





INTRODUCTION

My friend—and on-the-ground agent, and editor of the best wine magazine in Austria, *Vinaria*—brought two old wines to dinner. His name is Peter Schleimer, and he's known to some of you, because he comes over on our DI tours sometimes, and can be seen pouring at the Bründlmayer table, among others. Peter is one of those rare people who can't help being funny. It doesn't even matter what he's saying or doing at any given moment; he's just inherently funny. Yet he's also dead-serious about wine, and the two bottles he carried with him that evening were an Alpha & Omega of white wine. One was classic, the other quirky.

But even the classic one, which turned out to be a 2001 Riesling Heiligenstein from Birgit Eichinger—was “classic” in a particularly *Austrian* way. You could imagine a sort of cuisine of wine that uses ingredients no one else uses, yet what emerges still tastes like “food.” The quirky wine was a 2002, Ludwig Hiedler's Weissburgunder “Maximum” and was certainly a singular gesture of Pinot Blanc, both in type and longevity. I had a half-consumed glass of Styrian Gelber Muskateller in front of me also, the aperitif I ordered while I awaited Peter's arrival. We ate a fantastic dinner, which made me think it could be State Bird Provisions if that great San Francisco restaurant were transferred to Vienna, and acquired umlauts (and lamb-lungs on its menu).

I was stoked to be there, stoked to be back in Austria and to sit with my old friend, eager for the week ahead, tasting the new vintage with growers I have come to revere and often to love. It was good to be me. And it was also just a little bit lonely.

But then, my feelings are always mixed over there. 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, be-

cause 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 Veltliner, 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 I!

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 GV's; 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 GV's 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.

All of what I'd call "mischief" is well-meaning, and the frustration you're seeing in these words is the result of a clash between people working on behalf of the "long-view" and people trying to sell the wines to other people day-in day-out. I will write elsewhere about the "DAC" appellation regulations (the headline is, they are a solution in search of a problem), but right now let's consider a few other items that *seem* well-and-good but actually place the cart before the horse, and then wonder why the vehicle is stuck in place.

One winery has eliminated the grape variety from the front label for its "Grand Cru" wines. Like Burgundy. And this is how they justify it, that "place" should have primacy (with which I agree, in theory) and that many other Great Places don't have the grape on the label. To use a blunt example, Chambertin doesn't say "Pinot Noir." But really, Burgundy is Burgundy; it's been famous a long time, it's French, and everybody wants it. In contrast, Austria is only superficially known beyond its borders, and what pittance of reputation it's managed to establish is barely a generation old, and only a few wise souls want the wines. Our admittedly primitive form of marketing wines

involves emphasizing the grape variety, which we do because it's the thinnest end of the wedge to get buyers to listen and to buy. Making them hunt for the grape in small print on a back label is annoyingly unfriendly, *however much I agree that site is paramount*. There's a time to make that case and to repeat that argument, and that time is—not yet. When a variety such as Grüner Veltliner is *firmly* established as a go-to mainstream wine with wine buyers and consumers, that is when we answer the question "What does this word *Lamm* mean?"

They're also trying to restrain growers from releasing their top Crus until 12-15 months after the vintage. To be fair, many growers don't need to be "restrained" but others are frustrated, or so I am told. Count me among them. I don't want to distort any wine's vinification so that it will be presentable in June when I'm offering them to you, but neither is it seemly (or even fair) to ask you to buy an expensive wine you haven't gotten to taste. And so in this particular squared circle we have, in the white trunks, their idealism, and in the black trunks, my filthy mercantilism. Mind you, I think it's tolerable to ask us all to wait six more months and taste the wines the following January, but I don't think it's correct to insist upon it. Yet this *Diktat* is a condition of membership in an elite and desirable growers association, and if this reminds you of the goings-on among the German VDP, well um yes. They are cross-pollinating in an exchange of diablerie that seems logical until its real-world ramifications are accounted for. The operation was a success and the patient died—that kind of thing.

In a way it's quite simple. Assume you are selling to people who know nothing about your wines. Keep assuming that, even as we learn. If and when we have become expert and if that expertise appears to be durable, then would be the time to start dithering. And yes, "dithering" is unfair to the manifest intelligence and idealism motivating these practices, and yet all this tinkering (that's a better word) is retarding the cause we all agree on: giving these wines the love they deserve and the desire they are due.

So, sigh....it was nice while it lasted. Twenty-five 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 2018 VINTAGE *

Well, it's complicated.

Let me reassure you, there are plenty of excellent wines and more than a few great ones. They don't seem destined for long keeping (by which I mean decades-long) but you're not laying them away in any case, even though you could and would love the results.

In contrast to the generally even-keeled German vintage, Austria is vividly lit and shaded, and nothing could be presumed. Most of my visits were surprising in some way; usually pleasantly, sometimes...not so pleasantly. The same pan-European weather conditions prevailed in Austria—a prolonged warm dry summer—but the Austrians contended with a big rain in early September which upended their harvest plans. Many of the grapes were already (or nearly) ripe and the rain was inopportune. Paradoxically this favored growers in less clement regions, who withstood the rain and picked at their usual times. This was one of a number of paradoxes in the '18 vintage, which was not only unpredictable from estate to estate but often erratic within estates.

Because everything was ripe at the same time, there's a huge benefit to you and me. The everyday wines are just insanely good, and very often *way* better than their "class" and just as often the best they have ever been. That's a double-edged sword, because I'm certainly not into dissuading y'all from trading up to the top wines, yet this was not invariably justified.

The wines are not markedly particular, and they're hard to generalize about. They tend to run lyrical rather than powerful, and when they're intense and "import-

ant" they're more incisive than muscular. Each grower had a story, but overall I didn't feel the vintage favored Riesling or GV, though it certainly did so within estates. The wines are characteristic except for low acidities, which were only occasionally corrected. Terroir signatures are vivid. For the way y'all actually use these wines, 2018 is a patently desirable vintage.

When the wines fail they fail at basic cleanliness. "Basic" may be too strong, because some of what I objected to could be elements that will disappear in time. I hope so, but I don't think so. The most common difficulties were oxidatives and naphthalene, both of which seemed to be tied to excessive alcohol—"excessive" being a matter of opinion, naturally. Yet I sometimes felt, apart from my own preferences, certain wines seeming to collapse under their ripeness, as if they lacked the joints and sinews to support it. Mind you, I am not an expert in wine chemistry, but when a wine smells like Nana's closet, I write "mothballs" in my note.

While I don't intend this little report to be any sort of Standard Reference for these vintages, I do find myself in a quandary, because part of what I seek to do is to entice demand, and that sometimes collides with the larger truth. Also, Austria is somewhat impervious to vintage-bumps, or else we'd have had huge sales-spikes when we sold the 2013s and 2015s both of them superb and maybe great. So I wonder how closely the existing demand really keys off the general quality of the current year. 2018 is an everyday vintage in which a substantial number of exceptionally fine wines were produced, and it's my job to find them for you. Can we agree to parse this? I want to say *Buy these wines* but it'd be too far to say "Buy 2018 as a commodity because it's outstanding overall" when that isn't the case. And so the only proper answer if someone asks me "How are the 18s?" is to say "*These* 18s are rocking, but man you had to be selective. At least I had to be; you don't have to be because I already was."

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.

THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE:

Looking only at 2018s—many growers had multiple vintages to offer—the Great Three among everything I tasted were **HIEDLER, ALZINGER and GOBELSBURG**.

Among them, **Hiedler** was the most surprisingly consistent and successful, and I really felt a guiding hand (or hands) at work. **Alzinger** has a group of wines perhaps less weighty than the typical Wachau range among top estates, but four of the wines have been literally unforgettable; I can't stop thinking about them and craving to drink them again. Finally, **Goebelsburg** just goes on being stellar.

Any of these three could take the exclusive superlative. But the one I'm most drawn to is—**HIEDLER**. First because I *never* supposed they would make these wines in this vintage, and also because it heralds perhaps a new level for this already-fine estate. And finally because you always know, when you taste a great grower's superb vintage, that they were really in synch with conditions, and attending to the harvest's most *telling* elements.

So hats off to the **Hiedler** boys.

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE (2018):

ALZINGER Riesling Steinertal Smaragd.

RUNNERS-UP INCLUDE:

BRUNDLMAYER Grüner Veltiner Ried Lamm

OTT Grüner Veltliner Rosenberg

GOBELSBURG Grüner Veltliner Ried Renner

HOFER Grüner Veltliner Weberberg

ALZINGER Riesling Hollerin Smaragd

THE GREATEST WINE IN THE ENTIRE OFFERING REGARDLESS OF VINTAGE:

OTT 2017 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel

RUNNERS-UP INCLUDE:

GOBELSBURG 2017 Riesling Tradition

NIKOLAIHOF 2002 Riesling Vinothek

THE BIGGEST HAPPY SURPRISES:

HOFER in his entirety!

BRUNDMAYER Riesling Kamptaler Terrassen

HIEDLER Grüner Veltliner Schenkenbichl

ALZINGER Grüner Veltliner Dürnsteiner Federspiel

SCHROCK Muscat “Sauvage”

NIKOLAIHOF 2018 Neuburger

BEST AMONG THE LITERS:

BERGER

TOP VALUES REGARDLESS OF VINTAGE OR PRICE-POINT:

HOFER Grüner Veltliner Ried Vogelsang

GLATZER Grüner Veltliner “Dornenvogel”

GLATZER 2018 Blaufränkisch

NIGL Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

THE BEST PINK WINES:

As always, **PRIELER** for something more “mainstream” (though hardly mainstream) and **SCHROCK** for something more delightfully batshit crazy in her “Biscaya.”

THE BEST AMPHORA WINES:

I do not sell amphora wines.

THE BEST RED WINES:

SCHROCK Blaufränkisch Ried Kulm 2018

GLATZER Blaufränkisch Prellenkirchen 2017

GLATZER St Laurent Altenberg 2017

THE TWO GREAT “STORIES” WITHIN THIS COLLECTION:

The surpassing stellar quality of the few top 2014s. The remarkable trio of Blaufränkisch from Glatzer.

ANOTHER LOOK AT 2017:

Unlike in Germany, the 2017s did not suffer being tasted in contrast to 2018. As is common in Austria, there weren't many left available (except for the reds

of course, as they're bottled and released later) but I found them agreeable and worthy of my early faith in their ripeness and muscle and grace.

AUSTRIAN SPARKLING WINES:

Until we started working with Christian Madl I had no special interest in Austrian bubbly as-such. If one of my producers made them—and if they were excellent—I'd offer them, but I didn't seek them out.

Then last week I looked at a recent issue of the magazine *Falstaff* (which is a big deal in German-speaking countries) devoted to all the sparkling wines of the world. In the section for Austria, I glanced at the “top-10” highest-scoring wines, thinking yeah scores whatever.... until I noticed I represented 4 of the best 5 wines and 6 of the best 10. (It would have been an even cleaner sweep had Gobelsburg sent samples to them.) It started to occur to my obtuse ass that I had, in this offering, a large *tranche* of the elite sparkling wines in all of Austria.

They vary stylistically between the classic/impeccable (Bründlmayer above all) to the individualist/idealistic/quirky (Madl), and to Gobelsburg, who splits the difference. Not that Bründlmayer is in any way mainstream, but there's a tangible thread running from them to Champagne—perhaps because Willi's wife Edwige is French-born. Madl's are wines made by a fierce lover of Champagne who has no wish to imitate but rather to emulate, to take the best of his raw material and see how far his *tirage* can carry it. Gobelsburg is a kind of hybrid, using native grapes (GV and Welschriesling among others) but turning them into something so elegant you'd be tempted to speculate they were indeed Champagne but from heirloom varieties even more *recherché* than Meslier and Arbanne.

I ask you to take these wines seriously, and not only as “Champagne alternatives” but as fine sparkling wines in their own right. If you're a somm, I'd wince to have a token one or two stuck among “Other Sparkling Wines” on your list. *They deserve a section.* They are that good, and that distinctive. If you're already doing this, then my eyes are blinded by your incandescent hippitude.

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 metamorphic soils based on primary rock. While it's a useful word, you should bear in mind Urgestein isn't a single soil but a general group of soils. There are important distinctions among it: some soils have more mica, silica, others are schistuous (fractured granite), still others contain more gneiss. 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, 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 conduced 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 growers with whom I work to take whatever steps they can in an organic direction. I don’t think it improves their wines in ways you can taste discretely, though conscientiousness in one thing often implies conscientiousness in all things. Most important, I don’t subject my growers to any sort of purity test with only pass/fail as options. There are reasonable approaches other than mine, and I respect them, but this one works for me.

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 redun-

dancies. 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 a recent issue of *Wine & Spirits* had a piece on Chianti Classico in which several wine lovers in the trade lamented the banishing 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.

Blaufränkisch 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.

Blaufränkisch 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,

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.



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

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, Blaufränkisch is like Lagrein and St. Laurent is like Corvino, if that helps. I'll throw in the unlauts 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.

AT-HMN-90-NAR (12/250ml)

AT-HMN-90-NAF (12/500ml)

AT-HMN-90-NAL (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)

Seeburg, 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. Your aim is true, and yet somehow you’re still funny and adorable.

2018 Rosé Vom Stein

+ +

12/750ml | AT-PRL-60-18

The best Rosé I offer, and it's truly had to fathom how Rosé could be better than this. It's around 95% Blaufränkisch (which accounts for its mineral length, focused structure and the "wildness" Georg intends for it) and a little St Laurent or Merlot to dash in some *zaft*. The `18 is somewhat more polite than the `17, but good grief, what fruit! Not strawberry, more rhubarb and rose hips and the center pulp from an overripe tomato. An ethereal note of chocolate. I'm planning to seriously drink the absolute fuck out of this.

2017 Blaufränkisch Johanneshöhe

12/750ml | AT-PRL-40-17

It's our entry-level BF (but not his) and it's been getting warmer and more companionable over time. This one shows a lovely *Vino Nobile* aroma, round, barky, rugged but not rustic, focused but analog; it has warmth but also shape and outline, and a really articulate pepperiness.

This "pepper" thing, by the way, is not imagistic. The variety has more rotundness than even Syrah—as does Grüner Veltliner, by the way. Maybe we should put a cuvée of BF and GV in an atomizer and call it "Pepper Spray." Joe Marketing!

2016 St. Laurent

12/750ml | AT-PRL-47-16

I saw this a year ago as a cask sample and wanted to see it again. It's ancillary for Georg but by no means unimportant, and he only bottles it when he likes it. This one's more "Gigondas-minus" than "Burgundy-plus;" campfire and char marks, a little St-L funk (but I know how easily y'all tolerate brett in wines you deem hip, so don't you dare object to this); it's admirably *dark* in temperament, even peppery, but its form is more spherical than Blaufränkisch.

2016 Leithaberg ^{DAC} Blaufränkisch

+

6/750ml | AT-PRL-41-16

2017 Blaufränkisch Leithaberg ^{DAC}

+ (+)

6/750ml | AT-PRL-41-17

The vintage will flip over at some point this year.

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 limestone. 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.

I love the `16, but I love moderation, lissomeness and contour even more than I love seductive fruit. "It actually has a white wine texture," Georg said. It's very *pure* BF, minty and textured with extreme scree and mineral on the finish. If you like the variety this one will scratch the itch with untrimmed fingernails.

Yet there's no denying the luscious charms of the `17. It's markedly long, full of Madagascar pepper and resinous herb (marjoram, rosemary) and a long stream of sweet vinosity. BF is rarely ingratiating, though it's often juicy, but this one is as alluring as it gets.

2016 Blaufränkisch Ried Marienthal Leithaberg ^{DAC}

+ (+)

6/750ml | AT-PRL-43-16

The `16 *Goldberg* is still unready and besides, Georg wants to draw some attention to the neglected sib. If Goldberg is Brunello or Pomerol, then Marienthal is St Emilion. After a gorgeous aroma it arrives tannic and ringent onto the palate, but it's also regal and gushing with vinosity and physio-sweetness and with blatant mintiness. Bottling could "civilize" this, though it may at first seem to constrict it.



2018 Chardonnay Ried Sinner

12/750ml | AT-PRL-30-18

An elegant vintage, with some whole-clusters (for texture) along with the generally prevailing stoniness; an ashen edge to a rather flowery wine, plus a sort of pan-Austrian terroir note of mustard greens. As always, no oak but plenty of lees.

2018 Pinot Blanc Ried Seeberg

12/750ml | AT-PRL-31-18

A curiously atypical aroma leads to a palate that's less of the oleander and roasted corn this wine usually shows, and more along lines of quince and crushed rocks; a moony silvery wine with adamant grip, reminding me of Furmint. Very recent bottling might be subduing the fruit and exaggerating the phenols, but ten minutes in the glass leads it closer to its usual home.

2017 Pinot Blanc Leithaberg ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-PRL-32-17

A bottled wine, by which I was relieved, because I've been inclined to overrate this as a cask sample. If this was a "true" showing then it's probably the best-ever vintage. It's old-vines *Seeberg*, in fact, full of sea-scallops and lees and hovering somewhere between Chablis *Vaillons* and St. Aubin; mineral and langoustine, jasmine rice and pimento and coconut and masa harina; it's polyphonic and salty and very impressive.

+ +

NATURAL WINE

I had dinner at the very cool and delightful *Birch* in Providence, RI, and was delighted to find a bunch of wine from the Vermont estate *La Garagista* on their list. We drank three different wines, and I felt as I always feel when I drink Ms. Deirdre Heekin's wines. First, they're delicious, and then they're interesting and distinctive, and then while they are certainly unusual they are also not weird or bizarre at all—I find them *classic*, though I saw a horizontal flicker of dismay cross Deirdre's face when I said this to her. "Classic" has become so debased in the modern parlance; we think it means "boring mainstream wines," but when I use it I mean *wine that tastes like wine should taste*. I also found myself

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 intervention, 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

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



thinking, as I always do when I drink these wines, "This is what natural wines should all be like, idiosyncratic but basically wholesome." If only it were so.

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

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

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 mothballs, 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 leads me to Heidi Schröck.

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

This was the best time I spent in Austria this year. First because Heidi showed—yet again—that she is a virtuoso at friendship, and that somehow she knows just how to be a person being the best that people can be. And, second, that her wines were lovely again.

“Again?” Well, the past two vintages I had some questions about the direction the wines seemed to be headed. Her wines have always been “natural” as I use that word; they shape-shift from year to year and never seem like aesthetic specimens she has fashioned to produce a reaction. But when a few of them showed naphthalene and other dubious aldehydics I began to feel *Uh Oh, not these...* Heidi being Heidi, I could talk with her about it, so she’d know how I felt and we could have clear air between us as always. So when the `18s turned out to be classic Heidi-wines again, I was pretty blissed

out with relief.

They aren’t precise or digital like the GVs and Rieslings from Lower Austria—they are inferential, spherical and analog, and you shouldn’t serve them too cold. They thrive at cellar temp, when they can spread their arms and exhale. They have spaces inside them, and they seem to be wrapped in a fine cool gauze. They’re part way to food itself.

I see how you respond to her wines (and to her) at our tastings. They’re not the same as the others. She has a warm and witty way about her, a force to which you wish to connect. And you’re right, your instinct is accurate; Heidi makes you feel like a person, she reminds you what humanity is, or can be, and she does it without the appearance of effort. This is a warm, thoughtful, humorous and dignified woman, and the wines are, inextricably, *her* wines.

2018 Blaufränkisch Ried Klum

12/750ml | AT-HSR-41-18

The vineyard was “planted by Emma, Irma and Millie in 1955” on a gentle slope based on the (prevailing) sandy loam and limestone but with veins of gneiss and mica-schist. And for the second year running, this is a sophisticatedly beguiling and flowery BF; tons of (Tasmanian black) pepper and every single oozing blackberry in the firmament; it’s sumptuously long and both its fruit and its structure linger; it’s like a face that *lights up* when it smiles, and ten seconds after it’s on your palate it just beams and beams and beams.

2018 Gelber Muskateller ‘Savage’

12/750ml | AT-HSR-30-18

“Savage” in this case refers to atypically long skin contact, so I was wary and it turned out I didn’t have to be.

Not only that, it was perhaps the most unforgettable wine I tasted in Austria (along with Ott’s `17 GV Spiegel) in its para-sensual shape-shifting hovering-in-the-ether character. Though it might have been subdued from bottling, it showed waxy Furmint-like notes and was allusive and delicate and dense. Not explicitly Muscat-like, it’s simply resplendent with character and beauty. It’s like a friend who sits by your bed when you’re feeling poky, and who keeps you company and doesn’t have to say a word.

2018 Weissburgunder

12/750ml | AT-HSR-31-18

This wine really is different every year, and the `18 is toasty and (rye) crackery and like a hard sheep’s milk cheese; explicitly limestony, roasted oyster shells, crusty—strong-feeling wine.

2018 ‘Phoenix...aus der Flasche’

12/750ml | AT-HSR-33-18

It’s a *gemischter satz* that used to be called “Vogelsang” but had to change its name for almost certainly dumb reasons (did someone say DAC??); it’s mostly Sauvignon Blanc and Welschriesling and was in a H2S phase, but the palate is salty and savory and tasty, a *country air* sort of wine, straw and hay and flowering fields; a little redcurrant, with a hybrid vigor and a lusty out-in-the-open ruddy good health.

2018 Furmint

12/750ml | AT-HSR-32-18

All steel and coiled and primary—and unfinished. It will be bottled late and will see cask in the interim. It’s quite a U-turn from the rather-too-“natural” 2017, really straight-up, as though it traded places with the Muskateller. Even with time in cask I think it’ll be one of the *keen* ones.

2017 Grauburgunder

12/750ml | AT-HSR-34-17

2018 Grauburgunder

12/750ml | AT-HSR-34-18

The `17 will see us through this year, and we’ll start with the `18 in January. Heidi’s most baroque wine, it’s always on its full lees until summer, and the idea is to have a breath of cask rather than a *stank* of oak. The typical flavors are sandalwood, star-anise, beef-*jus* and the crusty end-cap of the roast.

The `18 has 20% new wood and seems rather scorched at the moment, with its typical fruit only showing on the finish. But it’s early days.



2018 Rosé 'Biscaya'

+

12/750ml | AT-HSR-60-18

Still consists of nine varieties, many of them not-exactly "approved" for use in Austria, and still tasting as if it were made by extraterrestrials. This is usually a weirdo-wine I can really embrace—the '16 is really full-on lunatic bliss, and the '18 resembles it, but you have to surmount an initial reduction aroma that vanishes with about 3-4 minutes swirling, or else just decant it and shake the bastard. Mind you, this needn't be decanted *yesterday* and it doesn't do the tedious "If you're gonna drink it Thursday you should really decant it Monday" nonsense.

What's behind the fleeting stinkies has more of the heavy spice of the '17 than the straight lines of the '16, but it's in good form; it's enormously rich and characterful; earth and berries and fox and mulch.

2018 Furmint Spätlese

6/375ml | AT-HSR-83-18H

A lovely fragrance made me think of a Foreau Vouvray; the 55 g/l residual sugar rides a little high, but this has more lift and buoyancy than many Austrian sweet wines. And, it's Furmint!

2018 Beerenauslese

6/375ml | AT-HSR-82-18H

Welschriesling, Pinot Blanc and a little Furmint, the wine's brioche with orange marmalade. Very pretty. And I can't write decent notes on young sweet wines to save my damn life.

2017 Ruster Ausbruch 'On The Wings Of Dawn'

6/375ml | AT-HSR-81-17H

More butterscotch and caramel now, of course, but it shows a woody creaminess, botrytis salt and malt, and a refined light honey.

SATTLER



REGION/SUB REGION

Neusiedlersee / Taiden

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 Sattler is 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!



2018 Zweigelt Rosé

12/750ml | AT-SAT-60-18

It's delicious and generous and rich—as always!

2018 St. Laurent

12/750ml | AT-SAT-33-18

A cask sample was really gushing with aroma with the palate in a steely phase waiting to access its plummy sweetness. Details deferred, but when has this not been excellent?

2018 Zweigelt

12/750ml | AT-SAT-30-18

Also a cask sample, but man what a *wonderful* fragrance! It leads to a palate that's everything this variety can ever be. If anyone could resist this wine I would have to wonder if you were really human and not some mordant bot. +

2017 St. Laurent 'Reserve'

12/750ml | AT-SAT-34-17

In bottle. Markedly rich and round, enticing and roasty, but the chocolate is dark chocolate and the wine is a hirsute basso-*profundo* that's certainly not ungainly but is "really quite rich."

2017 Zweigelt 'Reserve'

12/750ml | AT-SAT-31-17

Spicy! Violets more than cherries, and even stones and herbs, it leans in the Blaufränkisch direction (BF is one of its parents) in its mineral diction and stand-at-attention texture—and yet: what fruit! +

SÜDBURGENLAND

This fascinating little wine region is stuck away, far from any substantial cities or towns, rubbing up against the Hungarian border. Its best vineyards are based on an iron-rich schist that's ideally suited to Blaufränkisch, and if you cherish this variety you will find a uniquely mineral-drenched and almost floral pepperness, a curly sort of twang, as if the wine were rolling its r's, and you won't find this any place else. It's like conducting a tasting of all the world's black peppercorns, from Tasmania to Sawawak to Madagascar to Timut to Keral to all the others, an articulation of peppery-ness that's both fascinating and also a reminder of the existence of *particular* places in this world. In a curious way it's like tasting *white* wines, as we don't expect reds to be this mineral, this focused, this etched and chiseled.

But—you have to cherish this very singular grape. And be willing to detour to find this singular expression of this singular grape. In other countries you would indeed be so willing. Here, not so much. I think, sincerely, that anyone who appreciates the special nature of Etna reds—as I do—would find even *more* of that nature here among these remarkable Blaufränkisch. Etna compelled you to detour, properly so, but here there be umlauts, and so you stay away.

There are a few stellar growers. They have American importers but I doubt they're rocking the world with depletions. Until this year I offered one of these Top-Guys, but the wines were met with an unjustified indifference. Admittedly they weren't come-hither wines, but neither are dozens of other wines you've snuggled up to. So I am reducing the offering to the one I happen to be fondest of. Take a bow, Mr. Wallner....

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.

Wallner’s wines are adorable. They laugh and are jolly, yet they can’t escape (as if they’d want to) the scritch sideways snap of Blaufränkisch in these parts. Yet the wines are so yummy you want to drink them less from a glass than from a bucket.

But we had a snafu with the samples this year, which through a sequence of mishaps never actually reached me. Everyone was frustrated, especially Wallner himself, and so I will repeat anything I’ve offered before—as I know those wines—and I’ll offer you others I’m confident will be excellent. And I am thus confident because I have *never* really “disliked” a Wallner wine; I have cherry picked my utter faves and sought to compile an elegant and sensible collection. I’ll taste those newbies in June, when you do, and will only offer notes herein for wines I already know.

2016 Blaufränkisch 'Eisenberg' ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-WAL-42-16

(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.

2017 Blaufränkisch 'Eisenberg' ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-WAL-42-17

(This will be offered if/when the '16 sells out, and I'd surmise it to be riper and "sweeter" than the more scrupulous '16.)

2015 Blaufränkisch 'Eisenberg' ^{DAC} Reserve'

(+)

12/750ml | AT-WAL-45-15

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.

2017 Blaufränkisch 'Eisenberg' ^{DAC} Reserve'

12/750ml | AT-WAL-45-17

(Here again, this will be offered when the '15 is finished. I expect it will be similar, perhaps smokier.)

HALF-BOTTLES

We're fortunate to be able to get these, and I'm offering what I'm guessing will be the best of them.

2012 Blaufränkisch 'Eisenberg' ^{DAC}

12/375ml | AT-WAL-42-12H

2012 Blaufränkisch 'Eisenberg' ^{DAC} Reserve'

12/375ml | AT-WAL-45-12H

(Both of these from a warm, ripe vintage, and both should be drinking in their "early-mature" phase, given the accelerated aging of halves.)

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 (Lacon) 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.

Thankfully it looks like we don't have to choose. Walter's wines keep inching forward in ambition and thus also in stature, yet with only isolated exceptions they've maintained their basic companionability. That said, there are new means of organizing and naming them, and this is due to the arrival of...<ulp>...a "DAC" for Carnuntum. In Glatzer's case this appears to have had a benign influence, for once, and while it's awkward to deal with name-changes, the result has been to emphasize origin, and this I applaud, always. Eventually all of his production will follow the three-or-four-tier system—estate, village, single-vineyard—a process that's already beginning.

There's also a refinement of the label design, none too soon in my view, as the family seems to have understood the discrepancy between clear indications of origin for the wines but busy-fussy-illegible labels.

Put it this way: I am always *happy* when tasting Glatzer, and if the occasional wine

was also objectively impressive, that was a bonus. But this year many *more* of the wines were impressive, sometimes seriously so, yet I was no less happy. This means

that Glatzer's wines, which were always excellent, are getting even better, and we should all view them with new eyes.

I'm going to divide them by variety,

and first, a real ascension, awakening, call it what you will, and whatever you call it this is BIG NEWS because it has no precedent in this winery. Thus:

BLAUFRANKISCH

*One didn't think of Glatzer as a yoda of Blaufränkisch. They were usually good and sometimes very good, but not like these. It started with a wish to improve the level of the "basic" wine, to make it less chipper and more serious, and of course if you do that, you then have to improve all the wines in the upward chain. I was really stirred by this trio, and felt that Walter was arriving as a **serious** provider of my favorite red grape in Austria. They're best bought as a trio, though I doubt you'll do this, as BF is still infra-dig for most of you. Too bad! You're settling for less than the best. Regardless—I introduce THE GREAT NEW BLAUFRANKISCH FROM WALTER GLATZER:*

2018 Blaufränkisch +

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-40-18

After a Zweigelt I feared might be a bit too earnest, this "entry-level" wine is absolutely perfect. All the varietal juju plus lip-smacking juiciness, peppers and blackberries; this is exactly what basic Blaufränkisch should be, and there couldn't be a better introduction to this fascinating variety.

2017 Blaufränkisch Prellenkirchen + +

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-41-17

This is a village-wine, grown on sand, and it squares the circle between seriousness and deliciousness. It wouldn't be out of place in Südburgenland, with its herbal peppery shimmer at the end. It's also as superb a red wine as Glatzer has ever made, and if you only buy one, but this one.

2017 Blaufränkisch Bernreiser +

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-42-17

Now a single-vineyard wine, grown on limestone and gravelly marl; it's more articulate and less gushing, but extremely spicy and radiant with black cherry; less need to ingratiate itself but more need to *explain* itself, with diction, clarity and coherence, and with explicit nuance.

ZWEIFELT

2018 Zweigelt 'Rebencuvée'

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-43-18

I'm not sure this wine was really presenting itself today. I don't mind it being rather-more-serious than before, and I liked its greater grip, but something felt withheld, until an especially fetching finish, which teased with what the wine may yet become.

2017 Zweigelt Haidacker

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-45-17

Single-vineyard now, the first-ever bottling. While the oak's a bit "sweet" the overall wine is grown up and good, and the finish is an essence of Zweigelt. The wine is intense and multi-layered yet also slim and outlined.

PINOT NOIR and ST. LAURENT

2016 Pinot Noir

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-49-16

Among the most successful Glatzer PNs since the 2012, this one is surprisingly lovely, with pure cool fruit and a roasted-tomato mid-palate richness; sleek and long, it has Old World firmness and it's not at all quirky—just a kind-hearted dusty PN that makes you glad – among other things, glad you didn't have to spend more for good PN!

2017 St. Laurent Altenberg

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-47-17

The best SL Glatzer has ever made and one of the best I have ever tasted.

I've lost count of the many "ambitious" SL I've tasted with all manner of feral aromas and reductions, and one allows for these because of what lies below them—a special fruit no other wine can show. But here you needn't make allowances for *anything*; this wine's just fucking excellent. As and superb as SL can ever be, with a singular minerality I can't remember ever tasting from this variety and with the clearest fathomable fruit. It's *balanced*, the cask flavors are cooperative, not domineering, and the wine has excellent length with flavors of black cherry and the charred skin of a grilled eggplant.

AT LAST, WHITES

2018 Grüner Veltliner

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-01-18

Like so many "basic" GV's in 2018, this is strikingly good, frisky and lively and salty and pixilated and with an especially vivid aroma.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Dornenvogel'

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-02-18

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.

The *sponti* blanket was less present after a few months, and when I tasted the wine again in June it was just a fading memory. But here it is again in this '18, yet it's engulfed in waves of green-beany richness; balsam and parsnips; it has the weight of the typical "Weinviertel DAC" but a lot more density; rich, salty lentil and olive-oil finale.

2018 Sauvignon Blanc Schuttenberg

12/750ml | AT-GLZ-31-18

Yes, it's a lot of plusses for Mr. Glatzer this year....

He also makes a basic SB, which is always "proper" SB and quite good. If the single-vineyard wine doesn't seem to justify the upcharge, I'll stop at the basic one. But this time we have a wine of considerable character and originality, a *sponti* with long lees contact, it mines a vein of brassica and not so much flint or red peppers; rather a hint of cauliflower and something I called "wet wheat." I actually know what I mean by that.

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.

MADL



REGION/SUB REGION

Weinviertel / Poysdorf

VINEYARD AREA

3.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

2,000 cases

SOIL TYPES

limestone
loess
loam

GRAPE VARIETIES

Welschriesling
Riesling
Chardonnay
Weissburgunder
Pinot Noir
Grüner Veltliner
Zweigelt

FARMING PRACTICES

practicing organic viticulture

Nuptial preparations (his, not mine) prevented us from meeting this year, but I tasted samples of his new wines with Peter Schleimer, and found them to extend his already rad sensibility. Quantities are small. Creativity is rampant.

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 | AT-MAD-02-13

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!

Cuvée Speciale Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | AT-MAD-01-NV

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.

Brut Nature, 2015

6/750ml | AT-MAD-10-15

This is 100% Grüner Veltliner, deg 12/7/2018, and it's a super-toasty mouthfilling crunch of rye-crispy fibrous bliss—if that's what blisses you. It has the GV mizuna but is mostly a matter of rusky autolytic mid-palate vinosity. It is "balanced" without dosage, but also a little four-square.

Blanc de Noir, Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | AT-MAD-05-NV

Deg 2/2019, equal parts 14-13-12, this will appeal to natural-wine lovers with its "orange" overtones and slight foxiness. I don't like it personally, but neither do I wish to block it, hovering as it does in an outer orbit of tolerability.

Rosé 'Oenotheke,' Trocken, 2010

6/750ml | AT-MAD-04-10

7.5 years *tirage*, 100% Zweigelt, deg. 2/2019, and most saliently, "Trocken" which as you know does not mean "dry" with sparkling wine—it means "kind of sweet." Not *really* sweet, just a little, and in fact I don't know what the RS is, but only that it didn't shock me. The wine is entirely radical—I thought immediately of Paul Grieco; it's his kind of beast. It plays by no known rules, acidity like a banshee and zapped out RS, like a bubbly psychedelic Heidi Schröck *Biscaya* (which is already pretty plastered), it's a space-time warp, only for the most adventurous among you.

+

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

This was the most surprising visit I made this year, and also the most heartening. The relatively cool climate this far east of the Wachau and Kamptal kept Hermann Hofer's (certified organic) vineyards free from rot, and permitted him to pick *at the usual time* in mid to late October, when everyone else's grapes were well into fermentation—or had completed it. It really was like tasting a different vintage entirely, and no other grower in this offering so outpaced his usual norm—which is why the offering is so large.

Speaking of which, I will keep offering earlier vintages when they're available, and I encourage you to jump on them; how often do you have access to *affordable* GV with at least a surmise of tertiary development?

I drove there, by myself, on a cold, rainy Sunday that had everybody kvetching "Is it May or what?" A few really gnarly looking teams of miserable and mud-spattered workers were picking asparagus as I drove by.

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!**

GRÜNER VELTLINERS – OLD AND NEW

2015 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kirchlissen

+ +

12/750ml | AT-HOF-04-15

Until the 2018 *Weberberg* (coming right up) this was the best GV Hofer had made.

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 Nigl'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**.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Freiberg

+

12/750ml | AT-HOF-07-16

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.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Vogelsang

+

12/750ml | AT-HOF-06-18

This is as *delightful* as GV ever gets, and a real triumph of the '18 vintage; flowery and riddled with wild iris and chervil and sweet new potato. It behaves much like a Riesling in its lyric precision, except for the wild cress and sorrel of GV. This is singular and wonderful.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Von den Rieden'

12/750ml | AT-HOF-03-18

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 '18 is quite ripe (13.9 alc) and I'm rethinking whether it belongs on the core-list, as that placement was conceived for a lighter fella. Mind you, this '18 has its case to make; the extreme apricot makes it seem "sweet" though it's not, and with air the GV brassica emerges. It's original, if not as lithe and charming as it has been.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Freiberg Halbtrocken

+

12/750ml | AT-HOF-08-18

Hofer is hands-off, and so this GV finished with an "inconvenient" 12/5 g/l of RS. Have you ever tasted GV that wasn't either dry or extremely dry? I barely ever have. I hoped I wouldn't like it; it's hard enough to sell GV without contending with bizarre variations of GV.

Yet, aw *crap*—the wine is beautiful. Crap crap CRAP. Why does it have to be so good? It's like an entire basket of tropical fruits and melons strewn with plum-blossoms; the finish is like liquid lilacs and white iris, and it's wonderfully long. With just **11.5% alc** it's like a GV rendition of our WINNINGS Riesling.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Weberberg

+ +

12/750ml | AT-HOF-05-18

A new wine in the stable, from a vineyard on a year to year lease. This '18 is sure encouraging! The best young GV I've tasted here, the 4 g/l RS really propels the fruit (and lowers the alc to a moderate 13%) but wow—this is shatteringly expressive and aerial, like an ether of Nigl's Alte Reben or his best vintages of *Freiheit*. Wonderful length of spice and a lentilly clinging finish. They're in the zone with these '18s.

REDS

2016 Zweigelt 'Klassik'

12/750ml | AT-HOF-41-16

This has all that a simple, tasty wine can have: fruit, form and outline and contour, charm but also corners and angles; it's surprisingly articulate and animate, not just "pretty." And, miraculously, this BFF-red you don't know you can't live without has just 12.5% alc. I want me some!

2015 St. Laurent

12/750ml | AT-HOF-45-15

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. +

THE LITERS

They're the victims of their own success with the Liters, to the point we had to stomp on the brakes to ensure we maintained quality levels. Most vintages we run out of wine, which frustrates you, but if you prize an organic GV in Liter, act soon please.

2017 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AT-HOF-01-17L

2018 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AT-HOF-01-18L

There's a bit left of the excellent 2017, among the best years for this wine. The `18 is lighter and has a gooseberry note. Please note: the price has *come down*—how often does that happen?—as the crop size of `18 permitted it.

2017 Zweigelt

12/1000ml | AT-HOF-40-17L

I find this completely irresistible in its magnificent fruit and ripe tomato-water deliciousness.

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

One piece of what I call my trilogy-of-charm (along with Berger and Ecker), Setzer's wines can display a disposition that understands the difference between charm and ingratiation. The wines don't suck up to you; they are serenely secure in their loveliness and they won't mind if we notice. Yet, sadly, we rarely do. The coarser virtues will penetrate our truncated attention spans, but to appreciate charm we need to slow down.

That being said, we have the erratic nature of the '18 vintage on our hands, and Setzer's wines, which can sometimes flirt with overripeness, were curiously *green* in 2018. Not raspy or scrawny, but generally grassy and gooseberried. This isn't necessarily a bad thing; it will help to get them noticed, paradoxically. Because the "issue" with Setzer has to do with the invisible middle, the wines between the everyday and the stellar, which we don't seem to know how to evaluate or even how to use.

I wonder, can I help? Let me offer an example, from just last evening. My wife was making dinner and it was getting veggie-centered and I could see her riffing and improvising and I knew she was on one of her rolls, and that the meal would be the center of attention—*should* be, as was proper. I knew we'd drink GrüVe but *which* GV? Nothing too rich, because I didn't want to distract from her food, and nothing too light because the food would defeat a wine that was too innocuous. So I took a mid-range wine, something around 12.5% alc, and when we took the first sip we said "Wow, this is perfect," as indeed it was, for *that* moment. And each

sip we had with our meal was exactly the right sip of wine to be taking. A flickering instant of perfection and then *back to the meal at hand*. That's how to use wines like these. But you need to look at wine not as a specimen by which you are entertained or an item by which you assure yourself how awesome you are, but just as a fellow being with its own role to play.

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.

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.

2017 Zweigelt

12/750ml | AT-SET-40-17

The most Claret-like of the Zweigelts I offer, it is fine and dusty and civilized and moderate in its nature. It doesn’t have seductive fruit though it has lovely fruit, and it isn’t smoothly textured though its tannin is elegant. It’s too ripe to be trivial but not so ripe as to be solemn. I can never have too many wines like this—and guess what? None of us can, though few of us know it.

2018 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AT-SET-01-18L

This one’s on the green side, kind of like liquid celery-root, so if your taste runs that way you will gulp this down happily.

2018 Grüner Veltliner ‘Ausstich’ Weinviertel ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-SET-02-18

Really textbook GV; sorrel, mizuna, boxwood—it’s bottle-sick so the tight little bud of structure is misleading; there’s more wine here than meets the eye, and I expect it will unfurl into the essence-of-Setzer it’s always been.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kronberg Weinviertel ^{DAC} Reserve

6/750ml | AT-SET-07-18

The new designation for what was “Die Lage.” It’s a fine rendition of this always-solid GV; stones and brassica and fir and juniper; spicy and ripe yet still with this curious leafy spine.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kirchengarten Reserve Weinviertel ^{DAC} +

6/750ml | AT-SET-08-18

Pick of the vintage here. Nice ripeness, like toasty *Einkorn* bread; here the green note is spicy and welcome in a wine so warm and savory.

2018 Roter Veltliner ‘Wiener Symphoniker’

12/750ml | AT-SET-30-18

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%....) This `18 is typical and has no green flavors despite a strikingly low 11.8% alc, and yet it’s brothy and generous and savory; like toasted Chasselas or a Savignin with 30% Pinot Gris.



2018 Roter Veltliner Ried Kreimelberg

6/750ml | AT-SET-31-18

The big boy is like a consommé of shiitakes and hazelnut and Argan oil; it's gushing but not sloppy, just juicy and generous.

2018 Riesling

6/750ml | AT-SET-20-18

Smiling green zing; verbena, aloe, the "ripe-green" I adore in cool Rieslings, like the leaves near the apricot flowers. There are plenty of '18s with more pedigree that aren't this good.

(PSSSSST! There's a small amount of a truly stunning 1990 GV Ausstich, in case you'd like to know how even the "ordinary" wines can age, not to mention the wine is sublime. This sort of thing is extremely rare, and Setzer customers will move to the front of the line.)

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 an Ecker vintage, 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.

Like every vintner, Ecker has variations among vintages, yet the “quality” of any given vintage matters less here than elsewhere because the basic nature of the wines is to be humorous and hale. The peaks are never lofty and the valleys never deep, and because of this (and other things) I want to focus more on this worthy grower. So if you discern us *pushing* Ecker now, you are not imagining it. For me it's a matter of deep, deep principle, to put my weight and cred behind a grower like this one, though I won't win any you-know-what-measuring contests by so doing. No one loves great wine more than I do, but to play in that field can invite some unsavory aspects of the human comedy, whereas these wines are removed from the “competitive” matrix—they're just insanely tasty. Help me to strike a blow for delight when no one's watching to see how cool your palate is, or what “awesome” wines you got to drink. When all it is, is good smart fun.

REDS

2018 St. Laurent

12/750ml | AT-ECK-45-18

A sample from bottle, 100% steel, and completely *delicious*. Smoky and round, along Darting lines but with more stomach. It's an easy wine, it doesn't have a forever-finish, but no bowl of spaghetti should be far from it.

2018 Zweigelt 'Brillant'

12/750ml | AT-ECK-41-18

Surprise: a big boy! 13.5% alc is rare for this "normal" Zweigelt; it's a bellowing edition of this, with flavors like burned blackberries. It's very good but I think we'll wait for a more normal vintage to put it onto the core-list.

2017 Zweigelt

12/1000ml | AT-ECK-40-18L

This is entirely beguiling and vinous. Someone said "sleep-bodies" and yes, the wine does have a warm sort of cozy-dozy comforting quality, along with roasted tomato and rose hips; it's a lot more wine than you're paying for. A "cooler" feeling '18 is close on its heels.

WHITES

2018 Grüner Veltliner von Mitterstockstall Wagram

12/750ml | AT-ECK-02-18

Our newest core-list wine (meaning we stock it year-round and want distributors to do likewise), it's all of 12.3% alc but has a gorgeous aroma and is a perfect entry-level GV. It's absurd to even use words. OK, maybe "sweet legume," but really this is just a grin & tickle wine.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Steinberg Wagram

12/750ml | AT-ECK-03-18

This is Ecker's not-loess GV, and its primary-rock twang stands out, and gives his best 2018. Salty, classic "dark" GV, it resembles Nigl most of all.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Schlossberg Wagram

12/750ml | AT-ECK-04-18

This is usually the essence of Ecker but in '18 it's atypically ripe with 13.5% alc, and as such it's not as chipper and beaming as usual; it's suede not cashmere; savory, bay-leaf leaning to nettle, and wheat bread baking, spelt, quinoa.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Mordthal Wagram

12/750ml | AT-ECK-05-17

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.

2018 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AT-ECK-01-18L

He always places this *after* his top GV, just to show that it holds its own, and this little bit of theater has always been convincing. It's on the money in '18, a bit riper than usual (12.5%); iceberg lettuce, legume, chervil and beet green. Excellent in its class.



2018 Weissburgunder Ried Schlossberg

6/750ml | AT-ECK-35-18

This year I'm skipping over a correct-but-slight Muscat and also an attractive Riesling with an atypical pyrazine note—but this wine, which I usually omit for reasons of tidiness, is entirely convincing. Loessy, tapioca, charming and oatmealy and like char sautéed in butter and pank; it's Pinot Blanc at its charming best, in an unpretentious idiom. This and Darting's are two perfect "bistro" wines.

2018 Riesling Ried Steinberg

12/750ml | AT-ECK-21-18

The word means "dear" and is a German wine idiom to depict a wine with RS, in this case a fermentation that stopped at 24 g/l and which Ecker opted to leave alone. The wine is entirely surprising, all Sencha and green oolong, fir and herb and balsam; flinty grip, a 1-time beauty with excellent length and replete with sweet-green.

OTT



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

Visiting Ott is like stepping into a microcosm of harmonious civilization, which also contains a winery. 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 vision of the world they desire and have made for themselves.

This is apparent to anyone who walks through the door, but the best depiction I've seen in print came from a superb piece from Valerie Kathawala, that appeared in Grape Collective last year. Ms. Kathawala really "got" Bernhard, and her piece was capacious enough to convey the world-within-a-world of this place, and also Ott's essential seriousness—which is often obscured by his outsized social persona. The quotes in italics were given to her, and I thank her for letting me use them.

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.

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.

Ott's '18s were 100% *bloc*-picked, and he reports nothing unusual in terms of pH or acidity (both of which were recurring "themes" for 2018), along with "zero" botrytis. Yet for all that, it is not a typical vintage here, though it certainly maintains the overall standards that make this one of the Icon-estates of Austria. 2018 flip-flops and shape-shifts many of the patterns I'd learned to anticipate, and this little sojourn to Mr. Ott was full of surprises. And one of them was the single greatest wine I tasted in Austria this year.

2018 Gemischter Satz

12/750ml | AT-OTT-31-18

Basically, this is a perfect dry white wine. That's it! No "varietal tag," just a radiantly vital and alive being, delightful and glowing with health; it's like drinking sweet giggling straw.

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

Bernhard likes the "Mr. Veltliner" sobriquet that's been attached to him. The border between grape and human seems quite fluid and porous in his case, and it showed in an insightful quote he gave to Ms. Kathawala:

"Earlier, I would often hear 'The vines have to suffer to give good quality.' But that is not the case with Veltliner," Ott asserts. "Veltliner can't have any stress. If it does, it will taste like Sauvignon Blanc—green, sticky on the palate, no acidity, no finesse." Over time, Ott has come to understand that to make Veltliner sing, "the essentials are biodynamics, soils that are in good condition, and no monoculture." His farm is a paragon of this. With 30 bee colonies, 600 birdhouses, and trees in every vineyard, Ott is cultivating not vines but an entire environment.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Am Berg'

12/750ml | AT-OTT-01-18

The entry to GV is an analogue wine, all middle and umami, but in '18 it's a super-expressive middle, along lines of Hiedler's "Loess" though more solid and stern. For an everyday wine it's more generally vinous than specifically varietal.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Fass 4'

12/750ml | AT-OTT-02-18

The first of the '18 surprises; whereas this wine usually indicates a tangible leap ahead of Am Berg, in '18 this is less overt; the wine is saltier but not so much richer as *denser*, like the stock after an extra few hours on the stove; fennel, legume, collagen—an inferential GV.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Engabrunn (Kamptal)

12/750ml | AT-OTT-09-18

This village-wine comes from over the border in Kamptal, and is more intricate now, lacier and more articulated and more vividly outlined, contoured and saltier. The finish is stern and stony and spinachy; a wine for sophisticates, not for hedonists.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Der Ott'

12/750ml | AT-OTT-03-18

In essence this is the runoff from the Grand Crus and as such I love and appreciate it, and y'all seem to prefer to trade up to the sexier Crus. Yet for me this wine offers 98% of what I love about those Crus, and the "loss" of 2% of power is compensated by a gain in both drinkability and affordability. Sorrel and matja now, showing the herbal "sweetness" of its primary-rock component; it's stylish and satisfying, serious but not brooding.

GV – THE CRUS

First this magnificent statement courtesy of Kathawala's piece:

"I have the feeling that in, let's say, 'raw wines,' oxidation often destroys terroir. I am very, very open to these types of wine, but I fear oxidation destroys terroir. When I taste wine, then I want to taste where it's from because that's what makes the wine. But when we speak of a single variety like Veltliner, from a specific terroir, I want to taste that. Terroir is our most valuable good."

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Spiegel Erste Lage Wagram DAC +
6/750ml | AT-OTT-04-18

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Stein Erste Lage Kamptal DAC + (+)
6/750ml | AT-OTT-05-18

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Rosenberg Erste Lage Wagram DAC + + (+)
6/750ml | AT-OTT-06-18

Boy do I wish I could sell these exclusively as a set. It's how they make the most sense.

Another way `18 flips the script, as I usually find Spiegel or Stein to be my favorites, but this year it is clearly *Rosenberg*.

SPIEGEL – the high-elevation and loess-over-gneiss (among other elements) give this wine a minty lift I adore in hot years. In `18 we have us an Altoid of GV; mint, orchid and lemon grass lead into a giddy spazzy wine playing notes that only dogs can hear, with flavors that could shatter glass. Yet it's not brash or gaudy, just a quivering GV at its radishy spearminty best.

STEIN – loess over gneiss again but in this case it's the gneiss that *shows*, and the wine would fit neatly into a group of Kamptal Grand Crus. Does fit! This `18 is erogenously mineral almost to a point of sourness on the finish. A smaller glass suppresses the brilliant aromas but the palate is juicier and more coherent and the finish is "merely" mineral. In any case it's a mineral monster of primordial salts.

ROSENBERG – among Austria's few greatest GV icons, this is the best young vintage I've ever tasted. Often I've found this wine inscrutable, at least in its infancy, but this `18 is blazing and clearly in its own class. Intensely coniferous and herbal, but also regal with a refined green "sweetness", with spice and mineral as expressive nuances. A smiling, stirring monument not just of GV but of the entire culture of wine.

2017 Grüner Veltliner 'Domaine B.Ott' + + +
12/750ml | AT-OTT-04-17

A new release of a small *tranche* of `17 Spiegel, it was "inspired by a visit to Raveneau," and believe me, it's more than merely "inspired-by." It's a soul-capture of the essence of the master of Chablis, the ethereal, religious shimmer and the weightlessness that seems to stop the world; sweetly brothy, it never quite lands on the ground but seems instead to hover, free of gravity, singing and gleaming.

2018 'Rosalie' Zweigelt Rosé + + (+)
12/750ml | AT-OTT-31-18

It's in the family of Heidi's *Biscaya* if ever so slightly less atavistic and more correct, skimming the berry and flower top notes and leaving the earthiness behind. It's savory, like pancetta fat.

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 Kampers and Kremers 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 unremarked upon. I suddenly remembered a thing I hadn't thought of in years. Once

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

I 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! I have to say, Berger was a top performer in 2018, not because he made world-class blockbusters but because his basic wines have never been better, and in one case, never *could* be better.

REDS

2018 Zweigelt

12/1000ml | AT-BRG-40-18L

This is elegant, joyous, and in the best sense "simple." It's also long on the palate and just plain *pleasing*. There are very few wines like this in the world—"basic" but not mundane and costing barely a pittance. Offering you a wine like this one is how I sleep well at night.

2017 Zweigelt Ried Haid Kremstal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-BRG-42-17

Bit of char on the aroma, like grill-marks on a steak or like comet's tail pepper or like an eggplant thirty seconds too long on the grill, yet the palate fruit has an *ur* quality, like a Petit Sirah that wasn't all fucked with.

2015 Zweigelt 'K'

12/750ml | AT-BRG-43-15

16 months in used barriques, the wine is so creamy its virtually liqueurous; it reminded me of a young Reserva from CVNE, and it's more along PN or Temperanillo or Valpolicella lines than like a "typical" berried Zweigelt, but the wine *dances*, it's melodic, light on its feet for 13.5% alc and the long finish is all cloves and sweet ripe fruit.

WHITES

2018 Grüner Veltliner

12/1000ml | AT-BRG-01-18L

Not only the best Liter in this offering, it's also the best Erich has ever made, and punches three tiers above its weight. Drenched with loessy wet-cereal, delicate dill and aloe.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Zehetnerin Kremstal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-BRG-05-18

God I wish I could pull you out of your busyness for just ten minutes and carve out a tiny chapel of calm and solitude, where you can taste this wine and learn again what pleasure feels like. Because beauty has nothing to do with size or intensity. It can live in modest wines, lives very easily there in fact. But it helps to have some quiet around you.

This completely gorgeous-smelling wine is one of those '18s that got large. Everything ripened at once and so the usually-wee wines were also bigger than usual—this one's 13%—but the *nature* of the wine is delicacy, legumes and chervil, nearly impossible to spit, it's both transparent and long yet also dense and articulate.



2018 Grüner Veltliner Lössterrassen Kremstal ^{DAC}

+

12/750ml | AT-BRG-02-18

It happens here again; a wine that's usually supremely pretty is showing quite a serious side (not that these things are mutually exclusive) and a vinosity I called "ambitious." It's big-bodied but still graceful; loessy and brassicas, sprouts, leaves, mesclun, some amalgam of white pepper and curly-leaf parsley. Some of Nigl's *Alte Reben* wines have this profile, like liquefied wheat or farro or barley.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Wieland Kremstal ^{DAC} Reserve

12/750ml | AT-BRG-08-16

A "classified" site on calcerous 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.

2018 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | AT-BRG-30-18

Often the best Muscat in my Austria offering, this '18 is fascinating and atypical. No elderflower but a whole ton of mint and pepper (not "peppermint" but each of them alone) in a clear white needle of flavor, fully ripe but expressing as much ginger as flower.

2018 Riesling Riesling Ried Spiegel Kremstal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-BRG-20-18

A fine vintage, in a shady rocky direction, like salad greens without any dressing; nettles and weeds and pepper, one of those Rieslings that reads "Austria" more than "varietal," and only the rock-dust structure signals that it's not GV. People who'll like this are interesting people.

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.

At least, when they're on form. After a hiccup or two back in the aughts, Nigl's been on such a roll lately (going back to 2012 and maybe further) that I assumed it would never stop. And the "little" wines of 2018 are enormously fine and encouraging. With the "important" wines, well... either they were in a funk or I was, because I faced a mounting dismay as the tasting proceeded. At such times I always wonder if it was just a shitty phase, and I'll have to eat my words when I taste them again and they turn out well. That has happened, but not very often. So I'll tell you what I tasted, with the usual provisos: it was "just a moment in time," your mileage may vary, his track record is greater than my snit, all that stuff. The little wines are fantastic. The big ones...I have doubts.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Freiheit' +

12/750ml | AT-NGL-01-18

This singularly outstanding vintage of our everyday GV had my hopes soaring for what would follow. There's a refined, markedly detailed aroma and a palate with length and grip; it has the fruit of ripe years and the bright clear diction of leaner years. It's the best vintage I can remember, in over 25 years.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Piri Kremstal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-NGL-03-18

This was charmingly shy at first, but emerged as a charming and detailed wine; fresh, limpid and herbal. The finish is like... some sort of minty leaf, damned if I know. I tasted two separate bottlings; the earlier one is more explosive and energetic but also showed more heat on the finish.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Grüner Veltliner 'Privat' Ried Senftenberger Pellingen Erste Lage Kremstal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-NGL-07-18

The classic primary-rock site is on mica-schist and amphibolite and usually gives Nigl's best wines, though I have sometimes found them inscrutable. This wine will be a matter of taste-preferences, specifically mine for wines below 14% alc. It has all the elements that can make it great, but it's just too hot for me.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Herzstück vom Kirchberg Erste Lage Kremstal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-NGL-06-18

Often this goes into the Pellingen, to which it technically belongs, but when the crop is large enough Martin will bottle it separately, and at such times it's often (IMO) his best GV.

He put us to work. There were four components and the question was what to blend and how. I had my preference, and in any case this blend will require deftness and courage, as some of the wines were gnarly. If I get "my" blend it will be a typical outsized Nigl `18 but with certain virtues for all that.

RIESLINGS

2018 Riesling 'Urgestein'

6/750ml | AT-NGL-28-18

This used to be known as *Dornleiten*, and this `18 is a fine green beast; 12.5% alc, verbena tea and menthol, a delightful Riesling if you don't insist on apricots or apples.

2018 Riesling 'Senftenberger Piri'

12/750ml | AT-NGL-21-18

More strength and mintiness here, and less of the chlorophyll sweetness of (among others) the wonderful `17. Iris like crazy, pheasant breast, fennel seed and a finish like turkey stock. I like it in its rogue-variant way.

(Then we blind-tasted the top Rieslings. These are GOLDBERG on amphibolite, PELLINGEN as already detailed, and my beloved HOCHACKER, on its plateau above Pellingen and its complex soil of marble, paragneiss, amphibolite, mica-schist and eroded loess. The best among them, and a very good wine, was...)

2018 Riesling Ried Hochäcker 'Privat' Ried Hochäcker Erste Lage Kremstal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-NGL-25-18

Salty and brilliant and I didn't mind the slight finishing heat. I also liked the final wine, which was rather like a *Vendage Tardive* of Goldberg, but other than Hochäcker I need to taste all these again to see whether to offer them.



INTERESTING OTHERS

Hey, I resemble that remark...

SEKT Brut de Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | AT-NGL-70-NV

Now 14-15, Chardonnay/Zweigelt/Pinot Noir, deg as-needed, and snappy as always. For a wine that's kind of an afterthought, this always impresses me and I wonder why I don't cherish it as I should.

SEKT Rosé Brut, 2016

12/750ml | AT-NGL-71-16

All 2016, 85% Zweigelt and 15% PN; it reminds me of Chiquet in its fruit, though spoken in perhaps a less elegant voice.

2018 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | AT-NGL-30-18

Never the seducer, this is like leaves and bark from a birch tree on a drippy gray day, dark and charred and smoky.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein

6/375ml | AT-NGL-80-16H

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.

+

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.

Apropos of which, it has become more and more clear that a kind of miracle has been enacted right under our noses, as it were, and that is the surpassingly magnificent quality of Bründlmayer's 2014 vintage. This star-crossed and benight-

ed vintage was despised almost before it started fermenting, and sometimes I was also dismayed, by the many wines (mostly but not exclusively Rieslings) that showed the definite ambience of ignoble rots even when the growers insisted they separated stringently. There is always some excellent wine even in difficult vintages, sometimes *due* to the vintage's difficulty, but all in all I wasn't sad to see the '14 vintage retreating in the rear-view mirror.

Then two years ago we all tasted Bründlmayer's *Alte Reben Heiligenstein*

Riesling, and I well remember someone saying "If there is a great 2014 Riesling I have it in my glass," to which we all nodded in assent. The *Riesling Lyra* is conceivably even better, and this year I noticed—again—how remarkable the GV Alte Reben has become. I also remembered Berger's best-ever GV, the '14 *Wieland*, and we can still obtain Hirsch's beautiful '14 GV Renner. But back to these Bründlmayers, I need you to know that I have *drunk* bottles of all three of these wines in the last few months, and of course drink-

ing is another order of experience from "tasting." Last year we included these '14s as mixed-cases of "library" vintages, and we may do it again—I don't dictate those decisions. But however we offer them to you, I need to highlight them here.

And so, in the soberest language consistent with the majesty of these wines, I need to tell you, it would be impossible to present a greater family of wines from a single vintage than these astonishing 2014s. In a just world they should be the stuff of legend. They are:

LEGENDARY 2014s

2014 Grüner Veltliner 'Alte Reben' Kamptal Reserve ^{DAC}

+ + +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-05-14

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 '14 is its 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.

2014 Riesling Zobinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage

+ +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-22-14

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.

2014 Riesling Zobinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage 'Lyra'

+ + +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-23-14

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!

its inner sweetness has the promise, not of a wild night, but of life-long love.

2014 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage 'Alte Reben' Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ + (+)

6/750ml | AT-BMY-24-14

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.

OK, BACK TO EARTH-ORBIT – WILLI-REDS!

These continue to improve, and as they do I'm cherry-picking the most impressive among them to show you. I don't need a commercial "volume-item" from among them, but rather to show you what's becoming possible with the new regime.

2016 Zweigelt Reserve (+)

6/750ml | AT-BMY-45-16

This is an elegant sweetheart albeit a wee tic oaky, but it's also saturated with violets and smokiness and blackberries, and it's almost mineral, like a Blaufränkisch in a giving mood. Stylish and enticing.

2015 Pinot Noir Reserve

6/750ml | AT-BMY-41-15

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.

“GROONERS”

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Kamptal Terrassen' Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-BMY-01-18

Charm and aloe and balsam and sweet sorrel; a sleeker version of yellow-fruited vintages like 2009 or 2012, this is our friend at his best.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Langenloiser Ried Berg Vogelsang Kamptal Reserve ^{DAC} +

12/750ml | AT-BMY-02-18

I'm not sure where this site stands in the classification hierarchy, but this is as good a *Vogelsang* as I've ever tasted. It's salty and civilized at least in its general context as bellowing-beast-of-pepper; rather, a refined and gentle grassiness lingers into a charming finale of aristocratic geniality. This mid-range wine perfectly embodies those virtues I tried to explain in the intro: sonority, timbre, sense of effortlessness, kindly disposition.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Langenloiser Ried Loiserberg Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC} +

12/750ml | AT-BMY-06-18

The site is a high-elevation windy vineyard with extreme thermal cooling at night, seemingly predestined for Riesling, and many of Willi's GV's from here speak with a Riesling brogue. Paragneiss, mica-schist and amphibolite dominate in the soils. With this '18 there is some wood aging, for the first time; the wine is as adamant as the Vogelsang is sedate, coniferous and shoot-smoky, with resinous herbs and salt.

2016 Grüner Veltliner 'Alte Reben' Kamptal Reserve ^{DAC} + +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-05-16

"In future years we envision this as a *village-wine*" they said, but for now I see it as I always have, as a concentrated entrée into the world of the Big Boys. The '14 is lauded elsewhere, but this lovely '16 is close to perfect, outlines, sleek and woody, articulate, almost sandalwood, with the silky flow of the vintage; rich yet weightless, the acme of elegance.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried 'Vincent's' Spiegel Erste Lage Kamptal Reserve ^{DAC} +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-04-16

Not sure if this is labeled "Vincent's Spiegel" (and in fact Vincent was nowhere to be seen during my visit), but in any case this flat vineyard is gravels over a loess bedrock, tending to give solid stony wines. This '16 has realized its early promise; sapid, salty, like a caramel without sugar; large yet shapely, woody but not "woody," and the long perfume finish is sweet like new leather.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Langenloiser Käferberg Erste Lage Kamptal Reserve ^{DAC}

+

12/750ml | AT-BMY-07-17

In the old days when I was first encountering these wines, this was the one that most displayed the oft-repeated cognate about “big” GV resembling white Burgundy. And man, this one is pure Chassagne 1er Cru, a sine qua non for this site; lots of crushed rocks and the crusty end-cap from a roast; the final crunch of pepper finally announces it as GV.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kammerner Lamm Erste Lage Kamptal Reserve ^{DAC}

+ +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-03-1

Wait, we have access to this?? Aren't they supposed to wait until, like, 2022 before letting it be sold? I assumed as much and only scribbled a half-note when they said yup, you can offer it. The wine is typically mighty yet also (and also typically) aerial, complex and salty. With 14.2% alc it augurs for early drinking, which I know is a controversial opinion, but I want all that heat blanketed by baby-fruit.

RIESLINGS

2018 Riesling 'Kamptaler Terrassen' Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-BMY-20-18

What a fine vintage of this! Many vintages have been stiff and ascetic, lean and strict, but this one is fruit-fruit-FRUIT, plus aloe and sorrel and balsam. Applause for a nice-guy Riesling!

2018 Riesling Riesling Ried Steinmassl Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-BMY-21-18

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.

Yet this '18 is more a salad-of-seventeen-herbs than its usual quarry-of-seventeen-rocks, at least until the scree-drenched rock-dusty finish with its gravelly phenols. It helps to appreciate the “Don't fuck with me!” side of Riesling.

We tasted the Heiligenstein Trio of '18, none of which are quite ready to offer, but all of which are hugely promising, and so we grabbed greedy grateful hold of these earlier vintages, and the miracles they permit us to see.

2014 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+

12/750ml | AT-BMY-22-14

Have I offered this before? I don't think so. In any case its time has come; it's a study in emerald and salts, with a fine detail of herbs, especially cilantro and woodruff; it's like the plants eaten by a lost tribe who live more than a hundred years.

2016 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein 'Lyra' Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ (+)

6/750ml | AT-BMY-23-16

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 wooly—at least until you taste the Alte Reben!

The wine remains spicy and energetic, recalling a Steinertal from Alzinger; herbal, silvery, mineral.



2014 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein 'Lyra' Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ + +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-23-14

It may be the greatest Riesling the estate has ever made, one of those bottles where you hear yourself ask “Can wine be more beautiful than this? Can *anything*?” This wine doesn’t want “tasting notes;” it wants sonnets, or eulogies, or adagios.

2016 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein 'Alte Reben' Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-24-16

2014 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein 'Alte Reben' Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-24-14

2012 Riesling Ried Zöbinger Heiligenstein 'Alte Reben' Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ + +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-24-12

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.



MOUSSE AND SWIRL

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 Reseve, N.V. +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-71-NV

Deg 6/2018, based on 2014 and 2012 with 15% reserve from 2015, 50-50 CH/PN.

SEKT Brut Reseve, N.V.

6/750ml | AT-BMY-70-NV

Deg 10/2018, base 2015, 40% PN, 30% CH, 30% a mix of Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and GV.

SEKT Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Reseve, N.V. + +

6/750ml | AT-BMY-75-NV

Deg 3/2018, 100% CH from 2013.

SEKT Rosé, Brut N.V. +

12/750ml | AT-BMY-73-NV

Deg 8/2018, base 2016, PN/SL/ZW.

A tremendous showing for Willi-bubbles this year. The **Extra Brut** is salty and snappy, like a Marne Valley Champagne, crusty and brioché. The basic **Sekt Brut** is all of 11.5% alc! It's like breadcrumbs soaked in brown butter, charming acacia-blossom aromas, steadily lovely as always. The **Blanc de Blancs** is gonna give some conniptions to the Champenoise; it's outstanding; balance, challah, brioche, mirabelles and Parmesan. Stands with Gobelsburg's "RDs" as a high-water mark for Austro-fizz. Finally the **Rosé** is fetchingly fragrant, silky and classy and delicious.

I know how pie-in-the-sky this will sound, but I sorta hate seeing these wines stuck among "Other Sparkling Wines" on your lists, when really they belong in a little section of their very own. Or at the very least in a section for Austrian bubbles. And yes, the unicorns do have voices in the country I live in....

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

A new cellar is being built, or rather an extension of the existing cellar. We went to look at the construction site, and the complexity (and effort) were dauntingly impressive. Michael Moosbrugger—“Michi” to his friends—is also the chairman of the “Donauraum” chapter of the *Traditionsweingüter*, something of a sibling to Germany’s VDP, and has been a prime mover in both a vineyard classification (which I support) and a range of ancillary requirements which I find onerous, having to do with labeling details and release dates for the top wines. Believe me, Michi and I can conduct quite the symposium over these issues, and have done so at great length in correspondence. But as much as I disagree with some of the actions he’s taking, I agree wholeheartedly with his *reasons* for wanting to take those actions.

Put simply, Michi is taking the long view. At times, the *very* long view. Such tension (of an intellectual nature) as may exist between him and me results from the dissonance between his actions under the eye of eternity, versus my actions on the street needing to sell the wines *today*. But sentimentally, emotionally, we like each other, and I go further; I admire and am fond of Michi, for it is nothing less than beautiful, what he is achieving. And this is *before* I taste the wines themselves, at which time I am rendered speechless with rapture. I don’t even notice the labels. (In fact he had to point out to me that the change he made to which I objected, had already been on labels for *two years*, and I hadn’t noticed. My mind must have been occupied with loftier things, such as baseball.)

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 or-

der to determine what these old wines might be worth, the experience set a range of thoughts in motion. “Afterward I grew curious about the winemaking practices of the ’50s and ’60s, and spoke with Father Bertrand as well as the cellar-master 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 cellar-master 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 pre-

sumed 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 studiously 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

2017 Zweigelt (Schlosskellerei Gobelsburg)

12/750ml | AT-GOB-40-17

As always, this stylish wine splits the difference between berries and dust, in an especially winsome and sober way.

2016 Zweigelt Reserve

6/750ml | AT-GOB-45-16

It has fine fruit but obtrusive tannin, but we’d made the rookie mistake of tasting the reds after the whites, plus I’m abnormally sensitive to tannin, so I offer the wine just in case I’m a pill.

2016 St. Laurent Reserve

6/750ml | AT-GOB-42-16

It had more mojo than a (very good) Pinot Noir at its side; it’s the well-mannered side of SL, cherry tobacco smoke and really dark plums, iron and juiciness. If it came from any “hip” place it would quickly obtain a *vogue*, but, you know, umlauts.

BUBBLES

Brut Reserve, N.V.

6/750ml | AT-GOB-70-NV

Mostly 2015 with a little `14, and it's rather brash from very fresh disgorgement. As always largely GV with circa 20% Riesling and 15-20% PN; fruit was hard to glean but the silky texture was typical, and the wine has a long history of showing both specifically *Austrian* character with the refined texture of the world's best sparklers.

Blanc de Blancs, Brut N.V.

6/750ml | AT-GOB-72-NV

Also freshly disgorged, also 15% CH, 30% Welschriesling (which shows through the most) and 55% GV, and all 2015. Distorted on the day, as it was curiously woody—which is not in the nature of this wine.

2008 Brut 'R.D.'

6/750ml | AT-GOB-73-08

No dosage, and none needed. Disgorged "Spring 2018", it's a wine that only the best Champagnes can improve on. It reminded me of Margaine, but RICH Clary said "Marne, north slope," so he yanked me outside and beat me up. When we came back inside we agreed, this is a really complex leaf-and-flower driven wine that will keep getting better.

GV & RIESLINGS

I needed to deploy the strategic national reserve of plusses for these flights, as the wines accumulated into an almost eerie perfection.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Schlosskellerei Gobelsburg Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-GOB-01-18

A zippy version of a wine that's always too good, perilously good; classy texture of torn silk, a finish of mizuna.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Langenlois Kamptal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-GOB-02-18

This *village-wine* was crafted to bridge the gap between the negoç wine and the single-vineyard *Steinsetz*, and while I didn't "need" another sku I keep being overcome by how good this is. The `18 is finely dark and salty, earth and nettles and a noble sort of sourness.

Recently we went to friends for dinner, and he (who cooked and chose the wines) served us an excellent Etna Bianco, which was a pleasure to drink and it was nice to venture off my too-beaten paths. I thought of that wine while tasting this, because this has a similar twang, except it's better and costs less. < sigh... > I don't want to be a pisspot, but y'all could be drinking better wines and paying less for them, if you'd drop the umlaut pathology.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Steinsetz Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-GOB-03-18

What used to be a radish nettle-y sort of wine has crossed the rubicon as the vineyard got older, and is now more *yellow* than *green*, a GV with twinges of hyssop and mints and radishes, but it moves ever closer to *Renner* in its mirabelles and salts and physio sweetness.

The site's on a plateau on alluvial soil dragged down and deposited by the Danube when it retreated and left a sort of "beach" of big rocks. It also introduces a labeling concept whereby the site name is by itself on the front label, with the grape variety on the back. We're describing it as we always have, and you won't confuse it for Riesling (or anything else) because the vineyards don't overlap; it's only GV from here, from Renner, Grub and Lamm. And it's only Riesling from Gaisberg and Heiligenstein.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Renner Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ + (+)

6/750ml | AT-GOB-04-18

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. In fact the stellar quality of these wines over the past bunch of years has given them a reputation above their "station," as Michi himself has noticed. No question *Lamm* is more formidable, but no question Renner is more complex.

The '18 is one of the splendors of the vintage, and a superb GV that's quickly becoming my very favorite; it has the creaminess of "important" GV but also the detail of pixilated nuance of Riesling, and a sheer beauty of fruit that really doesn't alight on GV per se. It reminds me most, perhaps, of Rougeard Chenin in its strange capacity to offer density, clarity and an obscure and mysterious richness.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Gobelsburg Ried Grub Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+

6/750ml | AT-GOB-06-18

Grub is loess-loam and gravel, in a heat trap ravine between Gaisberg and Heiligenstein. Usually I find the wines intense but obtuse, and it's rather a relief not to offer them—there's enough wine already. But in exceptional cases I can't help myself, and this '18 is a gentle curvaceous giant, all dough and farro and Madagascar pepper. The empty glass smells like the rising dough of Einkorn bread.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

(+ +)

6/750ml | AT-GOB-05-18

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. This '18 has its customary virtues though it also suggests alcohol could be an issue. Is it eucalyptus spice or jalapeño heat? I liked it better in a moderate-sized tulip, unusually, where it was almost elegant and certainly showed more fruit.

2017 Grüner Veltliner 'Tradition'

+ +

6/750ml | AT-GOB-06-17

I remember when Meursault smelled like this. Our '17 is not one of the more prayerful Traditions; it's more savory. It's really great cooking smells coming from the kitchen; it's irresistibly salty and as crisp as barley-rye crackers. It's a fine, strong, generous gentleman.

2018 Riesling Schlosskellerei Gobelsburg Kamptal ^{DAC}

+

12/750ml | AT-GOB-20-18

Tasting wines like this I am tempted to wonder whether Riesling may not be the most successful variety in '18 after all. It has the flavor of some of the '18 Germans, plum blossom, lilac and salt. This wine is sometimes diffident, but this vintage has a ton of charm and grip.

2018 Riesling Zöbing Kamptal ^{DAC}

+

6/750ml | AT-GOB-21-18

A grinning gnarl of rocks and spices and fragrant roots; it made me think of Domdechaney as Künstler makes it, Riesling as an intricacy of mineral with few concessions to fruit as such. It's a rare love, this one, but a fierce deep love.



2018 Riesling Ried Gaisberg Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

(+)

6/750ml | AT-GOB-22-18

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. Accordingly I suspect it's underrated since we're always tasting it so young. And Michi makes no concession to "presentability;" the wine is the wine, and this '18 is dark, coniferous and spicy, even shoot-smoky; the salt and blueberry emerge in the tulip glass and with air—a lot of air—the conversation of flavors emerges. But these cards are held close.

2018 Riesling Ried Heiligenstein Ertse Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

+ +

6/750ml | AT-GOB-23-18

Right now this is vivid on its lime and smoke sides, with the tropical fruits and spices still in bud; lots of fir and balsam and the sweet kelp of (an Oolong tea called) Fu Shou Shan. Already superb, it needs just one more note in the chord to be truly great.

2017 Riesling 'Tradition'

+ + +

6/750ml | AT-GOB-24-17

Look, this is just heart-rendingly beautiful. The chiseled piquancy emerging from its stately beauty is hardly of-this-world. If you sometimes wonder "Have I forgotten how to love?" take a sip, and watch those old hidden lights come on.

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 oversized 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.

I don't know whether it's the '18 vintage or whether there's a really elegant synergy among the three men, but this was a rather different experience of Hiedler. Like the same guy, but clean shaven; the same shirt, but back starched from the cleaner; the same pizza but with a little less cheese. There was a grace around the wines that almost seemed winsome. They had all the *demi-glace* expressiveness I'd come expecting, yet they beat to a new rhythm. Time will tell if this is an abiding change, but regardless, it was an especially euphoric visit, and these wines need to be **front-and-center** for us all.

GEE-VEES

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Löss' Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-HDL-01-18

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." This wine is just what '18 shows at its best, adorable fruit, discreet spice and a gentle disposition.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Thal Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-HDL-02-18

+

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Thal Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-HDL-02-17

+

This is usually GV rendered as Viognier or Semillon, with a little hot paprika shaken into the mix. The '17 will be gone soon but the '18 is no slouch.

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.

The '18 adds espelette peppers to the mix; it has wonderful spice and a cashmere texture – don't over chill it! A resinous element shows in angular stemware but it's thoroughly euphoric in our "Jancis" glasses. I love Thal in moderate years, and this is among the best ever.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Kittmannsberg Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-HDL-03-18

(+)

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. Soil is deep sandy silt derived "from extensive layers of loss" according to my guide. This '18 is grand and solid and broad-shouldered, with a superb aroma but also a little finishing heat which bears watching. A Burgundian texture but with more blatant rock and white pepper flavors.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Schenkenbichel Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-HDL-04-18

++

Ludwig says it's "pure gneiss" but the standard reference says amphibolite with siliceous material, but whatever it is I'm glad he decided to bottle it separately, as the '16 (and now this '18) are masterpieces. This is like lentils cooked in coconut milk with a wine reduction; salty, flowering-fields, a generous curvaciousness, transparent yet opulent, a collagen richness with that end-cap crustiness from a perfect roast.

2017 Grüner Veltliner 'Maximum' Kamptal ^{DAC}

6/750ml | AT-HDL-08-17

++

Wow, what's gotten into Hiedler? Have the two young men determined that some of Dad's wines may have gone...too far? For this is vinous virtuosity, not merely varietal adurance. A roasting heirloom chicken just as it starts to perfume the kitchen; generous yet limpid (*that's* the new element, and I love it), a tic of curry and mustard seed, a velouté of taters and peas.

WEEEZ! LINGS

2018 Riesling Langenlois Kamptal ^{DAC} +

12/750ml | AT-HDL-20-18

Completely delicious in its pea-pod and meyer-lemon and physalis ways—not to mention apricot. This wine, formerly known as “Loiser Berg” and then as “Urgestein” is one of those that makes you forget what you thought Riesling could ever be. Completely mind-expandingly original and indelible.?

2018 Riesling Ried Steinhaus Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC} +

12/750ml | AT-HDL-24-18

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*. And if this '18 is marginally more “mainstream” than usual, it's still a wild ride with its classic caraway-seed amphibolite aroma, along with sorrel and sort of conifer wood resin, like torn, shredded herbs. Some 2nd-Flush Darjeelings taste like this, and to be entirely esoteric, especially the “clonal” ones. At least one of us knows what I'm talking about....

2018 Riesling Ried Gaisberg Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC} + +

6/750ml | AT-HDL-22-18

This is actually the *Kammerner* Gaisberg, the same hillside as the *Zöbinger* Gaisberg we know from Hirsch and Gobelsburg, but the more easterly side of the hill as it leans toward the Strassertal. The soil is a complicated conglomerate of loess, gravel, gneiss and amphibolite. Elsewhere I've said that Gaisberg can be diffident in its youth, but perhaps Hiedler's vinification gives it more presence, and whatever it is—maybe the soil—this is the best view into Gaisberg of any I know.

The wine is stunning: green orange and Satsuma with quite a lashing of mineral; minty but not brashly so; juniper and fir, a splendidly complicated Grand Cru.

2018 Riesling Ried Heiligenstein Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC} +

6/750ml | AT-HDL-21-18

It's quite a dominatrix, rather as it was in '17 also. Fiery, spicy, in-command, salty; Hiedler's wines tend to express the bubbling-cauldron aspect of Heiligenstein, with less of the typical dialogue of yellow fruit and green citrus. This esoteric beast of terroir is licking its hungry chops, and has you in its foamy sights.

2017 Riesling 'Maximum' Kamptal ^{DAC} + +

6/750ml | AT-HDL-25-17

Here is where Hiedler seems to leave earth, or at least to depart from any earlier language they may have spoken. This gorgeous Riesling has the sweet pea and dill butter and lentilly clarity the '16 showed so delightfully, yet it's somehow more smoldering and less lapidary. It's fundamentally *Austrian* rather than insisting on this-or-that grape, and it's as much Marsanne as any existing iteration of “Riesling.”

We say we want originality. We say we want wines with a strong human imprint. We say we want to surpass the everyday. So maybe we stop *saying* and start drinking, OK?

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 Gobelburg'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.

THE STARTER AND MID-RANGE WINES

2018 Grüner Veltliner Grüner Veltliner 'Hirschvergnügen'

12/750ml | AT-HRS-01-18

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. The new '18 is salty and lentilly and shows its usual silky class, though with darker, more resinous flavors, and more overt mineral.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Kammern Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-HRS-02-18

Lentils soaked in Oolong tea; hyssop and fennel frond; it has charm and detail and grip, though as an '18 it doesn't cling with any great length. Enjoy the mizuna snap on the quick finish.

2018 Riesling Zöbing Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-HRS-20-18

Iris and pea pod and marjoram. Not words we associate with Riesling, right? *There's* the answer to the question "Why Austria?"

SINGLE-VINEYARD WINES & GRAND CRUS

The two 2017 Grand Cru Rieslings were in various states of incipience. Heiligenstein showed its 1001-nights esoterica, salty and incense, like Ott's Rosenberg in the form of Riesling, with not just "spicy" flavors but literally the flavors of spices and salts. Gaisberg is really still in bud. After a lot of coaxing it emerges as pebbles, blueberries and cream. But these wines need many more months to reveal themselves.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Renner Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC}

12/750ml | AT-HRS-03-17

We're still waiting for *Lamm* to emerge from its veils, but this one is visible, and tasty; bright and buoyant with lentil-legume and minerals and pepper. It's usual "yellow" flavor is somewhat suppressed by '17's solemn *mien*, but the wine is savory and satisfying.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Ried Gaisberg Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC} +

12/750ml | AT-HRS-22-17

Again the *Kammerner* Gaisberg from which Hiedler's Riesling hails. (Hirsch's Riesling comes from the *Zöbinger* Gaisberg, and if this is too confusing, think of Zeltinger-to-Wehlener Sonnenuhr—same site-name, neighboring communes. Not so hard. This wine keeps showing the ruddy good humor it showed in its early youth, full of cress, micro-greens and even kale, plus it's replete with mineral.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm Erste Lage Kamptal ^{DAC} +

12/750ml | AT-HRS-05-16

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.

2014 Grüner Veltliner Ried Renner 1 ÖTW Kamptal ^{DAC} + +

12/750ml | AT-HRS-03-14

Another of the now-great '14s—the tip of the iceberg for that benighted vintage is really worth a re-evaluation. That said, '14 is the classic awful boyfriend, either perfect or infuriating. But when it's good, it's... like this wonder of GV, pure vetiver! Flowering fields, warm-green below a layer of gold.

ANYONE CAN SELL ANY DAMN WINE THEY WANT TO

A few years ago a visionary sommelier named Theresa Paopao had a by-the-glass program at a super-trendy restaurant in Brookline MASS named *Ribelle*. I'd never seen anything like it before, and sadly, haven't seen it since. I'm remembering it now, because I'm kind of painfully aware of how often it sounds like I'm scolding you guys for not showing enough *luv* to my kinds of wines. Or rather, to loving them all right but protesting how hard they are to sell.

You can sell them. Anyone can sell them. You have to get creative at removing barriers. And the first barrier, of

and let them taste it with their simple, true palates.

So when were the wines finally identified? *Only after they'd been ordered and tasted*. I saw this myself, as I ordered three or four of them just to watch this daring concept at work. "Once the one was ordered by it's identifier (we called them White 1, White 2, White 3... etc), the bottle would come to the table and a small taste was poured before anyone had to commit. It was not uncommon for a skeptic to quiz the attending wait-person on every single glasspour before choosing one. Wine education was a huge

To me this is a self-evidently brilliant idea, but I have to ask (myself at the very least) why, if it is self-evident, it hasn't been repeated elsewhere (to my knowledge at least). I asked her to see whether my blithe assumption was justified.

"It's a LOT of work (and people are lazy). One needs to be paying constant attention and making honest tasting notes. It would be so easy to copy and paste a note but that's not right or fair. We created a unique note for every new wine we ever served by the glass and that takes time and a bit of fearlessness." And there's your answer. To make it work,



course, is identity. That is, the wines people assume they "won't like" only by dint of the *names or origins* of those wines.

Ms. Paopao, who didn't seem to know what was "impossible," decided to do something about this. Her by-the-glass program, consisting of roughly 12-13 wines—"4 whites, 4 reds, at least 2 sparkling and 1-3 pinks depending on the season." were **not named**, but only described by how they tasted, or as she puts it, "only by a one-line tasting note that was crowd-sourced by at least 2-3 staffers including (and mostly) the kitchen." I was a guest at this restaurant when I first saw this, and was stupefied with joy—at last someone had figured it out. Entice the buyer with a persuasive and charming *description* of the wine, so that they order it without the static of their prejudices,

part of daily training; it was expected that all servers had to know the 'dropline' of every wine BTG which meant a mandatory recall of vintage, varietal recipe, producer and all location info." So, yes—a lot of work, but also a *lot* of enlightenment among guests and a huge lot of so-called "unsalable" wine actually being sold.

Are you thinking "My staff would never get on board with anything like that," well, who hires your staff? Paopao says "Everyone knew in the interview process that learning wine would be a huge part of the process. Honestly, I think it attracted people who wanted a deeper wine education. Even people who were originally hired to support staff (bussers, bar backs... even cooks!) came to wine class." Her one-word answer to the question "Was it a success?" is: "YES!"

you'd have to be not-lazy and not-fearful. You'd need to consider the vibe of your place, the number of seats, and whether you attract (or seek to) a clientele willing to "let go" and experiment. The idea won't work for everyone.

But it will work for a *ton* more people than have ever thought to try it. And it is the *answer* to our constant lamenting that we can't sell the kinds of wines we ourselves like the most. With a little creativity and moxie we really can sell what we want to. All we need to do is spend less time analyzing the *impediments* to selling wines and more time considering how to *obliterate* them. It can be done! It has been done, by one smart and fearless sommelier. I beseech you to use her example and make the world welcoming for wine-orphan-with-umlauts.

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.

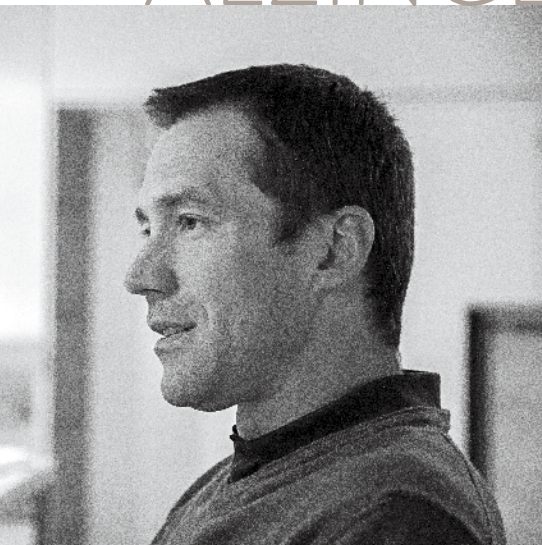
The greatest Wachau wine will distinguish itself from its neighbors in the Kamptal or Kremstal the way great Côte de Nuits does from Côte de Beaune; all things being equal, Wachau wines are simply weightier. The best of them, though, are distressingly scarce, and prone to be pricey, especially at lesser 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.

These days we can show you more of these wines, as Alzinger has rejiggered their allocation scheme and given us more wine. More wine! Do you know how *lovely* it is not to have to allocate? We hate allocating! Now we can share, and the wines of a generous man can be shared generously, and all of us can catch a glimpse of this special kind of beauty.

For it *is* special, as I try and try to say, and it has to do with Leo Alzinger's particular temperament. Basically, he's a sweetly genial sort of being. He reminds me in some ways of Willi and Christoph Schaefer. 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 greatest Grand Crus of the Wachau, and they are polar opposites in style.

The **LOIBENBERG** is as mighty in the glass as it looks on the huge terraced hillside, and yet for a 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 synesthese 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.

2018 is a great beauty here, but a beauty of an uncommon type. If you're seeking the Wachau *force* you may find the wines somewhat demure. I myself don't look for *forceful* wines at all, and so I find Leo's `18s to be rapturous, lyric and delicately angelic. It is as if they had found an even greater quietude, in which their true voices could be heard. I do understand that "quietude" doesn't serve a wine well in a clamorous room with 200 other wines vying to make an impression, and these gauzy beings will only brush your cheeks with a tiny almost imperceptible kiss. Yet that night, it won't be the impactful wines

you'll dream of, but rather the kiss.

Ah yes, there I go, making a virtue out of whispery wines. Yet, no, the problem is finding language for the special kind of impact these wines make, especially in this vintage. It isn't at all ethereal, it is flavorful and distinct and *apparent*. But it's not the firm-handshake we expect wines to give us, not the *Here I am and I feel just GREAT!* thing that lots of wines do. It needs us to let go of the noise, because the thing it has to tell us can't be shouted. But it's a thing we need to hear. Beauty is more important than impact, and this is beauty we can't afford to miss. Always, and especially now in 2019, when most of us are in various states of frustration and pissed-off-ness and disbelief and rage, please believe me: beauty will console you and make you feel less fractured.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Dürnsteiner Federspiel

+ +

12/750ml | AT-ALZ-02-18

This is the best *Federspiel* wine I've ever tasted, and was a candidate for wine-of-the-vintage. Honestly, it's fabulous; one of those 3-class upgrades you sometimes get in `18 with the "small" wines. Only the best Hirtzberger Federspiels have ever shown this class and beauty of fruit. Every one of GV's prettiest and most winsome flavors is here.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Mühlpoint Federspiel

+

12/750ml | AT-ALZ-03-18

A classic, if anything even silkier than usual. There's a phenolic twinge at the end but only if you're micro-tasting for it. At times I prefer this to its big-brother Smaragd, a question of the relationship between flavor and power and how I'll gladly let go of one to get more of the other. And yet....

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Mühlpoint Smaragd

+

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-04-18

I wrote: "This is like roasting green beans in the pan in which the pork roast was brined in quince." Yes, tweek, I know. The first draft was "Like fighting three Bulgarian thugs for the crusty bit of schnitzel," which really wasn't preferable. Back to the wine, which is markedly lilac-y and osmanthus-like at first, then adamant and charred in the middle, then spicy and almost spearminty on the somewhat brisk finish.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Loibenberg Smaragd

+ (+)

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-05-18

This is where `18 really reveals itself, for this wine shows almost all of its top-notes, the snap pea, pea-vine and mesclun, with barely a hint of the usual mango and plum. Somehow I think an underripe guava might taste like this. The wine as a whole leans high-note and mineral, and has aristocratic form and texture, and a fetching, suggestive finish.

2018 Grüner Veltliner Ried Steinertal Smaragd

+ +

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-06-18

Super high-toned and tarragon-like; juniper and Dragonwell; markedly cool, quivering, wintergreeny. There's a quickening here, a rush of Spring melt and the new cress by the water, piercing and yet comforting, the ice cold water will gurgle and pool and splish again and the cress will be green and sweet—but back to the matter at hand; this is fiendishly long, and masterly.

2018 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel

12/750ml | AT-ALZ-21-18

Extremely coniferous and showing ginger, lemon grass, mints and also scree and phenols; hyssop and sweated fennel and a margarita saltiness. Quite a particular sort of wine.

2018 Riesling Ried Liebenberg Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-25-18

Steep terraces upstream from Dürnstein, giving (as a rule) radishy Rieslings, but this `18 was made from grapes that were dancing. It does have the sweet spring-onion jazz and penetration, but it's tapping its toes and was born to jive the radishy bop.

2018 Riesling Ried Höllerin Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-22-18

Essentially the lower slopes of Höhereck (and Kellerberg, obliquely) it usually gives the most stone-fruit driven among these Rieslings, appealing but not always complex. But wow, this `18. It's a fluid dream of blossoming apricot trees; lapidary, as if it were fined with oxytocin. Sink safely into the flowering world, the bed is made of petals, and the evening birds will sing you to sleep. It's a wine of delicious limbs, and a bed that was never so sweet.

2018 Riesling Ried Höhereck Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-28-18

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.

This `18 has its spells and angles and salts and roasts and smokes and incenses. But my shaman-riesling is still waking up from his psilocybin dream. Patience....

2018 Riesling Ried Loibenberg Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-05-18

A little of the `18 gnarl here, the most backward wine of Leo's vintage. Time will tell.

2018 Riesling Ried Steinertal Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-ALZ-06-18

When has this moon-being ever been lovelier? Lovely, and wonderfully inexplicable. Riesling in a kind of phosphorescence. Riesling as a bright little gleam in the dark. Riesling with wind-stung cheeks, Riesling with a cold glow from knowing warm secrets that nobody else knows, Riesling that has mined some origin of silver, Riesling as a keen white riddle, and the last little flick of its cold finger doesn't quite disguise its warm and ghostly heart.

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..."

This year some of the wines were decanted two hours in advanced and then poured back into the bottles to serve us. They were quite open about it, and while I appreciated the chance to see the wines in their best form, I'm uneasy that this was *necessary* to show them in their best form. I'm pretty idealistic, as if you couldn't have guessed, but I often wonder how much we can reasonably ask of wine consumers. It's one thing to decant a red to separate it from its sediment; we want that sediment as a guarantee the wine wasn't over-diddled. But to *have* to decant a white wine to free it from unattractive smells and flavors it shows when freshly opened? That in my view is too much to ask.

Yet this was the most encouraging visit to Nikolaihof in the last four years, as you

will see from the sizeable offering. It was good to remember, when these wines are really singing there's a sort of quantum around them, a different view of "vinosity" in which gravity, energy and matter are different than you supposed.

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 "Niky" 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. Niky 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 Niky 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 receiving 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 Wachau 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.

THE GVs

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Zwickl'

12/750ml | AT-NIK-02-18

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!

This year we tasted from the cloudy part, and I really found it excellent, and a great example of the joy-energy even a slight wine (11.5% alc) can deliver. Give lees a chance.

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Hefeabzug'

12/750ml | AT-NIK-01-18

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. The '18 is an almost elegant version, with the late-palate sel-gris oyster-shell running up to cover the legume. It's actually quite complex, and only its brevity prevents the "plus."

2018 Grüner Veltliner 'Im Weingebirge' Federspiel

12/750ml | AT-NIK-03-18

I often find the very soul of Nikolaihof in these gentle early-released beings. This '18 is so dear and wholesome, like drinking an entire meadow of leaves and herbs; a vitally *outside* wine, as on an early Spring morning when the air is full of young grass and flowering mustard. For me this wine is masterly, albeit too modest for people who need wine to be more "entertaining."

2010 Grüner Veltliner 'Im Weingebirge' Federspiel

12/750ml | AT-NIK-03-10

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.

2016 Grüner Veltliner 'Im Weingebirge' Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-NIK-12-16

Cask-sample. This looks like a near-perfect Nikolaihof Smaragd, 12.5% alc, limpid and lucid, birdsong-y and companionable, an acme of spice and purity and a pellucid lentilly length.

2015 Grüner Veltliner 'Im Weingebirge' Smaragd

6/750ml | AT-NIK-12-15

This has developed wonderfully, into buttery lima beans and dill and one of those salts-mixed-with-herbs (chervil); also a note of refined duck fat (that's the '15 ripeness), it exhales peace and calm yet the finish is long and strong.

Grüner Veltliner 'Im Weingebirge' Smaragd Library Vintages ('11, '10, '07, '06)

6/750ml | AT-NIK-12-L1

Four wines, a fascinating 2011 that's just a tic aldehydic but nevertheless "sweet" fruited and ready to drink, a truly SUPERB ++ 2007 with violets and irises and spices and length, a grandly opulent 2006, all veal-stock, espelettes and cloves and + for yumminess, and finally a firm, adamant 2010 that shows a fine smokiness. +

RIESLINGS

2018 Riesling 'Vom Stein' Federspiel +

12/750ml | AT-NIK-21-18

Adorable! Everything I hoped 2018 would be. Sedately jolly, playful and tasty and buoyant; vital and dancing and happy.

2014 Riesling 'Vom Stein' Smaragd +

12/750ml | AT-NIK-21-14

Surprise! This is excellent, Nikolaihof in their most loveable form; lively, sorrelly, pea-pod and chervil, just on the right side of funky, full of energy and soul, but it's a reflective energy, suggestive of reverie even while it chugs and puffs.

2012 Riesling Ried Klaus am Berg Wachau Reserve +

6/750ml | AT-NIK-28-12

The strong vintage `12 shows Nikolaihof at its most extroverted and the wine is open for bid-ness, full of cardamom and smoked-salt—as if they'd fined it with Pancetta.

2002 Riesling 'Vinothek' + +

6/750ml | AT-NIK-27-02

As you know by now, this is a concept whereby a Smaragd is left in (large) cask for many years without sulfur, or in other words *sans soufre* before it was trendy. Great vintages of this are Great Wine, and this wine, bottled at last in July 2018, is great indeed.

The spirits yawn and stretch, and now the soul awakens. It's like a riper extension of the 98-99 "Steinriesler" (a similar concept using an unremarkable Federspiel and aged less long), similarly walnutty, toasty, caraway and salts and the essential *calm* of the best wines from this family. It's the quietest Vinothek yet, maybe why I adore it so, my fellow introvert!

2017 "Gut's Riesling"

12/750ml | AT-NIK-20-17

It's got 12 g/l residual sugar and 13.5% alc—it fermented too far and was meant to be less dry! The result is a salty bellowing beast yet with a scarf of white flowers waving around its edges; it's a lesson on how to have power without clumsiness, and how to know the high notes when you see them.

OTHERS

2018 Gelber Muskateller

12/750ml | AT-NIK-30-18

Green as green can be; basil leaves, bay leaves, cilantro and broad-leaf parsley; an inference of elderflower but this one is fuzzy-nubby and like hairy-stinky leaves. It tastes better than I'm making it sound!

2018 Neuburger +

12/750ml | AT-NIK-32-18

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??> I dunno. Let's say that it's among the aromatically "neutral" varieties, like a Chasselas with more body and paunch, agreeably nutty.

I can't quite believe this `18, though. It's so frisky! I never had a Neuburger like it; chalk and kiwi, outline and lift, really dramatically powdery, crushed white stones and not at all its usual oiliness.

HANS REISETBAUER



In 1990 Hans Reisetbauer planted his first apple orchard of 1.5 hectares in Kirchdorfertgut 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) | AT-XHR-20-NV

Apricot Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-12-NV

Plum Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-10-NV

Williams Pear Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-11-NV

Raspberry Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-17-NV

Cherry Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-14-NV

Wild Cherry Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-18-NV

Elderberry Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-15-NV

Rowanberry Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-16-NV

Ginger Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-19-NV

Carrot Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-13-NV

Hazelnut Eau de Vie 6/375ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-21-NV

Mixed Case Eau de Vie 6/375ml | AT-XHR-70-NV

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

Whisky, “Reisetbauer & Son,’ 7yr 6/750ml | AT-XHR-30-NV

Blue Gin 6/750ml (also available in 1.75L) | AT-XHR-02-NV

Brut Apfel (2009) 6/750ml | AT-XHR-60-NV

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



HIEDLER



Löss

GRÜNER VELTLINER

20 18

ÖSTERREICH



HIEDLER



Thal

GRÜNER VELTLINER

20 17

KAMPTAL



HIEDLER



Langenlois

GRÜNER VELTLINER

20 18

KAMPTAL



ÖSTERREICH

GRÜNER VELTLINER

Löss

20 18

HIEDLER



KAMPTAL

GRÜNER VELTLINER

Thal

20 17

HIEDLER



KAMPTAL

GRÜNER VELTLINER

Langenlois

20 18

HIEDLER

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*.