 2017 may be the best vintage they've ever made. The finest dispersal of mineral, it's less adamantly *strong* but still concentrated, yet the fruit is elegant and regal and the oleander, shellfish stock, meyer lemon notes are way savory, anchored with a vivid backdrop of rock-crush.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Schenkenbichl Erste Lage

6/750ml | AHL-230

Ludwig says it's "pure gneiss" but the standard reference says otherwise—amphibolite with "siliceous material"—and in any case these are the first vintages where this vineyard's wine is being bottled by itself. With the '16 we find a contained but massive opulence, more baroque now; wet cereal and ore, nettles and mustard and quite Wachau-like. Forthcoming and easy to grab but also with unfolding layers of complexity.

2016 Grüner Veltliner “Maximum”

6/750ml | AHL-246

Hiedler's "top" wine—as far as they can push power, ripeness and concentration—has flirted with excess at times, but either this era is changing or the '16 vintage held those things in check. It's like a corn *velouté* with mirabelle schnapps, admirably salty; parsnip and cream and walnut; the very emblem of Hiedler. *Gras*, exotic, shellfish stock, and while it isn't quite civilized it's still aristocratic.

THE REMARKABLE RIESLINGS

Ludwig's Rieslings are entirely unlike any other Rieslings in Austria. They are as RIESLING-Y as they can be, yet they are seldom spritzy, rarely "crisp" and never squeaky-clean. Not quite as proper as Alzinger, but texturally similar; not quite as "antique" as Nikolaihof but also analog, I promise you this: IF YOU LOVE RIESLING AND DON'T KNOW THESE WINES, YOUR VISION OF RIESLING IS ABOUT TO BE RADICALLY EXPANDED.

2017 Riesling Langenlois

12/750ml | AHL-242

The name has shifted from *Urgestein* to the village-designation, but the wine is the same as before. The '17 is smoky and angular, funky plum blossom and balsam, woodruff and iron; in other words as unique as always!



2017 Riesling Ried Steinhaus Erste Lage

+ (+)

12/750ml | AHL-243

WTF is it with this site? Is there a more remarkable Riesling *anywhere in the world??*

The wines are like some hybrid of Albariño, Chenin and Sauv-Blanc, herbal, limey, sorrel, aloe vera, hyacinth and herbs. It is.

my subjective fave among Ludwig's Rieslings. The site is steep with myriad little terraces, amphibolite and gneiss higher up, loess lower down, giving a Riesling for people who love Scheurebe, or you might say it's Riesling having *birthday sex*. For me this is a **not-to-be-missed** wine in this offering because it gives you all its warm-hearted kinky generosity for a reasonable price. Fragrances are refined, lime and verbena, but the palate is explosive, completely delicious and almost shatteringly complex; hyperactive interplay of herbs, ripe citrus, exotic fruit all blasted together in a Hadron-collider buzz of life-force, a twitching spazzy dance of herbal ripeness.

No one—*no damn one* on earth could have made a Riesling like this. Give it up for individuality! And take a deep bow Mr. Hiedler.

2017 Riesling Ried Gaisberg Erste Lage

+ +

6/750ml | AHL-244

Hiedler's is the most present of all Gaisbergs; complex and elegant and salty and juicy. It brings the great Nahe site *Bastei* to mind, or even Nigl's *Hochäcker*; this is Riesling at an apex of delicious improbability. You can see what this supernal terroir tastes like without waiting five years.

2017 Riesling Ried Heiligenstein Erste Lage

(+ + +)

6/750ml | AHL-245

Three plusses in parentheses because if this wine does what I suspect it may do, it will be a masterpiece, Hiedler's best-ever Riesling. Right now it's a lavish mystery, but it's straining to burst into lavish streamers of flavor. **We have 60 bottles available and that is it.**

2016 Riesling "Maximum"

+ +

6/750ml | AHL-241

It has loosed the surly bounds of anything you thought dry Riesling could be. Halfway to Condrieu, or Jurançon moelleux in its overripe banana aromas; yet as it sits in the glass it firms up, gets slimmer, more herbal, hyssop and chervil. WTF is this wine????

HIRSCH



REGION / SUB REGION

Kamptal / Kammern

VINEYARD AREA

31 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

12,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Kammerner Lamm,
Zöbinger Gaisberg,
Zöbinger Heiligenstein**

(*löss, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

**65% Grüner Veltliner
35% Riesling**

FARMING PRACTICES

Respekt certified Biodynamic

'Hannes is, as you know, bio-dynamic, has been for several years, has all the cred a dude can have. But he catches some flak from certain self styled purists, who do not actually know very much about wine, but know how to make themselves feel terribly virtuous by having categorical opinions on matters of winemaking. This excites 'Hannes' rebel streak, which is something we should always encourage.

"It's like an A.A. meeting: my name is Johannes and I sulfur and filter my wines..."

Among my Kamptal producers, 'Hannes Hirsch is the one with the least fixed identity. Or perhaps his identity is not to have an identity, his wine style is not to have a "style" and he doesn't wish to be pigeonholed. He falls somewhere in the nexus among Bründlmayer's and Gobelsburg's glossy gleam and Hiedler's juicy sensuality, but there's no point you can affix him to. I suspect he likes it that way, as my friend is the best kind of lone wolf and contrarian.

His entry-level wines are *superb*, consistently so. They're tasty and soulful and generous. It's when you climb to the levels of the Grand Cru wines that they often lay below a shroud of leasiness. This, again, is probably deliberate. That is, he wants his wines to be this way. He could make them some other way—he certainly knows how to—and moreover I think 'Hannes really wants his wines to lead the way. Early ones can be early and tardy ones can arrive when they're ready. I certainly don't mind when a wine needs a few years to reveal itself, but the risk is not trivial; we receive a wine that's a few vintages old, by which time we've moved

on to the new vintage. It means we have to be wine merchants and not *vintage* merchants, but this is a gigantic and intractable habit and one I won't break by raining my teeny little blows against it.

It's tempting to ascribe Hirsch's shape-shifting nature to his bio-dynamic conversion, but I think it's inaccurate. His wines have been this way for some years now, and the only tangible effects of bio-dynamics are the usual ones of lower alcohol (which I applaud) and more emphasis on tertiary flavors. 'Hannes himself is so quick-witted and such a fast talker that you suppose his wines ought to be like everyone else's, quick critters you see in micro-time units. In fact 'Hannes seems to see them in macro swaths of time, longer and more deliberate, wines that let themselves be known when *they* are ready, not when they are summoned.

Last Fall I did a seminar for a local retailer in which we looked through the vertical of Hirsch I offered in 2017: we had Gaisberg 2010-2013 and it was revealing. *All the wines were expressive* and issued a gentle but insistent reminder: these wines are stellar. Don't be confused when they're in a youthful shroud. That's how they *should* be.

Accordingly my tasting notes for some of the young wines are provisional, tentative. Yet if I am patient—if we all are—we'll often be stunned by wines that have a blazing deliciousness and an almost inscrutable complexity, and that refuse to "add up" in any of the ways we've come to anticipate. I want to lead you to them, but it's a curving path through dense woods, so join the adventure if you please.

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/750ml | AWH-170

I think we're calling it "Hirschvergnügen" now. It used to be called "Veltliner #1" and the label was comical and changed each year. Now we're naming it after an ad campaign from a car company that's guilty of committing massive-scale fraud—but hey, they didn't ask my opinion!

Among my starter-GVs this is the most sophisticated, vinous and complex. It's a "warm" style, juicy, like a wheat-soup with hawthorn and acacia. If you offer it BTG try not to serve it ice cold.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Kammern

12/750ml | AWH-171

Darker and crustier; a serious light (12% alc) GV that doesn't "read" light because the flavors are so toasty and savory. It also walks a line among spinach and fennel and mineral.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kammern Gaisberg Erste Lage

+ +

12/750ml | AWH-172

The intent is to release this next year, but it's so good right now that I begged for a limited early offering with the rest to follow whenever.

The soil is dauntingly variable and complex; let's say it can entail chernozem (look it up!), gravel, loess, gneiss, amphibolite, depending on what part of the hill you're standing on. And this GV is as euphoric and lapidary as a young Hirsch GV has ever been; creamy, spicy, delicate yet with endless persistence; an old soul in a form of utter contentment; really complex herbs and savories; mineral as though the rocks melted with joy; jasmine rice, white tea, peace and strength.

2015 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kammerner Renner Erste Lage

+ +

12/750ml | AWH-147

Now we're talking. Wonderful aroma, pure vetiver; as primordial as spring-water, rich and densely textured, a lovely complex wine that's almost fluffy; a swirl of infinitely fine pieces of flavor, all seen from the corner of your palate's eye, and snuggling beneath a virtually tactile blanket of texture and mineral richness.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kammerner Lamm Erste Lage

+

12/750ml | AWH-167

Hirsch's Lamm is seldom showy; it's inferential, and for its mass it's analog and evanescent. As it emerges it's game and weed, garrigue and earth, an old-century wine that doesn't explicate itself for you.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kammerner Gaisberg Erste Lage

+

12/750ml | AWH-173

Even in the hyper 2016 vintage this wine is serene, showing a vivid and intricate minerality in a texture somehow both zingy and creamy; tautly silky, night-ripe, moony lemon-blossomy salty and with a mirabelle backdrop.

2017 Riesling Zöbing

12/750ml | AWH-174

Some '17s are like this; angular and edgy; in any case this is less tranquil than the equivalent GV. May be bottle sick.

2016 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage

+ (+)

12/750ml | AWH-169

An especially savory vintage; all the malty meadow flower element and less of the herb, lime and tropical fruit—for now at least. Salty length in an aerial form, into a micro-pixelated mineral finish. As savory as if it contained 5% GV Lamm.

WACHAU

There's some chatter about the Wachau retreating from the scorched-earth bellicose wines of the past decades. I'd like to think it's true, because I hated those wines. They were (and still are) the opposite of "drinky;" they were, one might say, *Trump-y*, powerful and maladroit and really, let's be honest—useless. For what imaginable purpose does one seek a gargantuan wine with well above 14% alcohol, made even more egregious by bitter botrytis flavors? Nor is this queasy idiom needed; the genius of the Wachau is (or was) to give wines with a thrilling alignment of strength and precision, together with vehement terroir.

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

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

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

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

ALZINGER



REGION / SUB REGION

Wachau / Unterloiben

VINEYARD AREA

10 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

6,250 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Mühlpoint

(clay mixed with gneiss)

Liebenberg

(mica schist)

Hollerin

(gneiss mixed with löss and loam)

Loibenberg,

Steinertal

(weathered gneiss)

GRAPE VARIETIES

55% Grüner Veltliner

45% Riesling

I suspect that if you wait long enough, things take the shapes they're meant to take. In my early days with Austrian wines I imported Hirtzberger and FX. Pichler (both of whom were enticed away from me by an opportunistic competitor. It ended badly.) and with great respect to both of these outstanding producers, I don't miss them. I think that among the greats of the Wachau there are a few estates whose wines we don't merely admire, we love them. And among those, I have half of them, and that's fine by me.

I see Alzinger as spirit-kin to people such as Dönnhoff and Raveneau, wines that are endlessly complex and mysterious but seldom explicit. You'd almost prefer to describe them with music rather than words. It has to do with texture, but not texture alone. It enacts a quality of evanescence, as though some divinity was floating in the air around you, which laughed and gleamed when you tried to grasp it. I have to wrench myself out of reveries to "describe" the wines. It's why my language gets so silly.

But in essence, there are wines that explain themselves and wines that reveal themselves. Explanation is wonderful, of course, especially if we're curious, but revelation is deeper. And more unsettling, as we're seldom prepared for it, and it seems to come in moments that don't seem exactly apt. I can't imagine what it must be like to suddenly taste, say, a Hollerin Riesling from Alzinger in the thrum and cacophony of a trade tasting. We need to build an immersion chamber where a few tasters at a time can retreat into silence and let the wines absorb them.

Of course we don't often show the top wines from Alzinger, because we get so little of them, and we don't want to frustrate you with samples of wines we don't have to sell. But we talked about that with Leo. As some of you know, he's come over, not because he "needed" to move cases, but because he was interested to see who y'all were and how his wines fit into the total context. In that spirit we wondered whether it made sense to show his top wines, not everywhere and not all of them but just a few here and there, just so you'd get to see them.

Leo himself reminds me a lot of Willi and Christoph Schaefer. They both know their domains are too small to supply me with the wine I could use, but they give me what they can, somewhat apologetically. When they come over to show their wines—which both of them have done though they hardly "needed" to—it's because they want to meet you all, to see the scene, and not to appear aloof just because we have to allocate their wines.

I have very sweet relaxed friendships with both families, Schaefer's for many years and Alzinger more recently. But at dinner at home a few weeks ago, Leo produced a wine from Müller-Catoir, the 1998 Rieslaner BA, from the time he had his *stage* there with Hans Günter Schwarz. It isn't so much the wines that influenced him. It was the man. An angelic quality with which his wines are imbued. Finally it is this penumbra of tenderness which is so haunting.

While all the sites are outstanding, these two are *hors classe*.

The two top sites are among the great-

est 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 powerwine it isn't at all brutish. The wines, whether Riesling or GrüVe, are tropical and exotic, yet they manage an uncanny light-footedness and refinement. I suspect a synesthetic 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 marked 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.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Dürnsteiner Federspiel

12/750ml | ALA-187

I can't remember a better vintage of this "basic" Federspiel. It has a wonderfully pretty fragrance leading to a stunningly expressive Federspiel; roasted haricot verts; firmly spicy but with secret-sweetness, into a solid stern finale. Everything the category could be, and seldom is.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Mühlpoint Federspiel

12/750ml | ALA-188

These wines really demonstrate the flattening out of the quality span we sometimes see in '17, whereby the "light" wines ascend much closer to the "important" wines than usual. And yet unlike a year like, say, 2006, the top wines don't get grotesque and over-alcoholic. For this wine is markedly expressive—in some years even the Smaragd isn't this expressive. Roasty and dense with rich mineral texture, full of pepperness and secret-sweetness.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Mühlpoint Smaragd

6/750ml | ALA-189

More compact and mineral and strong. Yes riper, yes more power, but compared to the Federspiel this is quite *other* in character, more of an edifice of white stone; not as much fruit but a greater volume of flavor, saltiness and garrigue.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Loibenberg Smaragd

6/750ml | ALA-190

Even in the fleshy cask-sample it was clear this would hit 14% alc. It was hugely impressive, as these big wines tend to be in their infancy. Exotic and with "noble" stature, it's given away by the charred-skin of a stovetop-roasted pepper and by the jalapeño warmth on the finish. For many tasters this will be a *loaded* grand sexy-pie wine, and to them I advise: drink it now and in its first year.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Steinertal Smaragd

6/750ml | ALA-191

'17 is a riper year for a sorrel-y silvery wine, showing less as lime and more as an orgy of *greens* in the mint family; nettle, the arugula variant called "rocquette," mizuna, Italian parsley. The wine is decidedly *dry*, with a smoky finish.

2017 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel

12/750ml | ALA-192

Again an exceptionally good Federspiel! Solid, stony and lovely; salts and verbena and a complex finish of herbs, wintergreen, aloe and mineral.

2017 Riesling Ried Liebenberg Smaragd

+

6/750ml | ALA-193

Steep terraces upstream from Dürnstein, giving (as a rule) radish-y Riesling—like now. Sweet radishes, ginger and parsnip, like a Ricola-candy of Riesling; bracing and fun if you like being tickled with ice cubes while chewing a verbena leaf. And really, who doesn't?

2017 Riesling Ried Hollerin Smaragd

+ +

6/750ml | ALA-194

Essentially the lower slopes of Höhereck (and Kellerberg, obliquely), it gives the most apricot-driven Riesling among Alzinger's Smaragds. This one starts out with greener flavors than usual until a Victoria-Falls of stone fruit overwhelms, generously and lovingly. But it's not a soft love, glorious though it is. There's also a rock slide Christmas-tree thing above (or below) the white peaches. I don't recall a Hollerin this schizy, and I think it is wonderful.

2017 Riesling Ried Höhereck Smaragd

+ +

6/750ml | ALA-195

How inconvenient that my usual-favorite of Alzinger's Rieslings is the one they barely make. It's a tiny plot and they get "around 800 bottles" in a good year. Yes—*bottles*.

All I can say, after all these years, is—from this tiny place comes one of the earth's great wines, the terminus of every great facet of Wachau Riesling, the herbs from this, the peaches and plums from that, the mangoes from another, the smoke from yet another—all there.

The '17 is, typically, complete. It's the flavor of fullness, as if nothing else could be anticipated. Herbs, rocks, roasted veggies, salts. But the overall level of Leo's '17 Rieslings is so high that this doesn't soar above as it often does. It's just marvelous.

2017 Riesling Ried Loibenberg Smaragd

+

6/750ml | ALA-196

As always plum and malt, Chinese 5-spice, candy cap mushrooms; it's large and dancy, less concentrated and more dispersed than Höhereck, but an aspect of elegance is likely to emerge when the wine is focused by bottling.

2017 Riesling Ried Steinertal Smaragd

+ + (+)

6/750ml | ALA-197

Wild screaming lime aroma, and here's the Physio "secret" sweetness to elevate this to the divine, though it's a wild and savage divinity, maniacally vivid and spicy.

NIKOLAIHOF



REGION / SUB REGION

Wachau / Mautern

VINEYARD AREA

22 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Steiner Hund,
Klausberg,
Im Weingebirge,
Vom Stein,
Süßenberg

(primary rock topped with humus or gravel, and eroded primary rock)

GRAPE VARIETIES

55% Riesling
35% Grüner Veltliner
10% Neuburger,
Gelber Muskateller,
Gewürztraminer,
Frühroter Veltliner,
Chardonnay

FARMING PRACTICES

Demeter Certified Biodynamic

We are determined to make these catalogues shorter, yet the sad truth is you can't write in brief about this estate, because as soon as you start you end up writing about all of life. The "headlines," if one can even glean such things, are that all is well but one mustn't presume. That is, with an estate like this one, you're not surprised to encounter a few quirks along the way. As a rule the wines are atmospheric of antiquity, and most of the time this is stirring and beautiful. If any given cork isn't perfect you get bottle variation showing as just-plain oxidation. And the occasional cask comes close to a kind of sous-voile thing which one either appreciates or doesn't. But the overall effect of these wines as a group is to return you to a kind of holy innocence. You can feel like, "This is the way wine (among other things) used to be before it got all fucked up an' stuff..."

Most of you already know the story and love the wines. Bio-dynamic since 1971, first Demeter-certified wine estate in the world, all those things. The wines and the family convey a seamless unity, radiantly good humor, and an unfussy gratitude. And yet still, in their context they are open to almost infinite possibilities, and it strikes me that my most "conservative" estate is also my most radical.

We were sitting in a schmoozy kind of way with "Nikky" Saahs, and he was talking about the old days. Someone may have asked why the estate decided to go bio-d so long before anyone else did. Nikky told us that in the 60s his father didn't use the prevailing chemical treatments because times weren't good and he

couldn't afford them. So he did without, and his vineyards did without, and after a few years both man and vine alike learned how to do without.

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.

It's starting to be possible to talk about the "style" or the language of these wines. They are wines of atmosphere, and some of that atmosphere is that of the cellar, its ambient aromas and also the environment of the casks. Nikolaihof's wines are (almost) never what we'd call woody, but the casks have perfumed their breath. In "normal" wines there is an explanation; in these wines there is a breathing. When I open a bottle at home, and I open a lot of them, I always feel, with the first whiff of aroma, that I'm opening the pages of a 19-century novel. Yes they smell like GV or Riesling or whatever, but they also smell like food cooking and people laughing in the next room.

And when Nikolaihof wines "work," they are charged, numinous with spirit, atmospheres and questions and reverie and longing. In isolated instances when they don't "work," they are merely strange. I have shrunk from those wines, in part because they didn't please me, and in part because I want to show that the most hands-off wines in the world don't have to taste bizarre.

When you let these wines in—and you are very much aware of them *entering* your body—you feel as if you're receiv-

ing a signal from the Pleiades. It doesn't feel like A Wine, but rather like the fluid culmination of a whole world that built up to it. You're not only pleased, you are deeply happy. You are part of something healthy and purposive, and all you have to do is pour. And then dream.

We don't really envision Nikolaihof

making wines in stainless steel, but of course they do, the everyday wines, and those wines are always good. And because they are always good, I suspect the issues with odd aldehydes, the *flor* taste and garden-variety oxidation have to start with the casks. That *flor* taste isn't really a flaw; it's just that I don't travel to the Wa-

chau looking for wines that taste like Jura wines. I think I won't offer you anything I find to be dubious, which may entail a few iconic wines being absent, temporarily. This bothers me, because I deeply love this estate, but it bothers me less than to show you wines I find to be less than healthy.

Sekt Riesling Dosage Zero

6/750ml | ANK-218

Usually we toast my arrival with this, under that astonishing linden tree, but that means I can't take notes, and so this year we tasted it upstairs, and I got to see how the zero-dosage wine was better than the other one. I'm not being glib when I say this is a Nikolaihof wine *mit mousse*. I find it more pensive than celebratory, but I'm prima-facie crazy, as all of you know.

2017 Grüner Veltliner "Zwickl"

12/750ml | ANK-209

This is, in essence, an *unfiltered* "Hefeabzug," and you get two wines in the same bottle if you want. How? It's fallen bright in the top one-third, and if you pour carefully you will have a clear wine. You can then *shake the rest of the bottle* to mix the sediment and pour yourselves a cloudy glass of tasty atavism. They encourage this!

The wine-on-top is oyster and delicate and birchy. The cloudy one is "darker," more boxwood and cress. The '17 has a lovely texture and wonderfully dry and direct flavors; fennel-frond and herbs and even rather flinty, as if a Sauvignon Blanc had no gooseberries or veggies. In any case, I offer you what is probably the world's first interactive Grüner Veltliner. Give lees a chance!

2017 Grüner Veltliner "Hefeabzug"

12/750ml | ANK-210

This is the wine by which many of you know Nikolaihof, and yet it is atypical for them; all steel, bottled off the gross lees, it is another gesture of vitality and energy than they usually display. This '17 has the customary flavor of oyster shells, but the palate is really exciting; the spiciest element of lees and a zingy, straightforward briny charm.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Im Weingebirge Federspiel

12/750ml | ANK-211

For the last few years I've been finding the very soul of Nikolaihof in these early-released gentle beings. This one is amazingly winsome and delicate for a '17; gentle fruit but vivid mineral. It has a straight-lined dryness that seems to inhere to '17 at this estate. Calm, no frills, gentle but not indulgent, it has a poignancy many of the bigger wines don't show.

2010 Grüner Veltliner Ried Im Weingebirge Federspiel

12/750ml | ANK-100

This may have been intended for longer cask-aging, but Nikki's running out of cask space and this boy was "hastened" (ha!) into bottle. It is, in any case, a great antique Nikolaihof wine, recalling all kinds of things; Chablis, Klevener or Auxerrois or even (esoterica alert, forgive me) a Swiss Completer, but whatever it reminds you of it's murmury and gorgeous, like the *jus* from a veal roast with porcini and a hint of cloves. Being a '10 it does show some char and crunch, but it's pristine.

+

2013 Grüner Veltliner "Baumpresse"

6/750ml | ANK-217

In Nikki's regime they actually use the humongous 19th-century press from time to time. (They hire a hulking clot of Cossacks to run it, or so I surmise.) This wine in any case is entirely fascinating; phenolic, smoky, resinous. It's not exactly my idiom of choice, but for me it's the acceptable profile of "natural-ism." Highly quirky but without actual flaws.

+ + (+)

2017 Riesling “Vom Stein” Federspiel

+

12/750ml | ANK-212

This is just excellent wine, Nikolaihof as we love them to be; lively, sorrel-y, ped-pod and chervil; just on the right side of funky, full of soul and energy. But it's a reflective sort of energy, suggestive of reverie even as it chugs and puffs.

2012 Riesling Ried “Klaus Am Berg” Steiner Gaisberg

6/750ml | ANK-214

Yes 2012 was a strong vintage, but this wine is quite the powerhouse by this estate's standards. It's very young with no real tertiary development—too much muscle! A thumper, a big guy's-guy Riesling.

2004 Riesling “Steinriesler”

(+ +)

3/750ml | ANK-191

It's the archaic name for Riesling, used now to designate a long cask-aged wine of Federspiel quality, by which we see (if we actually needed to see) that even “humble” wines can age.

I have the two plusses in parentheses, and here's why. At first I rejected this wine for being too oxidized. Letting it sit in the glass, the palate began to change, blanketed by the wine's herbal juju, and the truly resplendent finish overcame all doubts.

But what wine is it, really? Both? I will not be the guy who says “You have to decant it,” because that's unreasonable (and often bogus). But I'm confused. Y'all taste it and tell me what wine it is.

2000 Riesling “Vinothek”

+ +

6/750ml | ANK-195

This as you know is a concept whereby a Smaragd wine is left in (large) cask for fifteen years or longer, without sulfur. This is the best since the '95; solid, powerful, smoky; strong but not heavy, an old iron stove of Riesling. The roast is reposing fragrantly, and the stove still smolders....

2017 Gelber Muskateller

(+)

12/750ml | ANK-216

As soon as Nikolaihof Muscat was introduced it became one of the few most interesting ones in Austria. This '17 is “herbal” in the norm of the vintage; it has mid-palate pulpy richness, a subtle stoniness, quite lingering for its lightness (11.5% alc).

Gelber Muskateller VERTICAL COLLECTION

6/750ml | ANK-219

Two bottles each of 2009, 2012 and 2013 in one deluxe case of 6!

2017 Neuburger

+ + (+)

12/750ml | ANK-215

This has a ton of character! Supposedly it is this - www.austrianwine.com/our-wine/grape-varieties/white-wine/neuburger - yet Jancis says it's PB-Silvaner crossed, and Wiki says it's Roter Veltliner and Silvaner. So, um, <shrug???

2015 Gewürztraminer

12/750ml | ANK-194

12.5 alc! A *whisper* of RS. A total classic Gewürz that you can drink!

HANS REISETBAUER



In 1990 Hans Reisetbauer planted his first apple orchard of 1.5 hectares in Kirchdorfergut and on September 16, 1994 Christian Carl of Göppingen built a still from plans designed by Hans himself. Quickly Hans gained notoriety in 1995 by winning “Schnapps of the year” at the Destillata specialist trade fair. Reisetbauer has been named “Master Distiller of the Year” by the Austrian gourmet guide A la Carte in '04, '07, '08 and '09. Most recently he won the Falstaff’s “Spirits Trophy Award” in 2010.

Hans Reisetbauer’s dedication in his orchards, detail in distillation and constant quest for new innovations has led him to be considered one of the finest producers of Eaux de Vie in the World. In order to control the quality of his products, Reisetbauer mostly uses fruit grown on his own property. Hans has also done careful comparisons to find the best water for use in his process, exclusively using spring water from Mühlviertel. As Hans explains, “Temperature, time and aeration during fermentation, as well as condition of raw material are important factors influencing the quality of the final product.” Following fermentation, the mash is distilled twice with the heads and tails being discarded. Only the “heart” of the distillate is kept as it contains the most prized volatile and aromatic components from the raw material and is responsible for creating distinctive aromas. Lastly, the product is diluted with water to bring it to 41% alcohol. Reisetbauer’s Blue Gin follows the same detailed approach, utilizing a recipe of 27 botanicals from 10 different countries, and strictly Mulan variety wheat harvested from Upper Austria.

- Apple in Oak Barrel** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-024
- Apricot Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-003
- Plum Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-001
- Williams Pear Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-002
- Raspberry Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-009
- Cherry Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-004
- Wild Cherry Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-011
- Elderberry Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-005
- Rowanberry Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-006
- Ginger Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-014
- Carrot Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-013
- Hazelnut Eau de Vie** 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-028
- Mixed Case Eau de Vie** 6/375ml | XHR-035

Wooden case including 1 bottle of each: Apricot, Plum, Williams Pear, Raspberry, Carrot and Rowanberry

- Whisky** 6/750ml | XHR-015
- Blue Gin** 6/750ml (also available in 1.75L) | XHR-025
- Brut Apfel (2009)** 6/750ml | XHR-027

Sparkling Apple Cider, produced Méthode Champenoise, with 100% estate Jonagold apples.

REFERENCE

GRAPE VARIETIES

GRÜNER VELTLINER

Austria's signature variety—one in every three vines is GV—is a late-ripening thick-skinned grape. Vine material is important, and the new generation of vintners is gradually eliminating all the nasty old clones that were only bred for mega-yields.

GV will excel in every echelon; it makes a great quaff, a lovely medium-weight al-fresco wine, and it makes superb powerful wines that stand easily with every great dry white in the world. Among them, it is the most flexible at the table, because it goes with things that defeat every other wine.

Brassicas? Check. Asparagus? No worries. Artichokes? Perfect match. Shrimp? You betcha. What about cabbages and things like that? If it stinks up your house when you cook it, GV is the wine to drink *with* it. Plus it goes with all the things other dry whites are used for. This is why I am about to say that GV should have pride of place on your wine lists.

As a rule it's a medium-to-full bodied wine. When grown in primary rock, these are common descriptors for it: pepper, boxwood, mustard-greens (arugula, mizuna, tatsoi, et.al.), "ore" (a ferrous sense), shoot-smoke, basils, cress, mints and parsleys, strawberry, tobacco, and ordinary apple and citrus. When grown in loess, then you find legumes, lentils, various kinds of beans, grain (barley, oats, maize), vetiver, sorrel, oleander, roasted bell-peppers, rhubarb. Seen naked on the page, you could look at these things and say *ewww, who'd want to drink that?* But when you taste, you know right away you're encountering something distinctive, original, and indispensable.

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 over the last two weeks, tasting yet another absolutely super-nal GrüVe, my blood commenced to sim-

merin'. 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.

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 petroly. 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.

RIESLING

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

Great Austrian Riesling is unique. Austrian growers won't plant it where it doesn't thrive. It's almost always grown in primary rock, a volcanic (metamorphic/igneous) derivative you rarely see in similar form or concentration elsewhere in Europe. These soils contain schist (fractured granite), 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.

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

I'm offering every single one I could get my greedy hands on. 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. What used to be perhaps the world's best examples of this variety have seemingly succumbed to climate change. Many of the Serious Ones are now, to my taste, simply too alcoholic. That does leave the mid-range ones as very pure renditions of Pinot Blanc (without the blending in of Auxerrois, as is practiced in Alsace), and these often show fruit and shellfish notes I don't encounter elsewhere in the world. Yet as outstanding as the best wines can be, they face competition from the Germans and the Swiss, and even in Alsace there are a few growers who take the variety seriously.

AUSTRIAN WINE LAWS

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

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

site gives special flavors. And old-vines cuvées are 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 confected into attractiveness by manipulating its sugar" is a reasonable case to make, provided one has the courage to accept the consequences of making unattractive wines. What too many do, sadly, is to sell unattractiveness as virtuous, in a fine example of Orwellian doublespeak.

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

But maybe a little empathy is called for. I arrived right in the creative heat of the wine-renaissance in Austria, and am less sensitive to the dubious past

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

DAC

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

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

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

I will reply, as we see how these systems ramify in practice, we also see the ways they can strait-jacket a wine culture, can inhibit visionary thinking and retard innovation. There is a constant ongoing tension between protecting that which has proven to be a region's most profound

mode of expression—such as Sangiovese in Brunello, for example—while also permitting a sense of questing and exploration. Sometimes it works very well, and sometimes it stifles people, and to the extent the laws are ignored, they become relics of irrelevance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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