



GERMANY 2010

terry theise estate selections

these manifesto

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

The whole of any wine must always be more than the sum of its parts.

Distinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.

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

Lots of wines, many of them good wines, let you taste the noise. But only the best let you taste the silence.

An opening note:

As I read over this text, I find to my dismay I've adopted a frustrated and even at times a scolding tone. I'm not going to change the affected passages, as they emerged for good reason. But, it is very important to place them in context.

It is has always been and will always be a privilege to do this work. I am the most fortunate of men. For the past twenty five years I have never once woken up and thought "Oh hell, I have to go to work today." I'm honored to represent the growers and their wines. I'm honored at the trust so many of you have shown me, and I will always work to keep earning it. So many of you have become good friends. I am not only happy, I am aware of being happy, and grateful for it.

But as we get older, we're less inclined to pull punches. There's plenty of things wrong, and they need to be exposed. It might seem diplomatic to demur from raising these issues, or prudent to only raise them delicately, but I suspect it's a kind of cowardice not to advocate ones point with vigor and passion.

I know the line is thin between passion and stridency, and that I've sometimes slipped over to the wrong side. If any reader feels hectored, or that I have been uncivil, it wasn't my intent, but rather my failing. Try if you can to see through the infelicitous tone, to the actual point I seek to make.

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LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

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

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

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

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

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

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



If you ever decide to go over to Germany for a month to taste wines, let me suggest you try not to have a pinched nerve in your shoulder blade. The only benefit I could derive was to learn the exact quality of every grower's office furniture, since I had to ask for a desk-chair in order to be comfortable. It got to where I was confusing mercaptan with naproxen.



"The wine isn't fined yet, you'll notice," some grower might have said, to which I could only reply "Oh yes, that's why there's so much acetaminophen in it..." before drooling on his tablecloth.

One kind soul took me to her physical therapist, swearing to his magical abilities. I met a stolid Dutchman named "Gløonjk," or at least I think that was his name. Bastard was strong. "Can you tear apart whole wheels of Edam cheese with those mighty arms?" I asked. He did make me feel better, and his abilities were almost telepathic. You did the Kama-Sutra "*Spastic Flamingo*" position, didn't you, he probed. "It looked so easy in the book," I replied pathetically. *A man your age should have some shame*, he pointed out. Depends on what you mean by "some," I guess.

So I soldiered through. Selbachs scored me a hard-to-get appointment with a locally famous osteopath, who panicked me for a second when he saw my x-rays on his screen. "Oh my dear God!" he said dispassionately. Have you ever had osteopathy? It's like professional wrestling without the costumes. *I prescribe a bottle of Mosel wine a day*, he said. "Just to be clear, does this mean you want me to halve my consumption?" The whole thing was radiant with order and competence, I must say, and the tariff was laughable. My adventures with the German health-care delivery system made me lament returning home.

This year marks a sea-change in my Germany catalogue, as you'll already have seen from the outside. Having published these things for, *o-my-gawd*, twenty-five years now, and with my real live actual book coming out this September, it makes no sense to repeat so much text in here each year. It's all available online anyways. Not to mention my stalwart colleagues have yanked my sorry ass into the worlds of Facebook and tweets. I haven't even seen my own Facebook page, and doubt I'll ever look unless I am seriously drunk or bored. Maybe I'll make my first tweet "Trimmed unruly nose hairs today." And then no one will read them any more. "Hemorrhoids finally not itching so much," that would be a good one. "Anyone know how to get dog spit off a dildo?" I really wouldn't ask me to tweet.

I was a little surprised by the market in 2009. The fact seems to be, the generation who *made* German wines a teeny bit trendy back around ten years ago have moved up in their careers and are no longer day-to-day buyers,

and the gang who replaced them are starting from scratch. They don't know much about German wines, and if they have the misfortune to seek help from the official German wine marketing sources they'll be more confused than ever. The poor dead-in-the-dust German wine law (of 1971, before you were born) is not only arcane, it is increasingly

irrelevant. And most of the tinkering around its edges have pissed into what was already brackish water.

So let me tell you this. What you really need to know to "get" German Riesling can be explained within five minutes and learned within ten. The rest is dross and bureaucracy. And German Riesling is preeminent among the greatest classic wines of the world – not just white wines: *wines*. Classic doesn't mean stodgy; it means uniquely beautiful and cherished for very good reasons. It is also low-hanging fruit for you. The best is easy to find and more important, easy to afford. I know how tempting it is to attach to things novel and new, but the result is you're reaching past superb wine and grabbing something "quirky." Something marginal. Something barely significant. And too often, something offering inferior quality and value, not to mention even more unpronounceable names, than the German Rieslings you feel privileged to ignore.

Here's how my portfolio fits into the general mix of German wine importers.

I have never sought the "elite" as a sort of divine-right-of-cherry-picking, though I do assert that right *within* wineries, where I choose my favorites and leave the others. I want of course to have *some*, maybe even lots of "elite" growers, but I also want to have really good, lusty, vital, honest examples of wines in every "echelon" of quality. Not because I'm strutting my egalitarian cred (rather the reverse, since I'm an unabashed elitist) but because *I enjoy the variety*. No one would claim a Schneider is "as good" as a Dönnhoff, but what can I offer you for those times when an *exalted* experience is simply not called for?

That's when it helps to be ecumenical. That's where I think (hope?) my strength lies, because I know there are times, lots of times, more times than you may realize, where an honest, grounded, entirely GOOD wine is called for. You don't always want to go to the opera dude; sometimes you want to go to the ballgame. If the "good" wine is honorable and true, it's like having the best seat in the house at the ballgame.

We are at risk of squandering this capacity to enjoy that which is simple, because we seem to need to insist it is *merely* simple, or that simple isn't good enough for us. Great complex wines are wonderful, enthralling, life-affirming, soul-shaking, but it's worth asking whether they are *relaxing*. Good simple wines are. Good simple

wines speak to our spirit of play and ease and repose, exactly because they don't demand our attention.

And so I wonder whether assembling a portfolio that's all about the "best" wines isn't really about the guy and not the wines. Because life's various pleasures apportion themselves in diverse ways, and wine's pleasures are no different. The "Schneider-pleasure" is not



identical to the "Dönnhoff-pleasure," but I would argue they are *equivalent*. In one case we cultivate an appreciation of the highest refinement of beauty, in the other we cultivate an appreciation of the joys of honesty, integrity, goodness, companionability. We don't have to choose. We get to have them both. As long as we're not cowering inside our dread and insecurity insisting "only the best is good enough for me, or rather, for me."

I am constantly tasting new estates. A portfolio is never fully settled. You have to be very careful not to coast, and I often ask myself "If I were coming to this grower for the first time, would I want the wines?" That doesn't mean I go all lord-of-the-flies on my suppliers; even the most talented and caring grower will have a dud vintage once in a while. When that happens you steer customers elsewhere and wait for the next fine year. You also, eventually, will deal with generational changes in wineries, and sometimes you will witness a winery's demise, which is sad. Usually when the young man or woman comes along there's a fresh jolt of energy and I can catch a star that's rising anew. On rare occasions, the young person isn't the vintner his parent was. Then a somber day comes.

But there's an assumption this portfolio is somehow valedictory whereas the small new importers have the real "cutting-edge" hotties. Would it were true. I'm seriously encouraged by any new importer for fine German estate wines: I want them to succeed. But the notion they are sleuthing cool new things out from under my settled old gaze just doesn't wash. In nearly every case, I know of the new estates coming over, I tasted them and they were either redundant for this portfolio, or they weren't good enough to handle the internal competition.

QUESTIONS OF YIELDS, & QUESTIONS OF ORGANICS

In fact, much of the chit-chat about yields risks

falling into the category of Great Lies About Wine, since far too many writers have reduced this to a primitive syllogism "Low yields = better wine," as if this were always true and existed apart from every other parameter. But let's imagine it was invariably true: Then what?

Does anyone question the economies of the matter? If you lower your yields from (say) 65 hl/ha to 40, there may well be a modest but discernible increase in quality, call it 15% better. But the size of the crop is reduced by 35%. Are you willing to pay that much more for a wine that's only a little better? And is it really better? Concentration is a virtue but over-concentration makes for opacity and brutishness. I'd rather see a wine whose voice could break a glass than one that takes a hammer to it.

It is also misleading to speak of yields in strict terms of hectoliters-per-hectare (i.e., tons-per-acre) because this figure is very often specious. The best text I have seen on this subject was written by Christina Fischer and Ingo Swoboda from their book RIESLING, and it goes, in part, like this: "*Decisive here is not so much the yield per hectare, but rather, per individual vine. With Riesling, the average value . . . is between 1 and 2.5 liters of must per vine.*" The authors go on to explain new methods of pruning and foliage management to encourage fewer bunches, along with crop-thinning about a month after flowering. Then comes this passage, which everyone in the wine-world should see: "*The so-called green harvest, which normally*



takes place mid-August, has proved a failure with Riesling. Since nature seeks equilibrium, it shares out the available nutrients to the remaining [bunches] where a reduction of quantity has occurred. There then appear large juicy grapes, whose relatively thin skin can no longer take the strain, . . . squeez[ing] each other and burst[ing] . . . and particularly liable to rotting."

Wine, I think, can be a lovely means of training ourselves to examine a question from all angles, but only if we're not terribly eager to assert value judgments, or to find any one matrix by which wines are either right or

wrong. This isn't easy. We're all asking what we should care about, what we should believe in, what positions we should take, and it's somehow *unsatisfying* to be told the best position is to consider the whole dialectic in all its difficulty. But otherwise we're liable to become insufferable, smug, simplistic.

I myself have every good reason to favor organics as an absolute Value. My wife's a doyenne of the "movement" and I believe in its principles. Yet I also know that if I assert this to my growers in absolute terms, it becomes a purity-test with only pass-fail as a possibility. In fact the whole production-culture of wine is moving in green directions, especially where microclimates allow—the drier it is, the easier to eschew fungicides, for example—and where the lay of the land allows for the extra costs organics entail. Johannes Selbach once said:

"Many producers here practice what we call sustainable or "integrated" viticulture, with a minimum of treatments, very little fertilization (most of it organic and tight restrictions on nitrogen whether in organic or chemical form). Herbs and weeds are controlled mechanically and only "mild" herbicides permitted. All of this is governed in a program that pays small subsidies for steep-slope farming. The viticultural research stations issue a list of "can-use" treatments and methods AND they make random checks so it's not just lip-service."

So fine, we might respond; it's better if most of the world is mostly organic than if a tiny part is entirely organic and the rest conventional chemical. But even here one is wary of the use of the "integrated" claim as a way to pretty-up one's unwillingness to go the extra green mile. Yet there's no question things are changing for the better.

Still, the Mosel is a real test-case for sustainability versus doctrinaire organics. Its steep-as-all-hell vineyards in a wind-sheltered fjord with high natural humidity augur against strict organic treatments both because it's in essence too difficult, and even if someone were willing to do the work would the consumer be willing to *pay the price*? Steep-slope production costs are already many times higher than in airy flatter vineyards where mechanization is much easier. So, note to self: Steer a value-weighted way through that, smart guy.

I have two estates newly certified this year, one by Demeter and the other by an organic certification agency whose name escapes me. Others are in transition. I'm pleased with every step any grower takes toward the green, and I tell them so. What I won't do is fuss at them to pass my purity test. Nor will I indulge anyone who tells me "We work organic but don't want to join an organization because the paperwork is too hard and we don't like the rules." In that case, I tell them, let the virtue be its own reward. But if you will not certify, you're not entitled to the organic Brand, and I'm not telling my customers you're organic.

That organics are a Brand is something about which I have decidedly mixed feelings. Of course it's desirable.

But what is undesirable is to oversimplify the world in order to make our moral choices easier. As doctrines go, the organic doctrine is one of the most attractive, but not as attractive as eschewing doctrine altogether. I suspect this is closer to the heart of the truly organic sensibility than to reduce the whole complex issue into bullet-points.

Doctrine is always dangerous. Purism is an especially dangerous doctrine because it *feels* as if we should approve. The best growers are the ones who say, basically, "We have principles and we have arrived at practices that express them, but the greatest principle we've learned is flexibility and open-mindedness. Not as an excuse to do any-old-thing, but to avoid getting wrapped within our own dogma. If our principles are durable they will withstand challenge, and the best principles are those which remain aware of the complexities in play."

A lot of us go through the worlds of people and events with a relentless determination – "I have to know exactly what I think of this." (Or of him, or her...) The categorical is reassuring to some people; no need to think about stuff any more. I often find the categorical to be ominous, especially when it's wielded like a cudgel. That's because I used to be that guy. How did anybody like me? *Did* anyone like me? I was awfully silly. Still am at times. But mostly I seem to be able to move about the world alertly and prepared to engage, to weigh and sift and not insist my mind must be *made up* by quitting time. Often I don't really know what I think until much later, and then I'm usually in the dark about how I reached the opinion.

If I have to know *exactly what I think of this*, then I'm taking experience and wrestling it into my little cerebral meat-grinder and sniffing what comes out the other side. I'm not really living the things I encounter, I'm grabbing them and mauling them. This doesn't seem helpful. Once I relaxed I found I'd know the things I knew when they were ready to be known, when they were done cooking, then and not before. Knowledge, experience, wisdom, seem to develop best when they can simmer slowly and for a long time.

All this abstract ram-a-lam is just a way of asking you to approach wine with enormous attention and curiosity; listen actively, probe, *enjoy*, and it will give you what you need, or think you need, when all of this wonderful experience is done cooking.

I believe in terroir. I can't imagine a German wine lover who feels otherwise. The wines themselves lead you to this belief. To me it's not only a rational empirical matter, it is also a question of Goodness. Please don't misread me; I don't claim the question reduces to good versus not-good. There are degrees of Goodness on a continuum. But there is definitely a schism among people who feel wine is *made* as opposed to others who feel it is *grown*.

This is the fundamental split between two mutually exclusive approaches to wine, and I think also to life. If you are a grower who believes that flavors are *inherent* in your land, you will labor to preserve them, and this means you'll do nothing to inhibit, obscure or change



View of the Mosel.

them. You will not write your adorable agenda over your material. You respect your material. You are there to release it, to unlock it, you are there to let it shine. This is the happiest of all the things that emerge from a belief in terroir.

If on the other hand your work as a winemaker is all about the vision you have a priori, the wine you wish to “sculpt,” then your raw material is a challenge to surmount, almost an inconvenience. Such vintners make wine as if they were piloting a plane, and nothing wrong with being a good pilot. But terroir-driven vintners make wine as if they were riding the back of a bird.

When I was first into wine, all the growers I met believed something so deeply they weren’t aware it was a discrete belief. They knew their vineyards, their land, possessed an existential reality equivalent to their own. And if the land was real, then it too possessed an identity. That is why the lands were named. And why we get to hear their voices.

I had a recent exchange of emails with a hero of mine, Bobby Kacher. I don’t always agree with Bobby but he’s earned the right to his beliefs and he knows more than many who take issue with him. He’d written a piece called *Our Precious Guardians* in which he asserted the importance of the human who makes the wine as the ultimate “guardian” of quality. No sensible person would disagree. The question is *what is he working with?* Bobby wrote, “Maybe a vineyard is like a Gibson Les Paul guitar and cannot express itself, unless stroked, in just the right way.” I think that’s right. And he used the phrase “express itself,” which of course suggests it *has* a self to express, an identity that belongs to it, not to the player. No question different players will play it differently, some better than others. But something is inherent to a les Paul, and no matter who plays it, it will never sound like a Stratocaster.

I was struck this year by the number of growers who have little displays of their soils in the tasting room. The message is, this is where it starts, this is what it is, what we do is serve it and honor it. All over Germany there’s a wave of naming wines after the soils they grew from. I asked one grower if he wasn’t concerned to call his wine “Schiefer” (slate) when other growers could also use that name. “I know that,” he replied, “But this is the proper name for my wine and it doesn’t matter if it’s also the

right name for the neighbor’s wine.”

If this seems cloyingly pastoral to you, please know I have no objection to technology *per se*; the crux of the matter is what it’s used for. That said, as a rule most of my growers would tell you the more experience they have, the fewer machines they need.

In essence this becomes a crusade. First for the wines themselves, their particular and incomparable virtues – grace, precision, complexity, food-friendliness. Second for the virtues of the culture in which they are inculcated, which cherishes these psalms of the earth and nurtures them with humility. If you’ve begun to suspect – or have long-since suspected – that much of what passes for viticulture in the New World is the bogus strutting of macho parvenus, then Germany, for all its flaws, is the antidote. At least for now, there’s a place we can go to see a kind of Platonic perfection of how wine should be.

Recently on one of the internet wine-boards there was a thread lamenting the inexorable demise of Mosel wines, or some such thing. Many were the words dripping with regret for this expiring yet still precious culture. Some were wise words. But few if any made the salient point that, if we want to preserve this culture we all agree is wonderful, the answer is to *buy the wines*, lots of them, drink them and then buy them again. Repeat as needed, and presto: culture remains intact. Every choice we make as consumers comes down to this basic question: *who do we want our neighbors to be?*

Daddy’s Fucked Up Tasting Notes

How, after all, do we write about flavor? The March, 2009 *World Of Fine Wine* has an essay on the subject, which makes the trenchant point that associative lan-



guage, *even when it is accurate*, is only useful if the reader has experienced the association himself. British children



eat gooseberries; American children do not. Thus if we read “gooseberry” in a tasting note we have to imagine or *suppose* what it tastes like. Have you ever eaten something for the first time and likened it to *wine*? When I first ate actual passion fruit the first thing I thought was “Ah! Ripe Scheurebe.”

This happens all the time; you taste or smell something and suddenly there’s what all these wines have been tasting like. My wife likes *tilleuil* (linden blossom) honey, so I bought her tisanes and infusions and soaps and all the things doting husbands buy their schnookies, but then I couldn’t get the damn thing out of my head when I was tasting Riesling, and it squatted in my notes for about two years. A hotel I stayed in had a shampoo made from aloe vera – same thing, showed up constantly in wine after wine. It’s not that these things are inaccurate. They’re deadly accurate! But even so, are they especially *useful*?

My friend, the dynamic Boston sommelier Cat Silirie, is getting into green tea, and I asked her to tell me what she was drinking (or “cupping” in the argot of tea geeks) and how she liked it. I didn’t know I’d receive an exquisite fusillade of lovely writing about flavor, but Cat’s got the gift. Here’s something she wrote:

“Wen Shan Bao Zhong; ethereally delicate, soothing, transportive. HINTS at florals but not heady or overt, calming, pretty, lovely. Associating with perfume



Hermes Jardin du Nil for its transportive gently humid green lushness yet delicate effect. Not a single note of dank nori or weedy kelp, its lacy greenness is delicate, ferny.”

See what I mean? You can feel her sense, her whole consciousness drifting among things that are hard to say; she uses “delicate” three times, she keeps referring to the *sense-tone* of the experience (“soothing, transportive, calming...”) and finally she has the adjectives you only find when you’re in the Zone (unless you’re Ann Lamott, who seems to possess the strategic national reserve of cunning adjectives), things like *weedy, humid, ferny*. I’m absolutely there with her, as if we were both swimming in the same ether. In this case the thing itself, the meditative tea, created the state of consciousness needed to describe it. Wine will do that too, if you let it.

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

There’s an active part of the mind whose very existence is to hide its activities from us. Athletes call it “the zone,” as do musicians. When I taught guitar (in my



misspent youth) I used to ask my pupils whether there were ever times they played beyond what they thought were their abilities, and they always said yes. I then asked them, since those abilities were *clearly* within them, whether they’d like to know how to tap into the source at will. At this point paths diverged. Some of course said yes, but others, the more interesting ones, preferred to admit the presence of the miracle but not to know its first name. If we adapt the idea to wine, where your palate is in effect your “instrument,” it starts to seem the point is not to hone your chops but instead to cultivate your *preparedness*. Then watch what happens when you try to write tasting notes. . . .

Making the Case For German Wines

“Given our enduring attachment to sweet foods, it seems perverse that sugar in wine should so often be judged according to fashion, not flavor. After all, there is no question that sugar and wine can be highly compatible; wine is not like meat or mushrooms in this respect. Moreover, we remain wedded to other forms of sweet drink, even in circumstances where

dessert wine would never be considered: we think nothing of serving orange juice with a cooked breakfast or Coke with a burger, yet at more than 100g of sugar per liter (*TT: in fact a whopping 116 g.l. in Coke*), both these ubiquitous beverages are as sweet as Sauternes and three times sweeter than the Riesling Kabinett most likely to raise the sardonic eyebrow of the fashion fascist."

- Alex Hunt, from "The Foundations of Structure and Texture," *World of Fine Wine*, Issue #9

Fashion warps and woofs just like hemlines rising and falling, but I'd like to establish some durable and cogent argument for these uniquely lovely wines. Because I want them to survive. Even now, German wine isn't what most people think it is. It isn't even what many Germans seem to think it is. Of course I am *uniquely* gifted with knowing precisely what it is, thanks very much. And I have only the teensiest little delusions of grandeur . . .

Riesling isn't what most people think it is. Riesling is in essence not fruity but rather mineral. Fruit, when present, is woven and stitched into a mineral skeleto-nervous system. It is not the other way around, as many people presume.

Guys like me who like mineral (others call us "rockheads," a term I'm quite willing to embrace!) often assume you know exactly what we mean. But maybe you don't. I'll try to clarify.

The first thing to know is that some version of this metaphorical idea comes to most wine drinkers spontaneously at some point or other. I remember back in 1988 when I first tasted with Bob Parker and Bob said about one wine *This tastes like crushed rocks*, and in those days he often used the term "wet stones" to depict what we call minerality. It is a flavor of considerable expression — it is quite distinctly there in the wine — but it isn't fruit. Nor is it acidity, nor does it relate to acidity. There's a prevailing critique that we rockheads use "mineral" to excuse underripe wines, but this is manifestly false. There are many wines of gushingly lavish flavor but whose flavor isn't delivered on waves of fruitiness, but rather on mineral.

I once told a woman at a tasting, when she asked if I had any Chardonnays, that all my wines were Chardonnays. "Then give me your best one," she asked, and I think I poured her a Lingenfelder. "Oh this is **wonderful!**" she enthused. "I think this is the best Chardonnay I've ever tasted." That's because it comes from the town of RIESLING, I said, showing her the word on Rainer's label. If you want really good Chardonnay, I continued, make sure it comes from Riesling. "Thank you," she said. "You've really taught me something." Little did she know.

You still hear "The wines are too sweet." This is just

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

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

Quick-cut to June 2003, at the Aspen *Food & Wine*

Classic. I'm standing behind my table when an incandescently radiant young blonde approaches, boyfriend in tow. Said boyfriend is buff and tanned, a manly man. Woman has spied a bottle of dessert-wine from Heidi Schröck in its clear bottle and inviting gold. May she taste it yes she may. I pour. And you, sir, I ask: some for you? "No," he says, "I don't like dessert wine."

Fair enough, I think, chacun a son gout and all that. But something gnaws at me, and I finally

have to ask: "Do you like *dessert*?"

"Excuse me?"

"Dessert," I say, "Do you eat dessert after a meal?"

"Sure," he says, "Yeah, I eat dessert."

"So you'll consume sweetness in solid form but not liquid form?"

"Well, I . . ."

". . . or you'll consume it in liquid form but not when it contains alcohol?" I press.

"Well I never thought of it that way," he says.

"Well?" I insist.

"Oh all right, let me taste the wine," he says peevishly, with woman looking keenly on.

I'm sure I didn't convert the guy, and I probably exploited his good naturedness (plus put him on the spot in front of his date, hahaha), but good grief, the bullshit some people believe about themselves!

I don't know a single human being who doesn't prefer a ripe tomato to an unripe one. Shall we share a basket of unripe strawberries? Even a Granny Smith apple has some sweetness; we'd spit it out otherwise. Somehow the wine world seems to insist we ignore an otherwise routine animal tendency, and affect to despise sweetness. If we were true to our TRUE tastes, we'd fall



over one another to get to German rieslings. Then there wouldn't be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it's probably good the way it is. . . . But if you're one of those perverse people who is certain you hate sweetness then please come on a picnic with me, so I can eat all the pink ripe strawberries and you can eat all the fucked up little green ones at the bottom of the basket.

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

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

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

As such I think Riesling, can give the "discriminating" palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there's confusion over this issue, and it won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

I'm not just being facetious. I do believe cultivation of the German Riesling type conduces to civility and courtesy. That is because we cannot enjoy wines of delicacy and finesse without appreciation. And when we *appreciate*, we are calmed and grateful. Might the opposite also be true? That is, when we enjoy those wines of coarser virtues do they also color our approach to life and our fellow humans? Hell, I don't know. Nor do I presume that everyone who likes big bruiser wines is a

truculent oaf. (Only some of them <wink>.) But I do glean, just a le-e-e-etle bit, a tendency for people who like the shock-and-awe wines to expect the wine to perform for them, to give them a vinous lap-dance; *Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about! That's damn sure 97-point fruit there! Oh yeah, come to papa.* Meanwhile, us German wine lovers are reading Tolstoy and drinking cups of jade-oolong tea with our pinkies extended.

Principles of Selection in this Portfolio

Visit everyone, taste everything, select what I liked the best, and then tell why. Nothing new or revolutionary.

The old broker-system is as good as dead now, and most of you don't remember it anyway. The marketing of German estate wines has at last aligned with their small-batch production structure.

At first I was deliberately ecumenical. I wanted to show you many facets of German wine and many different ways for it to be good. I still do. I am fond of the quirky. But I'm also realistic about how the wines are sold.

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

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

From a zenith of over SIXTY growers this little family has been reduced to around thirty, and it might have gone down as far as it should go. Demand is rising and one remains alert to the eventual demise of estates with no visible heirs. Plus I'm a curious cuss and don't want to sit in my house with the windows closed. I suspect many of us in the fine wine biz have to struggle to reconcile our aesthetics with what passes for "common sense" as, *ahem*, businesspersons. For me, unless the businessman's point is beyond argument, the aesthete usually prevails. Somebody has to hurl beauty in the wan face of common sense, and it might as well be me!

Selecting was easier in the old days. German wine was unpopular and therefore inconspicuous, and it was a buyer's market. I was at liberty to take only what I wanted. These days, we're selling more and are therefore more consequential to the grower; if I pass on a certain wine it can play havoc with his plans. And bruise his ego. It's all very *Realpolitik*, I suppose, and I sometimes wonder why I care so much about my precious "standards," but always I come to the same answer. **It's because I want to keep faith**

with you. We may disagree, you and I, we may not like the same wines, but you deserve to know that I like what I say I like, and I won't ask you to buy a wine I don't endorse.

Finally, I've begun to see I like to catch a grower just as he's wriggling from the egg, so to speak, ideally before he's been detected by the crowd. I'm delighted by the number of growers I selected long ago who have since become famous VDP estates. Wanna know who? Here's who!

Joh. Jos. Christoffel
Willi Schaefer
Florian Weingart
Dönnhoff
Kruger-Rumpf
Josef Leitz
Müller-Catoir
Meßmer
Minges

And I'll predict here that Adam will be the next to ascend the lofty ranks of VDP-dom.

Gray-Marketers: Consumer-Champions or Scavenging Jackals?

There are times the gray-market is helpful and maybe even necessary to the consumer. Big "name" producers sometimes manipulate supply. A few importers gouge on prices. Growers themselves don't allocate their wines to accurately reflect the needs of various markets. And if you're a consumer, you have my blessing to obtain my wines wherever price and convenience compels.

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical '60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty. These proponents of pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won't buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can't sell the wine.

People also claim that monopoly creates opportunities for greed. Seems very logical, again, especially to us Aquarian-Agers who mistrust merchants innately. But the logic falls apart on closer examination. Say you're the sole Jim Beam distributor in your state. You gonna crank up the prices? After all, no one else is selling Jim Beam, right? *WRONG*. No one is selling Jim Beam, but someone's selling Jack Daniels and someone's selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is out of line with the other guy's price for his bourbon, you're not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let's say) Christoffel, it wouldn't be long before y'all noticed Fritz Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

Thus I argue it is self-evidently in the *grower's* best interests to choose whom he wants to work with and



"Have I got a deal . . . just for you!"

invest in that person. Now the commitment flows both ways. There is a true partnership, without which there can be no loyalty.

Speaking for myself now, I am delighted, as are most of my fellow importers, to offer *good value* to our customers. We want you to like us. We want you to like our wines. Hey, we want you to *make money* on our wines (radical notion!). I take a standard markup across the board in my portfolio, tweaking here and there if I need to hit a price point. If I ever sniff a whoop-de-do markup opportunity it's because a grower is underpricing his wine. In which case **I tell him so**. I do not wish to profit at his expense; this is what I call loyalty and sustainability. So, fellow wine-dogs, this dog won't hunt. None of us is motivated by profit per se. We are in business to get and keep customers. We all need to live. We all want to enjoy our lives. I want to invest in a grower who's willing to invest in me. And I want to sell his wines without interference.

Now what about that whole "reallocation of product to market demands" business? Again, it *sounds* fair enough. Let's say Selbach suddenly got boffo reviews in Belgium, and they immediately run out of wine. And let's say I have some excess inventory. Of course it makes sense to "reallocate" that inventory. And here's how it should happen:

I contact Selbach offering him some of my wine if he needs it for Belgium. Would he like to contact his Belgian importer, or would it save him the trouble if I did so directly?

Here's how it should not happen. I broadcast emails



to every retailer in Belgium offering them the wine, bypassing the importer my partner wants to work with and ignoring any wishes he has about how his wine gets sold. Some friend I am! "It's a BRAVE NEW WORLD, BAY-BEE; eat my dust!" Out of one side of my mouth I'm pontificating about the "free market" and touting my credentials as "consumer-champion" and out of the other side I'm just a hyena scavenging for business because I smelled carrion somewhere, blithely disregarding any norms of courtesy toward a grower whose loyalty I asked for!

And I have the gall to say the other guy's greedy.

There is only one true reason to defend gray-marketing, and it's the one I promise you will never hear. Gray-marketing happens because certain people cannot stand anyone getting between them and the product they want. "Who is the gormless importer to tell me what I can and can't get?" ("Um, he is the person the actual producer of said wine wants to have selling it exclusively," I might suggest, if I thought it'd be heard.)

There are only two reasons to indulge in gray-marketing. A) ego, and B) profit-motive. Ego, because you have to show at all costs that you have the *cojones* to get the Product no matter whom you have to screw. And profit-motive because nobody gray-markets anything they'll ever have to work to sell. Oh no! The wine's already sold *itself*; all this dog needs is to purvey it.

Do business with them if you like, or if you must. Sometimes you need a swine to lead you to the truffles. Just do NOT let them tell you they're doing it for you, because they care so passionately about great wine and are working toward a Utopia where no one makes too much money at it. If you believe that, I have a golf course on Three Mile Island to sell you.

Core-List Wines

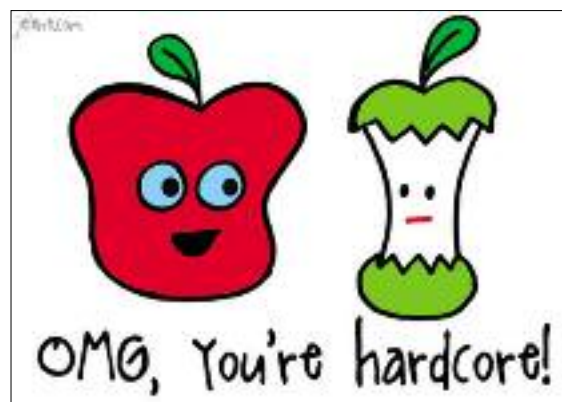
The core-list, with which we have been very successful, was created to ensure greater continuity and help you build brands. It began as an empirical record of having consistently selected a certain wine over many years. The wine needed to be in "good" supply (by small-batch standards). Yet for all that it's been fabulously received, it's created many "candid exchanges of views" (in the parlance of diplomacy) among my staff and me. I want you to know this: *no wine will be offered merely because it's on the core-list. Every wine will continue to earn its way into this offering. In the (extremely unlikely!) event a core-list wine is yucky in the new vintage, off it goes. If we've done our jobs properly, that will almost never happen. Core-list wines will be clearly indicated in the text (with notes in **bold print**) and I'll explain why each wine is on the core-list.*

Hard-Core-List Wines

I usually offer around 300 German wines per year, and of those we keep some 44 wines on the core-list. That leaves a lot of wine subject to the caprices of the DI system, where even my fulsome swollen tasting notes will often fail to entice buyers. Last Winter I drank a bunch of wine I'd bought from my growers, which I like to do

because it's *drinking* like y'all do as opposed to "tasting" which is only a fraction of any wine's truth. While I drank the wines I got pissed off at how little of them we sold. I decided we had to have a way to draw attention to the most *seriously wacked out wines* that would otherwise disappear into the maw of the pre-arrival offerings.

Thus the HARD-CORE list. It comprises a group of wines, not too many, which are so good they deserve special attention, but which may not be this good again next year (the core-list is about reliability) and which are in short supply (the core-list is about availability). We are going to *buy and stock* these wines, and when they're gone they're gone. They are the gnarliest of the gnarly,



the apex of latex, the suppering monkeys of lackey imperialistic capitalism, the *best group of wines to which under normal circumstances you wouldn't pay attention.*

They'll be identified in the text. Here they are:

- 2009 **Dr. Deinhard** Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken
- 2009 **Eugen Muller** Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb
- 2009 **Eugen Muller** Gewürztraminer Spätlese
- 2009 **Messmer** Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb
- 2009 **Minges** Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
- 2009 **Darting** Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Kabinett Trocken
- 2009 **Hexamer** Sauvignon Blanc
- 2009 **Meulenhof** Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese
- 2009 **Clusserath** Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett

Dry German Wines

I'm gonna fuss at you guys a little. I've been reading a lot of quotes you're giving wine writers about the "new interest" in dry German wines, which you say you also enjoy. Last year I offered 77 wines either Trocken (the majority by far) Halbtrocken or Feinherb, a little over a quarter of the whole. Sales, shall we say, lagged behind that proportion. I think maybe you like to hear yourselves say you're interested in the wines more than you

actually like to buy the wines. I'm such a bitch, aren't I! But if you really like these wines I'd appreciate some tangible evidence pretty please.

Now I'm gonna fuss at the Germans, who are very quickly suffocating what used to be a precious wine culture.

I taste each year at roughly the same 40-some estates, and thus I can compare apples to apples. I know the view I receive isn't comprehensive but I'm sure it's representative. And I was happily perplexed to see how much better the dry Rieslings had gotten in the past years.

Some of this is surely due to accommodating vintages of which more later. Some of it may be the wines the growers opted not to show me. But the general increase in quality was enough to revisit my vituperation against Trocken, to see if it is still justified.

The Germans are bemused at a market bifurcation they themselves created. If you've gone there, especially to the Pfalz, you'll surely have noted they only drink dry (*Trocken*) wines. More correctly, they want their dry wines to be really dry and their sweet wines to be really sweet, i.e., dessert-sweet. They wonder at export markets' resistance to what they see as a benign change of style.

David Schildknecht recently wrote a column in the Austrian magazine VINARIA in which he said German Riesling was quickly becoming an either-or proposition, either up-to-9-grams of RS or 60-grams-and-above. He's absolutely right. "You know how Germans are," said one (German!) grower. "They like things in boxes, categories, and they're very absolute." It doesn't matter that most Riesling tastes best BETWEEN 9 and 60 grams RS. Taste is not the issue. I'll repeat that: Taste is not the issue. The issue is concept, and the Germans will tell you "If it's dry then it should be really dry and if it's sweet then really sweet. What's this stuff in between?"

This stuff in between is the golden mean, the realm of truth that almost always lies between the extremes. But actual spontaneous sensual experience doesn't matter if the wine doesn't fit inside the concept *YOU* have determined beforehand. David also wrote (brilliantly!) "Well it's not a stock and it's not a classic reduction, so don't expect me to taste your so-called sauce," and this describes it precisely.

That the wines are getting better is actually beside the point. They are improving – they had nowhere to go but up – but the doctrines and dogmas accompanying them are the same ones they used when the wines were almost all yucky. It's good that quality is gaining on ideology, but it's far from certain they're running neck and neck. Ideology will always win such races, because ideology cheats.

Grower after grower told me their private (German) customers won't even taste a wine if the sweetness is higher than –X–, and they're afraid of losing customers if they remove these data from their pricelists. Am I the only one who finds this *insane*?

Nor is this a mere squabble of ideas. It affects me constantly, because many of the "sweet" wines I offer

are effectively bottled for me, and if I don't sell them out the poor grower has no one else *who'll buy them*.

I haven't yet tallied the Trocken totals in the new offering, but I'll bet it continues to grow. The wines are getting better, especially at the top end – the everyday ordinary stuff is still pretty cheerless.

So let's give credit where it's due. I am tasting a large number of excellent and worthwhile Trocken Rieslings



Stones at Weingart in the Mittelrhein.

than I ever did before. I have little doubt that top producers are making sure their Grand Cru dry Rieslings are superb, as many of them are. Regardless, there are two difficult questions that need to be addressed. First, what about the number of foully bitter and grotesquely unbalanced Trocken wines at lower echelons of quality? The ceiling may have been raised but the floor is still awfully damn low. Second, even if the wines are improving, do we need Germany to be yet-another-source for dry Rieslings when she is the *only possible* source for Rieslings of the type she used to make? Let's go deeper.

One year I wrote this sentence: "There are people who like bitter flavors, but I don't believe disproportionate millions of them happen to live in Germany."

Then I started to wonder.

The Germans are notoriously averse to their own (perfectly good) tap-water. I don't recall when I've ever seen a German person go to the sink and draw himself a glass of water. What they often drink instead is a concoction called *Sprudel*, which is a highly carbonated and (to most non-German palates) aggressively salty beverage. A grower in whose home we stayed gave us a bottle of Sprudel for our room, and my wife poured a glass for the bedside. The next morning I reached idly for it, took a sip, and the light-bulb went on above my head.

The water was significantly bitter, now that it had gone flat and warmed to room-temp. Almost every German drinks such waters from his earliest childhood. And so I find myself wondering whether this might explain their singular attachment to bitterness. Could it be such a deep part of their essential aesthetic imprinting they do not in fact see it discretely?

Someone online took huge umbrage at that comment. In his fit of high dudgeon he conveniently ignored the charge they always hurl at us: that our "sweet-tooth" is the result of drinking soda since we were lil' tots. Sure dude. If you need to explain our addiction to sucrose



German wines and a chair: not so perfect together!

then I also need to explain your addiction to bitterness.

G a u l t - Millau likes to do what they call a Ten Years After tasting. (No, this doesn't involve Alvin Lee in any way I'm aware of.) Armin Diel told me when they tasted the t o p - r a t e d Trocken wines of the 1994 vin-

tage "It was striking to see how thin and sour many of them were compared to the wines we're making now." Yet oh, the passion with which they were extolled! Is it really dignified to be reduced to saying "To be sure, we were overplaying the virtues of those "thin, sour" wines, but now we're not!" Sure we're saying the same things now we did then, but now they're true. This is fatuous, and the melancholy irony is that the best of today's dry German wines deserve better, but the tastemeisters spent too long crying wolf.

I have no doubt there are more successful Trocken Rieslings than ever. But the whole matter is rife with group-think and dogma, such that the Pfalz has been suffocated by adherence to an ironclad formula. But let's take a step back.

When an idea appears monolithic it's productive to challenge whether it's a true idea instead of a *truism* or dogma. It seems self-evident that wine styles would apportion themselves spontaneously based on taste if actual taste were guiding them. It is less credible to suppose that, for some reason, an entire generation of wine drinkers has suddenly learned that only dry wines are acceptable. In fact it's only dry wines that are *permissible* if one wishes to be *au courant*.

Peter Geiben told me a revealing story. He was visited by a trio of consumers who wanted to taste and purchase. What did they wish to taste? *Trocken*, of course. And so a line up of dry wines was duly assembled, along with a single "feinherb" and a "sweet" Kabinett at the end. "It's necessary you taste all the wines," said Peter; "those are the rules!" And when all the wines were tasted, the buyers said "Actually, those last two wines were quite attractive . . ." and when the order arrived the next day, "Not one single bottle of Trocken wine was ordered; only the sweet Kabinett."

So what? So this: such things occur very rarely in modern wine-Germany, where people seem to have lost any sensual connection they may have had with what

actually gives them pleasure. A journalist in Germany asked me whether I thought Trocken wine lovers were "wrong" in their tastes. A fascinating question. A useless question! I suspect something even more sinister is at work. The German riesling grower is such a captive of the prevailing dogma he has started to identify with his captor. Remember the growers who have lamented to me they can't even get their customers to taste their "sweet" wines. The Trocken Stasi may be peering at you from behind the wall. The monolithic quality of this ideology suggests not that tastes are "wrong" but rather they are *dishonest*.

Remember any little feature of fashion from the last ten years. Doesn't matter which one. While it was trendy we had to have it, and thought it looked good, and we looked good in it. A few years later when the new trend came along we adopted it. All well and good. But admit it: you look in the closet at the old stuff, whatever it is, wide lapels, four-button blazers, hip-huggers or bell-bottoms or flowered neckties, and you think *That looks ridiculous; what was I thinking!* Fashion exerts a kind of hypnosis, and if this is true of fashion imagine how true it is of dogma. "Wrong?" I think not. Misled, and therefore dishonest with themselves.

Often even the dogma is supported with dishonest (or at least false) explanation. I am automatically suspicious when a German starts in with the whole "traditional" rap. As I see it, "tradition" is a moving target, usually determined by the time you start from and how far back you look.

Yes, most German wine was dry until the '50s, but that is because the technology by which they could reliably be made sweet didn't exist. And, every broker knew the best casks were those containing wine with natural residual sugar. And, the dry wines of those days were usually aged in Fuders, not steel, and aged longer before bottling, thus helping to round them. When microfiltration and temperature control became available, most producers opted to use these new technologies to make sweeter wines. Thus "tradition" changed when it COULD; changed, you might say, into a new or re-defined "tradition." 100 years from now it's quite possible SWEET wines will be seen as "traditional" and dry wines as an aberration.

What I'd prefer to see is that we all stop struggling over theory and simply use our sensual wits to produce and consume the loveliest possible wine. This will, I believe, lead to the celebration of riesling's ability to shine in a variety of styles, and it will apportion them naturally and spontaneously. That's my little pipe dream.

It's recently been suggested (by a writer who ought to know better) that the great dry German wines of yore were swept away by oceans of cheap sweetened swill in the '50s and '60s, when *dosage* could be used to pastiche what were formerly rare and truly precious sweet wines. This argument sounds pretty ideological to me. Sure there were lots of yucky wines made sweet in the 50s and '60s. Which only says there's plenty of yucky growers and only a few good ones. The same guys are making

yucky dry wines now. At least the yucky sweet wines were *palatable*. But for every true wackoloon who really gets *off* on bitterness, there are hundreds who are losing the ability to discern disharmony; consumers and growers alike. Taste with them if you don't believe me!

Come to Germany and taste our fine bitter wines, prized by connoisseurs everywhere! There's a marketing approach in line with the Zeitgeist.

Actually, I've solved the problem. Oh sure, people go on propounding it like it hasn't been solved, but still. Here's what they can do. It's very simple.

Destroy the word "Halbtrocken." It sucks, it's not half-dry, it's half-*ass*. Inasmuch as most Riesling with 9-18 grams-per-liter of sweetness tastes dry to any reasonable palate, let's call THAT "Trodden."

The wines they currently call "Trodden" — those snarling beasts with 0-9 grams of sweetness — would henceforth be called "Sehr Trodden" (very dry). After all, if there are degrees of sweetness it stands to reason there are also degrees of dryness. The Loire has its "Sec Tendre" designation. There is ripe-dry and smooth-dry and rich-dry and there is also austere-dry and battery-acid dry. I mentioned this idea to Helmut Dönnhoff who was visibly intrigued. "That's the first time I've heard such a proposal," he said, and I could see the wheels-a-turning.

The poor deluded clown who absolutely must drink a commodity called "Trodden" will now receive a *palatable* wine which (s)he will suddenly begin to actually sensually enjoy (and probably wonder why), while the real sour-power guys can have their macho-dry wines. ***Oh I don't drink those dainty little Trodden wines, not a real wine stud like me: I drink VERY dry wines!***

You know exactly what would happen: within a couple years the overwhelming majority of "Trodden" wines would have more RS, taste much better, and harmony would start being restored to the troubled kingdom. I will even waive my hefty consulting fee and consider this my pro-bono contribution to Universal Beauty.

A Very Famous winery in the Rheingau is hosting an apprentice I happen to know. And this young man reports that the Very Famous winery routinely *de-acidifies* its Rieslings and then *pumps them with carbon dioxide* at bottling in a sad attempt to restore some sense of the freshness it *already removed*. So the wine is manipulated twice in order that the Product shall be satisfactory. Or, *satisfactory*.

One of us is wacko and I don't think it's me. The glaringly obvious answer to this "problem" is to leave a little sweetness in the wine to balance its acids. No need to manipulate, and the wine is balanced and vital. But no-o-o-o! The wine must be dry A PRIORI.

Florian Weingart had a cask of Spätlese he was hoping would ferment to dryness, but which stopped with 35 g.l. residual sugar. This was an owee, because Florian's "sweet" Spätlese usually has around 60 g.l.—typical of modern German thinking ("If it's dry it should *really* be dry and if it's sweet it should *really* be sweet."). So what was our hero to do? He didn't want to diddle his

wine to restart fermentation, nor did he have any dosage in the winery with which to sweeten it. And? He showed me this perfectly balanced wine under the name "anarchy," and all I want to do is change it to SANITY. I tell you I *dream*, however hopelessly, for a day when growers will make the tastiest wines they can and then figure out how to "position" them or "market" them—as if beauty didn't sell itself!

Later on I had this note from Weingart, which is so apropos I reproduce it verbatim: "While 'Anarchie' maybe implicates a total abandoning of normal categories that is actually not what I intended. The 'Anarchie' is a natural — non-chaptalized — wine and we would like to show this on the label by using the Prädikat. 'Anarchie' refers to the fact that it crossed my plans when it stopped fermenting naturally but in doing so revealed a perfect harmony that I would not have found intentionally. It does not fit in the category halbtrocken but should we care if the result is ideal balance? 'Anarchie' just likes to say that every wine is an individual, and that this wine taught me to respect that by naturally finding a balance of residual sugar. We don't want to negate the necessity of regulations and categories but find that life itself and enjoying wine is an experience beyond categories."

Oh, AMEN!

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

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

I keep waiting for things to right themselves. I look for any little sign that reasonableness is returning. I collect anecdotes, I sniff the air, but this year I started to feel a kind of despair. I asked myself, if I were only now discovering this wine culture, would I find it as magical as I did 30 years ago? Would I want to work with the wines as *they're actually being made*, not as they're customized for me? Would I approve of the wine culture in toto? And I must wearily acknowledge, no, I don't think I would. I might pick and claw at this thing here or that thing there. I imagine I'd find my way to congenial pockets of resistance to the prevailing dogma, to beautiful and *variegated* wines. But overall I think I'd glean something the opposite of vitality, a dark and airless thing, dumb and stuffy.

These things are sad to say. Sadder still to experience.

The whole spastic conniptions of the VDP, with their Grosses (or Erstes) Gewächs, show what happens when you take a "marketing" approach to wine. By now you know this is a de-facto vineyard classification, unofficial but tolerated by officialdom, created to draw attention to Germany's best sites, its Grand Crus. Their names

appear on labels by themselves without commune, like Bonnes Mares or Richebourg. So *Burrweiler Schäwer* becomes Schäwer Grosses Gewächs, and all's right with the world, at least the world that can *pronounce* "Grosses Gewächs."

I take no issue with any of this. I proposed a vineyard classification in an article in *Decanter* magazine way back in 1985 before you were even born. Why even have site names on a label if they don't matter? And why not codify the consensus of centuries as to which are good, better and best? Mischief will ensue, no doubt, but mischief is already ensuing and it's worse mischief; consumers have to memorize the best names among over 6,000 sites.

You would think, having done a fine days work, the VDP poo-bahs would have retired satisfied they'd left the world a gentler place. But some vile marketing gene must have wafted into the chambers, and these wise elders commenced to fix what wasn't broken and break what was intact.

They decided that all Grosses Gewächs wines would be dry. Must be dry. They said they did it to provide the consumer with a predictable experience. They *really* did it to cement an ideology. Why, why, why?

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

Ah but this isn't P.C., you see! In a topsy-turvy world where Trocken = Proper it follows rationally (if horrifically) that the potential quality inherent in a site has only to do with the goddamn residual sugar in a wine from that site.

You will also avoid a bizarre polarization you yourself created with your dogmatic rigidity. For a grower can — and almost always does — bottle a dry wine from his peak-site called Erstes Gewächs, and another from the same site called Pudyanker Slugberg Riesling Spätlese, and what's the "market" to make of that? "But wait . . . aren't those from the same vineyard . . . ? Why isn't the Spätlese also Erstes Gewächs?" Ah, you see; because the presence of the dreaded residual-unmentionable means that it cannot be sold under the banner of a "great growth."

And all this was done in order to . . . simplify?!?!? What it does in fact is merely to stigmatize the wine with sweetness, and so its effect is to advance a thinly veiled agenda.



Riesling with acidity and residual sugar pairs wonderfully with many cheeses.

People can make any points they want, but I'd prefer they be made openly. By the efforts of these apostles of marketing it becomes clear they seek to brainwash the "market" into despising Rieslings with sweetness (and accepting the so-called "noble-sweet" dessert wines doesn't count, pal!) and it's the sneaky stealthy manner in which it's being done I find so repugnant.

I wonder whether VDP shouldn't stand for "vigorous dissent prohibited," or "violent damage proposed," because it is distressing to watch them pratfall around cleaning up their self-made messes by making yet greater ones. It is nothing short of appalling to observe them propagandize so sneakily on behalf of their dry-at-all-costs agenda. I'll repeat, if a vineyard is "great" then it is *great no matter what "style" of wine happens to be made from it*. Certainly, mandate allowable grape varieties, and feel free to have a nice feel-good agenda as regards sustainable viticulture — and then shit all over it with the stupidly heavy pretentious bottles they use — but do not dictate grams of residual sugar.

What then is the drinker to do? How can she know if the wine she proposes to consume is dry or otherwise?

I have a "marketing" solution to this problem, which again I'm glad to give away. It is to associate flavor profiles with clear icons.

DRY (up to around 12 grams or so) will be *STONE*.

OFF-DRY (13-27 grams) will be *APPLE*.

BALANCED-SWEET (28-55 grams) will be *PLUM*.

DECIDEDLY SWEET (56-85 grams) will be *PEACH*.

DESSERT-SWEET (86 grams +) will be *HONEY*.

You put a little drawing on the label. You call the wine "Grosses Gewächs Stone" or whatever applies. You honor the greatness of the vineyard *without* sneaking in your agenda on dryness. And then you can reconcile the two currently disparate families of "product," the nobly dry wine of pedigree versus the yucky sweet stuff still subject to the whole "Prädikat" system.

So if you're, say, Andy Spreitzer, you no longer have to have "Lenchen Erstes Gewächs" astride several sweeter wines from the same vineyard labeled Kabinett or Spätlese or Auslese ("Tell me again why those wines aren't great growths even though the vineyard is the same???"); you'd have a nice tidy range of Erstes Gewächs according to their sweetness style, and if you

had a crappy vintage or a bad cask you'd declassify it to "Rheingau Riesling" and have done with it.

As if! Because the VDP seems to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all O.K. Good place to stop.

But, alas and inevitably, the "marketing" guys pull up in the white truck with the jackets and the Procrustian bed and the syringes and scalpels and electrodes. Let's establish prices, they insist, and let's further decree the precise parameters of residual sugar a priori. Time to REWIND the tape to just before the silliness started, eh guys?

Look, it's always dangerous to force a wine to fit an idea. Better force the idea to fit the wine, because the wine exists in nature, it is there, real and immutable. And if we respect its being and let its needs be heard we'll make something beautiful from it. Yet a certain kind of person feels safer among abstractions. Maybe he's a whiz-bang conceptual thinker, and it's O.K. to let him play with his toys, until he wants to turn them into everybody's toys. It's always healthy to maintain a distance between marketing people and wine, especially so when the marketing people are conceptual-intellectual Germans. "Hmmm, let's see; we have determined that all wines in this discussion should fit into round holes, because the "market" needs round-holed wines." But what if the wine is square shaped? "No! This doesn't fit the concept!" Even if the wine is more beautiful that way? "No. If it's square shaped then we will just pound the living crap out of it until it fits in the round hole!"

They will howl I am being unfair. All Chablis is understood to be dry, they will say. All "Erstes Gewächs Gerümpel" should also be thus simplified; the "market" demands it. Really? Is the Chablis really as predictable as all that? Is it one of them with malo or no malo, with oak or no oak, lees or no lees, all-stainless or all cask in the cellar? Shall we legislate every conceivable variable out of our wines?

Ah but you see, the only variable that matters is residual sugar, because we are obsessed with residual sugar, because we have for some perverse reason turned it into the sole aesthetic CRUX of the matter. Sugar doesn't matter, folks, except as an agent of harmony, one among many, an especially helpful one at table, but finally just one of many facets. Yet singled out for special villainy in a world gone gaga.

The newest idea is the "2nd-wine" from classified sites.

Here's the problem. Gregor Meßmer makes a "GroGew" (I'm sick of typing the fucker out!) from (Burrweiler) Schäwer, but he has to sell it at a considerably higher price than is usual for him. Nor is he *permitted* to sell it before September of the following year, and Gregor's is a happ'nin winery with thirsty customers who need wine now, not in bloody September.

He doesn't want *all* his dry Schäwer to be GroGew, only the best of it. The rest he'll sell as Burrweiler Schäwer Spätlese Trocken or even Kabinett Trocken. The

Spätlese Trocken now becomes the 2nd-wine of the GroGew and if certain VDP apostles get their way, it won't any longer be called "Spätlese Trocken," it will be understood the "2nd-wine" is also dry. Much simpler? You tell me!

He'll have to find *another* way to describe what was his Kabinett Trocken, because he can only use the Schäwer name on two dry wines per vintage. He can use it on as many sweet wines as he likes, because of course the sweet shit is infra-dig, not only beneath ones dignity but beneath ones very consideration. Do whatever the hell you want with that crap, dude!

So now you've set up another knot the poor hapless consumer has to untie, all because you insisted the original wine had to be dry.

Almost every time these (sometimes) well-meaning people have twiddled around the edges of the disastrous 1971 wine law, they've ended up sewing more confusion without removing any of the confusion already created by that laughable document. They also create the image of a wine culture stumbling about like some half-blind twit looking for the monacle he dropped on the floor.

The 2009 Vintage

Last Fall when the first harvest reports started coming in, I found myself strangely indifferent. That's partly because I really don't need to know this stuff until I *taste* the vintage, unless the new crop is radically different from the yearling, or if the market's askew by shortages or excess wine in the system. But I was also bemused by the content of the reports; another ripe, "Spätlese-vintage" sort of critter. Just what we don't need. On the other hand, the sleek and racy 2008s were just what we needed but they still didn't get the juju they deserved. So what do I know?

I'm something of a weather geek, but I gotta tell ya, my eyes glaze over when I read stuff like "2mm of rain fell on northern Pauillac during the night of July 8-9..." because this indicates an obsessive level of detail toward a fruitless goal. I doubt a vintage can be "explained" in any but the grossest meteorological terms. So the stories of Germany 2009 are most salient in three ways.

First, the interruption of flowering by a lengthy spell of cold weather. About half the flowering was completed when the weather changed, and when flowering resumed you saw a condition the Germans call "verrieseln," a failure to propagate. This isn't always bad – there's sometimes a lot of flavor in those un-sexed grapes – but in this case you had bunches with grapes of significantly different stages of ripeness.

The summer was generally on the cool side, with plenty of rain. The warm weather that did come rarely stuck around more than a couple days. Oidium was an issue, as was peronospora. The crop looked small.

But the vintage was rescued by an extended period of clement weather throughout the Fall. This wasn't one of those Indian-summer late warm spells that makes for viable wines if you hurried to pick in the short window.

This was a protracted mild sunny Autumn that allowed growers to pick when they *wanted* to instead of when they had to. "We even got a few weekends off," said one fellow. Johannes Selbach said "The weather absolutely played in tune and that includes all three months, August, September and October (except for a couple of slightly rainy days in the 2nd week of October which did not do any damage). The quality was very good from day one but kept getting better to the point where, over the last week, the grapes turned into some fantastic, aromatic little things. A combination of natural dehydration plus some botrytis has concentrated the flavor. Must weights in degrees Oechsle, while already ripe in the beginning, started hovering around and beyond 100° Oechsle, without selection. Acidity levels were good, 75%++ tartaric!"

You might hate me, but I didn't ask and still don't know what sort of acidity readings the vintage will show. That's because I only care about acidity when there seems to be too much or too little of it. If it's balanced, how does it increase my enlightenment or pleasure to know that it's 7.8g.l. rather than 8.1g.l.? I'll admit I was curious about the dry extracts, but most growers hadn't gotten their lab reports back. The vintage will be bottled rather late, as the Winter was extremely cold. In two cases the data were available the extracts were on the high side – as seemed evident by the flavors of the wines.

Extract matters, especially in a wine's youth, because it conveys a mid-palate fullness and sometimes a tactile minerality, and it buffers both acidity and sweetness. Of all the analytical components it's the one I'm least indifferent to.

I'd describe 2009 as an excellent vintage in which a number of great wines have been made. That's not quite the same as a "great vintage," where the baseline is raised to such a point that almost any competent wine is sprinkled with fairy-dust. 2009 also makes a very useful dyad with 2008, since '09 gave a paucity of Kabinett and '08 gave a bunch. Many are still available. 2008 is also flattered by proximity to its kid brother, i.e., '08 tasted lovely alongside '09, though it is lighter and more explicitly acid-driven. I'm very glad to still have it around. At first I wrote "2008 was a smart sexy girl, while '09 is the big clueless lug who hits on her," but I cleaned it up as I tasted more. The best '09s, which tend to occur as one moves northward, are really refined and at times exquisite wines. In an odd way both vintages are childlike. 2008 is the little sister who likes dancing, and 2009 is the older brother who likes playing sports.

Looking back at cognates among the older vintages (and recognizing these comparisons are somewhat misleading) I find 2009 offering similar fruit to 1999, though in a *much* more concentrated body and firmer skeleton. '09 sometimes feints in the direction of 1990, but with far less spiky "green" acid. If 2008 was a silvery greeny sort of vintage, 2009 is much more yellow and maizy.

In fact "roasted grain" became a clear signature, albeit a challenging metaphor. "Basket of yellow fruits on top of crushed stones" was another common impression, maybe easier to grasp. Though I know exactly what

I mean by roasted grain, thanks.

There's only one real vintage "issue" I could discern. In a narrow band corresponding to Rheinhessen, there's a tendency to grassiness. It's a fiend to explain. The crop was small (thus not diluted) and the grapes were ripe, so whence the greenies? I suspect the answer may lie in those tiny berries from the second flowering, which lurked unseen in the center of what looked like healthy ripe bunches. It's also possible it comes from decomposing insects such as ladybugs, that got into the must. Ladybugs are known to release a compound when they feel threatened, that can give wines a catty flavor. I am not making this up. Growers looked askance at this theory. But in many cases they failed to *recognize* the flavor in question. Growers are sometimes too close to their wines, through no fault of theirs.

In the Pfalz and parts of Rheinhessen the '09s grow more powerful yet not more opulent as they get riper. They show a sinewy strength, sturdy yet juicy. As you go north, '09 starts looking more like a classic Riesling vintage of great detail and shimmering delicacy, as if one had crossed 2001-2002 and gotten the gravitas of one with the limpity of the other.

The vintage absolutely craves oxygen. The just-poured wine seems as if it were *parched* once its fervid aromas start to emerge after 5-10 minutes. It's like a plant visibly perking up when you water it. I had to taste slowly, and many were the wines I wrote off, only to marvel at what jewels they turned out to be after a few moments in the glass. This spells trouble for our mega-tastings, but what can you do? All I can say is, I promise you will not get at these wines in the first few seconds after pouring. Bring a little straw and blow bubbles into the wine. It can't hurt, and you'll look like such a dweeb people will think you're edgy.

There wasn't much botrytis, and I cannot recall any gnarly or unwelcome rot in any wine I tasted. This was good for the dry wines, though these were occasionally marked by noticeable alcohol. 2009 is a Spätlese-lover's dream, and it is also very often a Valhalla for lovers of Auslese. About which I have this to say....

There's way too much Auslese around. We all know it. Climate change has taken what used to be the marker of an exceptional vintage – Auslese *denotes* something inherently exceptional – and turned it to a common occurrence. And not just climate change. Lower yields play a role, creating riper and more "phenolically mature" fruit. Finally one has to consider the journalists and their competitions, which create the need to strut ones stuff. So we're awash in Auslese, and I intended to offer few or none.

Until I tasted.

There are wines of such singular magnificence and such terroir genius that my every cell, my whole aesthetic conscience revolted at the thought of ignoring them. And many of these Auslesen show virtually no botrytis, and are not more candied than the preceding Spätlese, but rather more *strong*, more forceful. They're like '03 on Slim-Fast. They are in fact the signal genius of the vintage. I hate to say it as much as you hate to hear it, but the

consolation prize is they are *drinkable* masterpieces, at laughably low prices.

Open your heart to them, and find a way to use them. They will expand your world and wash your senses in joy.

2009 seems like a year that will age cooperatively. It doesn't seem temperamental, doesn't suggest periods of truculence; it seems like a sanguine child.

A good thing I've started to see is a retreat from excessive sweetness in the "sweet" wines. It got to be rather a farce. I still have a grower who showed me three Späts with 90 grams of RS, which is just sad. Mind you, the muscle of '09 permits a drier profile in general, though oddly I found many of the '08s worked better as truly dry wines. Still, it's good to see so many growers discover what Johannes Selbach has always known; you can make wines that folks can use or you can make wines to preen for journalists, but it's rare to do both things well.

The questions become divided. "How do I judge these wines comparatively" calls for one set of parameters. "What am I thirsty for?" calls for no parameters at all; it's just a sounding of the body and the spirit. I wonder if we can take these two questions and shove them together. I fantasize it could be like two wary kids who end up playing sweetly with each other. Maybe we can actually "judge" a wine according to the *desire* it awakens in us. The sensual thrill-ride is very nice, and I'd miss it if it never came back, but it is delight, not hunger.

'09 contains a modest community of anything-but-modest dessert wines, mostly Eisweins picked about a week before Christmas, and a few remarkable BAs and TBAs. There might have been more, but I heard a few bewildered growers say "Why should we risk and work so hard to make these wines when people don't buy them?" which is partly true. People don't buy them because they have become too commonplace, and this has happened because it's hell-bent-for-glory when you're under the press's microscope. I've also grown jaded with ultra-sweet wines, but among the 2009s are dessert wines that stirred my soul again.

Why? Because they *weren't* botrytis-bombs, but rather these lunar, silvery quintessences of the Spätlesen. You hardly ever find them that way, but when you do it lays you bare.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

The Winery Of The Vintage is...the candidates are *Müller-Catoir*, for an amazingly sustained across-the-board performance culminating in a trio of unbelievable Rieslaners. *Meulenhof/Justen* for his best vintage since at least 2001, featuring a literally incredible group of *Auslesen*. *Von Othegraven*, for a second consecutive collection of otherworldly limpidly expressive, mysterious Rieslings that convey the ethereal heart of the Saar. *Willi Schaefer*, for one silly-great wine after another...it is really hard to choose this year.

And then there's *Selbach-Oster* and *Leitz*, each of

whom had remarkable vintages...but!

It has to be *Meulenhof/Justen*, because it makes no sense I can discern. Usually I like Stefan's Kabs and Späts but find his *Auslesen* a little mawkish. This year there seemed to be some sort of orgasmic in-the-zone FORCE about the wines as they got riper. I was in serious pain that day from the Osteopathy treatment, and we were running late for dinner (with news that our companions were already waiting for us) but still I couldn't pull myself away from these astonishing wines, one after another, somehow at once beatifically serene and quivering with energy.

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Selbach-Oster Riesling Schmitt

RUNNERS UP INCLUDE:

Von Othegraven Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese, Alte Reben
Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5

Clüsserath Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett

THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Meulenhof/Justen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese #13

RUNNERS UP INCLUDE:

Carl Loewen Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese
Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese
Eugen Müller Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese

THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Diel Spätlese, naturally, but also **Catoir's** trocken version.

THE KABINETTS OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

(In order of greatness)

Diel Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Kabinett
Von Othegraven Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett
Adam Hofberg Riesling Kabinett
Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

Eugen Müller Gewürztraminer Spätlese (perhaps the most elegant and refined German Gewürz I've ever tasted).

Hexamer Sauvignon Blanc (I came ready to despise it and was blown away by its finesse and class).

Leitz Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Alte Reben (a serious contender for dry wine of the vintage,

a new way to measure sweetness

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

new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "**SOS**" into your lexicon today!



this is the first vintage of this powerhouse that isn't a powerhouse but that crams all of its meaty mojo into a delicious 12.5% alc).

THE GREATEST DRY WINES ARE:

(In order of greatness)

Leitz Berg Rudesheimer Kaiserstiefels Riesling
Alte Reben
Dr Deinhard Kieselberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs
Müller-Catoir Gimmeldinger Riesling Trocken
Wagner-Stempel Heerkretz Riesling Grosses
Gewächs

THE ABSOLUTE TOP VALUES:

Selbach Saar Riesling!! (in a class by itself)
Leitz Eins Zwei Dry Riesling
Eugen Müller Forster Mariengarten Riesling
Kabinett
Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken LITER

THE BEST IMAGINEABLE FOOD-WINES:

Eugen Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese
Halbtrocken
Darting Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese
Halbtrocken
Diel Riesling Kabinett

SHORT LIST FOR ROCKHEADS:

Diel Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese
Selbach-Oster Anrecht Riesling
Spreitzer Wisselbrunnen Riesling Erstes Gewächs

SHORT LIST FOR FRUIT AND CHARM HOUNDS:

Geil Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett
Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

SHORT-LIST FOR GOOFY PLEASURE:

The wines that give the utmost stupid joy without reference to their objective qualities, just sheer batshit-loony fun. The only things you'll wonder are A) How the bottle got empty so fast, and B) Where the next one is.

Darting Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller
Kabinett Trocken
Minges Riesling LITER
Weingart Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling
Kabinett
Merkelbach Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling
Kabinett #8

EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED

2008 is only just now being reviewed by the leading journals. In the last decade the vintage takes its place among the "smaller," but in the '90s it would have stood among the best and in the '80s among the very best. It's a Riesling-lover's vintage, less of a crowd-pleaser than '09. For drinkers on the delicate silvery wavelength, '08

gives a pleasure that's growing all the more uncommon. I did what I always do and am reoffering the '08s that still have something important to say, or a vital role to fill – such as typical Kabinetts at excellent prices. In one instance – Merkelbach – I bought less 2009 simply because those '08s were incomparable, and I selected '09s that would complement them.

In our topsy-turvy climate, we have to ask when we'll get another true "Kabinett" vintage, exactly the inverse of twenty years ago when it was *Auslese* that was scarce. I remain certain that '08 will offer lovely early-term pleasure. That said, my instincts regarding its aging curve are to expect periods of leanness and asymmetry between the end of the primary phase and the start of the tertiary. I have another notion I can't explain and couldn't begin to defend, that 2008 will drink fantastically when it's *really* old, i.e., 30-40 years old. I gleam a germ of complexity in these wines that's buried under their young energy.

The best of the last decade:

Looking at the period 2000-2009, it seems to me the very best German wines are the *2005 Mosel and Nahe wines*, which remain a high-water mark of my entire life with these things, bearing serious comparison with the great 1971.

A close 2nd are the 2001 *Mosel and Nahe wines*, which are aging classically and justifying their early promise.

The best vintage overall is 2007. If it failed to reach quite the gleaming summits of the best of '05 and '01, it was a vintage with no weaknesses and with the highest average level.

The most misunderstood vintage was, of course, 2003. There were lots of flabby wines, I know, but the best '03s are monumental and will age as splendidly as the '59 Spätlese I drank last week in the Rheingau. I think we insisted on misunderstanding this vintage because we were loaded up on '01s and '02s and were looking for reasons not to buy. Or maybe we were just inexperienced, or obtuse. I sometimes wonder what room there really is for *profundity* in these times. It seems to almost annoy us. It is too demanding. No matter; the best '03s will have the last laugh.

The most perplexing vintage seems to be 2002. It seemed to be the smaller sibling of '01 at first, or '01 was mammalian and '02 was avian. We knew '02 was better



in the Saar, Ruwer and Rheingau, and arguably better in the Pfalz. As time passed and '01 went into its retreat, '02 came ablaze; it was certainly the most exquisitely *fragrant* family of Rieslings I could recall. But then '02 underwent a sudden gain in color and began to show secondary flavors sometimes botrytisey and sometimes varnishy, and at this point all I can say is it's a fascinating changeling.

2000 and 2006 were marked by vineyard challenges mostly having to do with mildews, rot and vinegar. The many fine wines actually made in those vintages were testament to the skill and determination of the growers. 2004 was relatively light and often vividly green, which you either like or dislike.

What's becoming clear is that modern vintages favor the more northerly regions. The Mosel and Nahe haven't had a difficult vintage in at least a decade, whereas the Pfalz had tough times in at least three of the last ten years, and was the weak sister in a few others. The northerly trend makes me personally happy because those regions are not so hostile to wines with sweetness. And curiously, those vintages where the Pfalz shone were also good Mosel years, such as 2002, 2007 and 2008. Armin Diel told me (perhaps facetiously) that I had too much Mosel wine in my portfolio (which led one Moselaner to riposte that I had far too many Nahe producers in an area much smaller than the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer), but I'd favor the Mosel even if it weren't the most popular region over here, because they haven't abandoned the endangered virtues of balanced sweetness and low alcohol – yet.



What is a Palate?

A chapter of my book is devoted to this very question, in general terms, but the salient issue here is to describe what *my* palate is, since you ought to know what I like and why.

In fact I think there should be some sort of law that anyone who writes about wine should be able and willing to describe his/her palate, what it likes, what it recoils from, what it's sensitive or insensitive to. I don't believe the reader should need to infer these things. That's unreasonable and even discourteous.

Perhaps we don't perceive this need because we're still chasing the romantic fallacy of "objectivity." This capacity is not present in any human being I know, when confronted by an aesthetic object. Yes, there are certain facets of wine objectively present – degree of fragrance, for instance. We'd all agree, objectively, that Muscat's a big ol' shitload of scent. But I might love it while the next guy loathes it. He either recuses himself from writing about Muscat because it makes his stomach heave, or he tries feebly to be "objective" and produces flaccid useless prose, or he says what he feels and you conclude that Muscat is a yucky sort of thing. Because you're stuck chasing the chimera of objectivity.

It's fine to ask our writers to be as *impartial* as they can. It is fine to demand they surmount their natural preferences when appropriate. I think it's imperative to want writers to be mature enough (and keen enough in their judgment) to know where their subjective palates take over. The line exists in every taster, but not every taster knows where it is. And this is because too few of us ask the question *what is the nature of my particular palate*.

Thus I advocate, not objectivity, but a consistent, visible and informed subjectivity. It is all you can ask of a person.

I do believe there are larger truths – or Truths – about wine, and we can make value judgments about them and argue all night – civilly I hope. But when it comes to scents and flavors of individual wines, I am much less sure. Here's a blatant example. One thing I know about my own palate is that it grows over-sensitive to tannin if I have tasted a bunch of young astringent whites. If colleagues are present I'll always ask them "Does this wine strike you as extremely tannic?" and when they answer no, I'll know it's just me. Alone, I'll suspect it's just me. I've started to taste the red wines first for just this reason. So this "palate," this part of ourselves that we use to apprehend wine, shouldn't we begin by knowing it, and shouldn't we share what we know with our readers? I mean, just to be minimally *useful* to them?

I like detail more than I like size. In fact I instinctively recoil from wines I feel to be bigger than I have room for. When I detect skeins of flavor I am happy. When a wine enters my palate and then breaks down into many-colored rivulets of flavor, I am *very* happy. I like wines which show *persistent soft-sell*. The persistence is how I know the wine is serious, and if it has the *real* goods it doesn't need to hard-sell.

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

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

I like balance but I will tolerate a fascinating "flaw." Ideally a wine is both balanced *and* fascinating. In a balanced wine the flavors seem *preordained* to exist in precisely **that** configuration. No knees or elbows poke out.

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

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



How German Wines Age

The whole “petrol” matter stirs some controversy. Some growers accept the adjective sanguinely, but others detest it. All I can say is I wish I knew where some guys go to tank up, ‘cause I’ve never smelled refined oil products that smelled like Riesling.

But, I know what y’all mean by it, and I want to correct a misconception. That “petrol” flavor is not a signal of maturity, but rather of adolescence. It will vanish when the wine is truly mature. By which time we’ll all be driving electrical cars anyway.

The author Tom Stevenson of whose scholarship I stand in near-awe, summed up the petrol thing neatly. “The so-called petrol aroma is a well-known varietal characteristic of a classic . . . Riesling wine of some maturity. The active chemical compound has been identified as trimethyl-dihydronaphthalene, or TDN for short. TDN develops during the bottle aging process through the degradation of beta-carotene, an antioxidant that is itself derived from lutein, another antioxidant. The ratio of beta carotene to lutein is higher in Riesling than in any other white grape variety. Studies show that the lower the pH of a wine, the higher its potential for developing TDN. The longer it takes for the petrol aromas to emerge, the more finesse they have. Interestingly, cork absorbs 40 percent of TDN, thus screwcaps preserve more petrol aromas.”

In next month’s edition, Tom will demonstrate how you can use this information to get all the girls you want, so don’t miss that issue!

Here are my rules-of-thumb, with all the usual provisos; your mileage may vary, etc. It presumes on good Riesling from a good grower and a good site in a good vintage.

KABINETT: peaks from 4-6 years (if it’s *true* Kabinett and not declassified Auslese) and shouldn’t fade till about age 15. It’s not an abrupt demise, but rather a deliberate twilight slide. That said, I have in mind a 1961 Kabinett I drank at Schmitt-Wagner; 42 years old and going strong.

SPÄTLESE: peaks from 7-10 years and shouldn’t fade till about age 25.

AUSLESE: peaks from 12-15 years and shouldn’t fade till about age 35.

BEERENAUSSLESE: peaks from 25 years or so, and shouldn’t fade till about age 50.

TBA: I know you’ll hate to hear this, but these wines aren’t designed to fit into a human lifetime. Unless you started buying TBA when you were, like, seventeen, every bottle you have will outlive you. I drank a bunch of 1953 TBAs in 2003 (in honor of my ghastly birthday) and several of them had more improvement ahead of them. So, peaks anywhere between 35 and 55 years, and shouldn’t fade till the Red Sox play the Cubs in the series — and the Cubbies win.

EISWEIN: No one knew how these would age, but some theories are starting to gel. It depends on the wine, on its essential balance. If the acidity is too high, and if it’s too dominated by malic “green” acid, this will oxidize into vegetal flavors not to everyone’s taste, though the wine is strictly still “intact”. Such wines compel a theory to drink Eiswein young. This makes little sense to me. The correct theory would be to ignore such wines entirely. They are unbalanced and will give little joy. Eiswein with balanced, ripe acidity will age splendidly, if unpredictably. Dönnhoff served me an ‘83 Brücke Eiswein last year, whose caramel color took us aback. “Actually, Terry, the wine took on that color at three years old, and has held it since,” he said.

My own instincts are to pay heed to the weight of the wine— Eiswein at 135° Oechsle is a different critter than one at 200° Oechsle— and drink it as you would any other hyper-concentrated dessert wine: either very young or very old.



The Question of Tartrates

Now and again we get a pick-up request due to tartrates in the bottle. When I was starting out some 30 years ago, every grower’s pricelist had a disclaimer to the effect that tartrates are a naturally occurring substance and no cause for refund or return. I wish we all could do the same.

After all, haven’t we been taught to prize *Vin non filtré*? Don’t we feel *great* looking at all that muddy goop in the base of a red-wine bottle? Yet two threads of potassium bitartrate in a bottle of white wine and people start returning bottles. It defies reason.

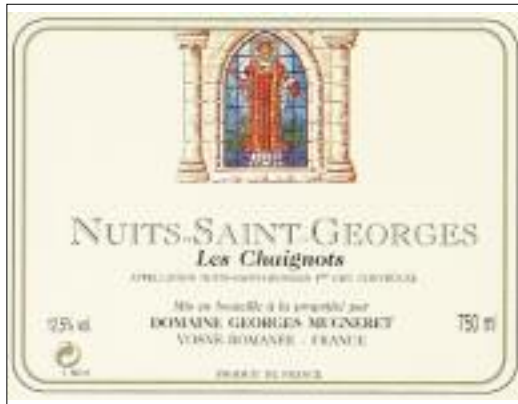
A retailer I know had a case of wine, seven bottles of which were throwing tartrates. He put these alongside the “clean” ones and charged a Dollar more for them! “Special unfiltered cuvee!” I believe he wrote. All seven of those bottles sold before the first clean one was bought.

At worst tartrates are entirely benign. At best they’re an active sign of superior quality, because potassium bitartrate won’t precipitate without a lot of *ripe* tartaric acid in the wine, the acid from *mature* fruit. Yes, you can

eliminate tartrates before bottling by cold-stabilizing, but some growers dislike what they feel (with justification) is an unnecessary handling that can sap a wine's vitality.

Don't get me wrong; we're not urging growers to encourage tartrate formation in bottle. In fact we're not discussing it AT ALL. Nor should we! Nor should you. If you buy a wine with tartrates from me (or anyone else) you have my blessing to hang a sign *WINE DIAMONDS: A SIGN OF SUPERIOR QUALITY!*

Label Basics



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

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

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

Here's what it means: Selbach-Oster is the producer. If you see the word *Weingut* in any proximity, that's your signal. A Weingut is a winery which estate-bottles its

wine. Look for that word. Vintage is self-evident. Zeltinger **Schlossberg** identifies the site and locality. Zeltingen is a place from which the populace, whether Homo Sapiens or the progeny of vitas vinifera, are known as Zeltingers. O.K., New Yorkers? Schlossberg is a vineyard. How are you supposed to know that? It's always the second word in the sequence. Meursault Perrieres. Zeltinger Schlossberg. NBD!

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). Beginning in 2009, a wine is either a *Qualitätswein* (if it was chaptalized) or a *Prädikatswein* if it wasn't, i.e., if it was ripe enough to do without adding sugar to the must to bulk up the body. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the *Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum standards. That word Gutsabfüllung means estate bottled. Think about it: it's actually shorter than *mise en bouteilles au domaine*; it's just a single word instead of a seven-syllable phrase. And then finally on the bottom we find Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, in this case the region of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No "Grand vin de Bourgogne" here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the BATF, which will require "Red Burgundy Wine" to appear on the strip label.

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

GLOSSARY

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

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays

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

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

EXTRACT: Extract really is simple and tangible. It is everything in wine except sugar, acid, water, and alcohol. You can measure it in the lab, and all German wine carrying an A.P. number has had its extract measured. The average reading would be somewhere in the low 20s—speaking in g.l. now. I'd expect to see a Riesling QbA or Kabinett with 22 to 24 g.l. extract, or 2.2 to 2.4 percent. I'd look for Spätlese to be a little higher, Auslese still higher, and the stickies quite high, up to 40 or even 50 g.l.

I'll bring extract to your attention if it's noteworthy. High extract corresponds with low yields, old vines, moist soils, and generally with high acidity. Can you taste extract? Not as a specific flavor, but as a largeness of flavor, especially mid-palate flavor—the second wave of taste that comes on after the initial burst of fruit. Extract is also a buffer, ameliorating both acidity and sweetness.

ACIDITY: I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine, except Riesling, has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient.

Curiously, it does seem that before the second World War, many German Rieslings underwent partial malolactic fermentation, probably by accident, and the wines of ripe vintages may have been lower in acid than we experience these days. Yet the wines aged fabulously.

The Germans have lurched backward from their acid-obsession. Now the pack has moved too far in the opposite direction. The poor grower! The ones who try to "gauge the market" end up being whipped around, dupes to fashion. The Good Guys just go on making the best wines they can and look for people to sell them to. I would never advocate a return to the days of Trocken wines with 11 grams of acidity (you could disfigure your

own face if you let any of that stuff dribble down your chin), but it concerns me to hear so many vintners talk about adjusting acids downward to make their young dry wines palatable. It signals an inappropriate focus on acidity as such, rather than on the entire flavor of the wine. As Hans-Günter Schwarz so wisely puts it: "Acidity is the fundament of fruit."

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

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

FEINHERB: There must have been a hole in the ozone layer when they permitted this term to be used. Because they didn't *control* it, and this is most scandalously fungible, sensible and un-Teutonic. In fact *feinherb* means whatever a grower wants it to mean. It always denotes a wine on-the-dry-side, and in practice, as one grower told me, the local wine-inspector tolerates anything up to 30g.l. residual sugar especially if the wines tastes as if it should have 70. For some growers *feinherb* are their dry-ish wines above the limit for Halbtrocken. Others use it in place of Halbtrocken because (correctly) they despise "Halbtrocken".

When I first started seriously with wine, *herb* was the word growers used to indicate their dry (or dry-er) wines. "Trocken" was unknown. So "feinherb" is an attempt to rub a little spit on it and make it sound nice. The word is neither here nor there, but the idea of regulating it *sensorily* is so manifestly sensible I wonder why they don't apply it to all the dry wines instead of obsessing over lab figures. Enjoy this wee glimmer of sanity while it lasts, as I'm sure some constipated twit at E.U. Brussels HQ will wrestle it into his airless little box.

SÜSSRESERVE: It was striking how many times tasting these 2008s when I wished there was some *dosage* with which to fine-tune them. Literally dozens of wines

could have been improved. But this is contrary to the new liturgy, and it's starting to get under my skin.

This is *really* un-trendy now; fewer growers deploy it each year. The zeitgeist is for "purity", and using *dosage* smacks of manipulation. This is fatuous reasoning, which I'll explain presently. But for now, a short anecdote:

Stefan Rumpf is one vintner who'd like to do away with *dosage*, but as a practical matter he's keeping some around until he gets fluent in the new cellar-regime. His residually-sweet 2004s were all made by stopping fermentation (is this not also manipulation???? Oh, don't even get me started). There was a Scheurebe I liked and which needed to be sweeter, so we tried it two ways—one using *dosage* and the other by blending an Auslese into the base wine.

It was unanimous; the wine with *dosage* was clearly superior.

So-called "Süssreserve" (literally sweet-reserve) is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—at least in theory. Actually, I have decided that I don't like the word "Süssreserve" any more and I won't use it in this text. Since nobody objects to the idea of *Dosage* in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I'll use the nicer one.

In any case I applaud purism in most places it is found, but the anti-*dosage* crusade in Germany smacks not of science but of religion. I am quite certain that thousands of growers used *dosage* willy-nilly—but that only demonstrates there's plenty of hacks making wine. I doubt very much they'd make better wine by stopping fermentation. Hacks are hacks. *Dosage* has been seized upon by a community of growers a little too eager to polish their halos. It is a convenient symbol of manipulation, but this is silly; all winemaking is manipulation, and the authentic questions are not whether to manipulate (one already does) but rather *how* to manipulate and to what end. What we call "non-manipulation" (with rather an excess of romanticism) is more properly called *minimal* manipulation. We prefer growers whose wines are guided by a wish to *preserve* natural inherent flavor rather than ladling all kinds of cellar-sauce over it.

Wines made sweet by stopping fermentation do have their "own" sweetness, but I'm not willing to presume this is superior, and certainly not as a matter of faith or

ideology. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. True "residual" sugar has a higher proportion of fructose: therefore it tastes sweeter and "heavier." Stopping fermentation involves either chilling, racking through filters or sulfuring. In fact these more "natural" wines require more sulfur than those made with *dosage*. Andreas Adam insists "Süssreserve **falsifies** terroir!" and I'm delighted by how much he cares about terroir, and if you have to err then it's damn sure preferable to err on the side of purism. But what he says ain't necessarily so. And there's the crux: young growers are also young *people*, and young people like things to be categorical. Then life kicks our ass and we get more humble.

A reasonable compromise is to stop your fermentations but also to keep a little *dosage* around. After all, how can you be sure you stopped at just the perfect point? The wine is turbulent and yeasty. Isn't it at least prudent to give yourself options? Believe me, every wine is easier to judge several months later.

I wonder whether the anti-*dosage* sentiment doesn't arise from a puritanical disapproval of sweetness, especially sweetness "added" deliberately. No one would say this outright, but I feel its presence. Thus stopped fermentation, especially if it stops spontaneously, can be excused; *oh well, nature wanted it that way*. And so the argument isn't really about *dosage*, terroir or purism; it is a shadow-argument about ameliorating the despicable sweetness.

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

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

it's a small price to pay to help ensure the future of viticulture in Germany.

But here's a curious twist. Every parcel of vineyards in Germany is categorized by quality — categories A, B, or C — so that when the vineyards are reapportioned the grower gets back nearly the same proportions of A B and C land he gave up. Makes sense. But also raises a very sneaky question: Why does anyone still quarrel with the idea of a vineyard classification *when it has already been done??* And is already being used! Show me a grower who fumes that vineyard classifications are undemocratic and I'll show you a grower who'll fuss to **high hell** if he gives up A-land and gets B-land back.

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

THEIR TWILIGHT-ZONE WINE LAW: The 1971 wine law is being neutered by the new generation. Eventually



Giant German rabbits love Riesling. Seriously.

it will become so irrelevant to the way wines are actually produced and labeled it will either be forced to adapt to reality or become a laughable anachronism. Many growers are taking their cue from the Austrians: all the dry wines are ostensibly sold as "QbA" because no one likes "Spätlese Trocken" or "Auslese Trocken." Many growers are using old micro-site names as a gesture of recognition to their distinctive terroirs. No serious grower cares (nor do some of them even *know*) about the ripeness minima for the various "Prädikat" levels; they

name by *taste*, and a "Kabinett" is the wine that *tastes* like one, regardless of must-weight. Indeed there's never been less concern about must-weight, or more concern about physiological ripeness.

So I asked a few of the wise old sages whether they thought the law could be changed. The consensus is: no. Far too complicated and messy, especially now that the EU is involved. What will happen, they say, is far more growers will take what's useful in the law and disregard the rest.

Plusses and The Quest For Perfection

You'll see one, two or three plusses next to certain wines in the following text. They are how I formalize the answer to your oft-asked question "What must I not miss under any circumstances?" That is, they are my short-list of "musts."

Every wine in this offering gets in because I like it a lot. Certain ones are especially striking; firsts among equals, if you will. To these I give a plus.

Less frequently, a wine really stops me in my tracks. It announces its greatness; it is aristocracy. It gets two plusses.

And on very rare occasions a wine is utterly transporting. It stops conversation, it seems to slow time down, it conveys a nearly divine spirit of beauty. To these one or two wines per vintage, I write three plusses.

This "scoring" scale is deliberately vague because I think any attempt at greater definition is misled, misleading and even pernicious. I barely *think* about it at all; it registers immediately, and if I find myself thinking about it I grow very irritated.

Any evaluative scale presumes upon some notion of perfection. For years Gault-Millau refused to award any restaurant more than 19.5 on its 20-point scale, saying, correctly, that perfection was unattainable. Then they relented and gave the full 20 to Marc Veyrat, causing him plenty of indigestion I'm sure, and compelling the question of what they'll do when, inevitably, they find some restaurant they think is *even* better.

But I understand the feeling, the sense of sublimity and the ache it creates, and the desire to convey such an exaltation of emotion in a way equal to its intensity. It is very natural and human, but it doesn't always do good.

David Schildknecht has found a way out; he defines perfection as "better than which cannot, at that moment, be imagined." Because in the essence of the Moment Of Beauty one is quite certain that all such moments are fundamentally *equal*, and one sees how fatuous it is to catalogue or quantify them.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

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

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

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



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

sommelier alert

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Pfalz

pfalz wines



I'll confess I'm *really* glad the Pfalz kicked such ass in 2008. I like Pfalz wines and was getting tired of them not getting the attention they deserved – at their best. But you need to know this is an entirely changed region from what it was fifteen years ago – “Pfalz, an altered State!” – and the changes are....not encouraging.

This can easily be misconstrued, so forgive me if I say it in language like a childrens-first-reader. I love the Pfalz growers I work with, I love their wines, and I love that some of those wines wouldn't exist if I weren't there to buy them. But I also hate that some of those wines wouldn't exist if I weren't there to buy them. It means *no one else* would buy them, and that is a travesty.

I'm open to newbies for the portfolio, especially from the Rheinhessen and Pfalz, but every time—every *single* time—I investigate a new Pfalzer it's the same dreary tale; nothing but dry wines and maybe a token sticky or two. The entire region has cast itself as a dry-wine supplier, and thus it is an uncongenial place for me to do business. I don't mind dry wines, when they are good,



Pfalz vineyard view

but I don't like not to have a choice. And can you even conceive that nearly every Pfalz vintner will say he cannot sell a Riesling Kabinett??? Pfalz once felt like the

land of unlimited possibilities. It now feels like the Eden of the unexamined palate.

But I need to repeat that I've managed to gather a group for this portfolio who (mostly) will make the wines we need, and in some cases not only because we need them; they'd have made them anyway. That said, there's an abiding danger of awkwardness if someone bottles, say, 500 cases of Riesling Kabinett for us and we only buy 400. He can't sell the other 100 in Germany! And I hate selling under pressure to *move inventory*, much as I love selling under self-imposed pressure to *show you to the MOUNTAIN!*

I love my growers and I'm not ever gonna bail on the Pfalz, but with each passing year it feels more like enemy territory.

Let's suppose for argument's sake that they start really getting it right; they learn whatever magic trick is

necessary to create consistently and sustainably viable dry Rieslings. Then what? Then there's one *additional* region from which fine dry Rieslings come. What has been sacrificed, however, is just the thing which makes German Rieslings *unique*. Other places make good dry Riesling, lots of them. But NO other place anywhere on earth makes these miraculously beautiful Rieslings with sweetness. Thus even *if* — and it's a big if — Pfalz dry Riesling was abruptly consistently excellent, I don't think I'd take the trade-off. Something one-of-a-kind in return for an also-ran? No thanks!

THIS IS NOT A SCREED AGAINST DRY WINES. I LIKE DRY WINES! This is a screed against sheep-think and dogmatic uniformity. I want there to be excellent dry Riesling from the Pfalz, and I want it alongside Rieslings with sweetness (and I don't mean "noble-sweet" Auslesen) and I want growers and their customers to be flexible and ecumenical and *honest* in their tastes.

These days the newest darling in the Pfalz (and elsewhere) is Sauvignon Blanc. Most "serious" estates have it and feel they can't do without it because it's so trendy. Well hmmm. I think I might just have an opinion about that. First, many of the wines are pretty good, and a few are very good. And the world *does not need* them. Maybe if some clown at EU is bored one night he can issue a decree that for every Sauvignon Blanc vine planted in Germany a Riesling vine has to be planted in Pouilly-

Fumé. Stir things up some.

But what's really sad is the gesture of self-loathing the German wine consumer is making. Over-strong language? You do know, right, that they already have a vine giving very similar flavors to those of Sauv-Blanc; many would say quite a bit better. This vine is native and has been in the ground since around 1916. Unlike Sauv-B it gives many different kinds of wines, including magnifi-

The wines have a great affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

cent sweet and even dessert wines — and its recent dry wines are at least as good as those of the imported arriviste. It is, of course, *Scheurebe*. And it is so damn sad to see the Germans squander the opportunity to stand *proudly* behind that which is uniquely theirs, instead of running behind the parade saying "We can do that too."

I suggested to several growers they gave their wines the name "Scheu-vignon Blanc." Somehow I was taken frivolously.

And don't you go fussing at me when you see a couple Sauvys in this offering. I said the wines could be good. I'm not gonna boycott them. I raise the point at all to show how oddly blind this culture can be to its native treasures.

müller-catoir

pfalz • haardt

I saw these wines early on. I'd started feeling I was going to like the '09s, and was settled into having a happy few weeks. But Catoir's were the first wines to really *jazz* me, the first wines where words like stellar and exquisite could be used.

I was glad to see it, because Martin Franzen's rather neon style sometimes made his '08s feel a little unfinished. But that same florescence was wonderful in '09s juicier more muscular context. The range was consistently excellent and I got to cherry-pick among a very fine group.

I'm not disinterested, obviously, but neither am I alone in proposing that Catoir is once again at the summit in the Pfalz. Maybe he shares it with a neighbor or two – but no one's *better*.

You may recall the micro-cru bottlings of the past few vintages (Breumel, Aspen, Gehren, all sections of the over-large Bürgergarten) which the law seemed to tolerate. "Seemed," alas. They just hadn't noticed it yet. But now they have, and they want to deep-six it. Oh this is brilliant. Here's a wine law that allows all the *Piesporter Michelsberg Oppenheimer Krötenbrunnen Bechtheimer*



Martin Franzen

Pilgerpfad Niersteiner Gutes Domthal of the world to flourish, absolutely **meaningless** names, actually MISLEADING names (because the consumer thinks they denote actual places), and this same infinitely wise wine law will **forbid** a name that actually **does** mean something, because it isn't in the registry of "approved" site-names. If I weren't

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

such a peaceable guy I'd throw a brick through a window. When I suggested the affected growers simply disobey, I was told they'd be fined, and the fines would become painful with repeated transgressions. Ah, THIS they'll pay attention to. They'll *enforce* this. A whole law is based on a fallacy close to a bald-faced lie – but they've got time to prosecute an honest grower who wants his customers to know where the wine came from.

müller-catoir at a glance:

Maybe the greatest estate in the Pfalz and one of the top few in all of Germany. Brilliant primary-fruit driven wines of supernatural steely clarity and multi-layered depth. The overused word *aristocratic* perhaps best describes them.

how the wines taste:

Extremely spritzzy and highly leesy — one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronomie! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

THE DRY RIESLINGS:

- GMC-146 **2009 Riesling Trocken**
 A dear wee winsome dry Riesling, full of quince and grain both in texture and in the ripe grainy “sweetness; it has the cool peony Herrenletten face (for those who recall that site’s profile); grows salty on the finish; digital precision over a saftig mouth-feel. SOS-0 (now- eight years)

- GMC-149 **2009 Mussbach Riesling Trocken** +
 This is gloriously pretty! A beaming skipping daisy-girl of a wine; detailed and mischievous and joyful. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 7-10)

- GMC-147 **2009 Gimmeldingen Riesling Trocken** ++
 Trust me, I tried leaving this behind. I’m not into sku-clutter. But I kept going back to it and it finally consummated its seduction. I just adore its suave saltiness – it’s amazingly easy for a wine with so much hay and grain and garrigue, and the sneaky length and spearminty precision are amazing. SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-12)

- GMC-153 **2009 Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +
 Single-site now. It was the most mineral among three Crus, and the best balanced; a really swollen saltiness and rock-power plays against an Empire-apple tartness; the wine is a little stern – as befits its significance – and there’s a strangely compelling spring-oniony sweetness in the finish. This won’t seduce, but it will charge your thoughts, again and again, with every sip. SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 11-15)

- GMC-154 **2009 Breumel in den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++
 “GG” is the standard descriptor for Grosses Gewächs these days. Tasted from an unfiltered tank-sample the wine was explosively ripe and mineral, a classic portrait of mass and power having little to do with fruit as-such; peppery ‘09 thrust, martial and almost haughty; can’t wait to see this guy in bottle. SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 12-15)

SAUVIGNON BLANC et.al.

- GMC-151 **2009 Haardt Sauvignon Blanc Trocken**
 Fascinatingly, this is cooler and less overt than was the ‘08; just 11.5% alc, and Martin agrees it’s more discreet; an easy-going, diligently articulate example, perhaps a refined antidote to the over-endowed, blatant wines from you-know-where; yes it’s pricy but it’s also classy. SOS: 0 (now-2 years)

- GMC-148 **2009 Haardt Scheurebe Trocken** ++
 Our friends Beth and Joe came down to see us, and Beth brought a bottle of Catoir’s legendary ‘89 Scheurebe Auslese Trocken. I’d long since finished mine, and it was a blast to drink it again, entirely fresh and electric at 20 years old – a Scheurebe. A dry Scheurebe! There are those who’ve said Schwarz’s wines didn’t age, and, well, poo on them.

This old friend prompted me to reach out to the man who made it, and I had dinner with Hans-Günter and his very charming new sweetheart Sabine. He looked hale and glowy with his new love at his side. I told him about drinking that stunning ‘89. If he’s like me, he likes to hear from people who drink the wines he made (or in my case, sold), about how they resided in someone’s life for a few hours, and made him happy.

I say all this because the ‘09 Scheu is the best dry version from Catoir *since* that great ‘89; I mean, this is really special wine, four times better and more interesting than the Sauv-Bl; riotously redcurranty and drenched with cassis; fantastic grip and mid-palate physio-sweetness into a snappy minty finish, but it’s the solid length that blows you away; peppermint against a compote of plum and currant. W-o-w. SOS: 0 (now...20 years!)

GMC-150 **2009 Haardt Muskateller Trocken** +
 I love Alsace Muscat, but man these pure “yellow” Muscats will ruin you; tasting recently in Alsace all I could taste was the soft yielding Ottonel – I missed the spiny electric buzz of wines like this. Mind you, there are *very* few “wines like this,” as Catoir’s Muscat is reliably among the best in the world. This ‘09 is ridiculous silvery focus and Thai-basil spice is poised over the vintage juice and grain in a shimmery snap of drooling mentholated penetration. Might be the best since the insane ‘04.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

THE SWEET STUFF, RIESLING AND OTHERWISE

GMC-152 **2009 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett** +
 (already bottled when tasted) Thank God they still make this, and I didn’t even have to beg them to. Less peachy than this usually is; more plum and currant and lots of sweet ginger; the flavors flash like a 4th-of-July sparkler; it doesn’t shrink from its sweetness, but the sinus-clearing mintyness and mineral and talc just yank the sweetness away, and the wine finishes spicy and dry.
 SOS: 2 (4-15 years)

GMC-155 **2009 Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese** ++
 About as beautiful as Pfalz Riesling gets. Hell, as *Riesling* gets, as white wine gets – as wine gets. An orgasm of garrigue, an explosive release of grainy-leafy pheromones; angular salty sweetness. There need to be more such wines in the Pfalz, but at least there’s this.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)

GMC-156 **2009 Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese** +
 Pure pink grapefruit, unusually for a Catoir Scheu, which tend to run more sagey-cassis. The palate is a consolidated quorum, a consensus of flavor, pure archetypal Scheu, with almost a Nahe-like sleekness and purity. If I gave plusses for only my own subjective response, you’d see three. The length is beyond stubborn, and the purity is virginal, Edenic. It is one sublime chord, perfectly played, which I happen to love, but it isn’t paradoxical or ambiguous.
 SOS: 2 (now- 15 years)

GMC-157 **2009 Herzog Rieslaner Spätlese** +
 Eucalyptus grassy notes with toast and banana; it’s more adamant and masculine than the Scheu, a karate-chop of vinosity, peppery and a little cruciferous; a wine you impress people with.
 SOS: 2 (now-18 years)

GMC-158H **2009 Herzog Rieslaner Auslese, 6/375ml** ++
 Here begins as singular and remarkable a trio of wines as I have ever tasted. It starts again with eucalyptus, stronger; the whole wine is stronger than the Spät, but not really sweeter-seeming, rather more solid and salty, and considerably more intense, with obdurate length; incomparable parameters of flavor and structure; paranormal vinosity.
 SOS: 2 (now- 25 years)

GMC-159H **2009 Schlößel Rieslaner BA, 6/375ml** +++
 Relative to the TBA coming up, this is almost affordable, and believe me, it's money well spent; you will not obtain its equal with any other wine of this nature. Again, we haven't really hit "dessert-wine" territory yet, and Franzen agrees there's more shriveled flavors than botrytis ones; the wine is just even stronger and saltier, it's like a liquefied Mimolette, with the torque of a rocket, the stubborn smoky power of those 1000-year-old bush teas; massive length leads to an astonishingly elegant finish. SOS...??? 2? 3? No earthly idea! (12-35 years)

GMC-160H **2009 Schlößel Rieslaner TBA, 6/375ml** +++
 As again we climb; this one's like a 75-year-old Tawny; chocolate and pepper, meringue and salt, like some caramel from an ancient Oloroso. SOS: 3 (18-45 years)

RIESLANER, THE RIESLING-VIAGRA

Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anywhere else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Hans-Günter Schwarz *loved* it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives *more* acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most *singular* great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would *never* himself do such a thing



scheurebe: what gives?

Um, I happen to like it, that's what gives.

It was crossed about 80 years ago by a Mr. Georg Scheu (hence its name). I imagine Scheu was looking for a wine with Silvaner's advantages (big berries and early ripening) paired with Riesling's structure and class. His introduction also claimed the Scheurebe would be a Riesling-like wine suited for sandy soils (which Riesling doesn't especially like, or rather Riesling *growers* don't like, as the yields are mingy).

As often seems the case with crossings, the results are oblique to the grapes crossed, i.e. there's no linear sequence of getting Riesling-flavors-plus-Silvaner-flavors. You end up with new flavors you couldn't have predicted. Scheurebe ripens 7-10 days ahead of Riesling, and has a little less acidity, but it's essentially a Riesling structure, i.e. firm and citrusy. It does indeed like sand but doesn't give its very best results; the wines tend to be 1-dimensionally tangerine-y.

Great Scheurebe unfolds a truly kinky panoply of flavors and aromas. Indeed, Scheu is to Riesling what "creative" sex is to missionary-with-the-lights-out. Start with pink grapefruit. Add cassis; I mean pure cassis. Then add sage leaves you just crushed between your fingertips. Then lemon grass. If it's extremely ripe you can talk about passion-fruit and papaya. If it's underripe you will certainly talk about cat piss.

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why? Theo Minges told me, "A lot of bad Scheurebe was made from too-high yields. You got cat-piss and sometimes botrytis on top of cat-piss." But times changed, and after a general retreat in acreage, the variety is being rediscovered by good growers sensitive to its manic potential. But you have to respect it. Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more* attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored

dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

Scheurebe keeps very well but doesn't age as dramatically as Riesling. Ten-year-old Scheu is only a little different than 1-year-old Scheu.

Tastes differ, of course, and what's sizzling and emphatic to me might be blatant and vulgar to you, but we who love Scheurebe are truly in a kind of thrall to it. It has little of Riesling's spiritual depth, but neither does Riesling have Scheurebe's erotic power. We need both for a balanced diet! Riesling may indeed represent All That Is Fine And Good, but Scheu offers All That Is Dirty And Fun. Scheurebe is bad for you; it's fattening and wicked and hair will start growing on your palms as soon as you pull the cork. In other words, there's no down-side . . .

The grail-keepers of Scheurebe include Lingenfelder, Fuhrmann-Eymael and one hopes Müller-Catoir under the new regime. I look for it wherever I can. Growers who have discontinued Scheurebe include Meßmer (this was really calamitous) and Dönnhoff – yes, Dönnhoff; his last vintage was 1985, in which he made a gorgeous Auslese from a site in Kreuznach.

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. Yet when it deigns to accept you it knows some moves you've *never* been shown. In 2006 it sulked in the heat. But in 2007 it came snarling back in full kinky regalia. Of course Scheurebe satisfies our desire to wallow in lust, which we *spir-chull* guys need so's we don't float away on our wisps of bliss. And so there's little point in *delicate* Scheu, or God help us *subtle* Scheu. If you like it at all you like it writhing and sweaty. Yet: this does not, or *need* not preclude a certain elegance, a certain stature, a certain, dare one say . . . aristocracy? Scheu may be slutty, but it isn't ignoble, and I wonder whether there's really *any* equivalent in the world of wine. Certainly Scheu can overstate, sometimes blatantly, but the *thing* it overstates is often marvelous and even *fine*. So, sybarites, you can have it both ways. Scheu is almost as noble as Riesling but unlike Riesling it has the naughty bits still there!

SCHUREBES IN THIS OFFERING:

- GMC-148 2009 Müller-Catoir Haardt Scheurebe Trocken
- GMC-156 2009 Müller-Catoir Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese
- GTM-130 2009 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese Trocken
- GTM-134 2009 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese
- GDR-196 2009 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese
- GWG-050 2009 Wagner-Stempel Scheurebe Trocken
- GGE-040 2009 Geil Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett
- GGY-084L 2009 Gysler Scheurebe Halbrocken, 1.0 Liter
- GKF-152 2009 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese
- GSD-101 2009 Schlossgut Diel Scheurebe Spätlese, 6/750ml



There's an almost manic energy attached to this place. They didn't show me any sort of list, so I had to keep asking what wines were available – even what wines were made in the first place. No one, not even my highly button-down and competent colleagues could have made the slightest logistical (or even rhetorical) sense of it all. It was a whirligig of marvelous wine and rat-a-tat talk. Next year we'll do the tasting inside the Haidon Collider, slow things down a bit.

Stefan Attmann is the genial culprit.

D'ja ever meet someone and in the first five seconds you're off and running? You can't stop talking, it's as if you've collected things your whole life to say to this very guy? Hours pass and you don't know how? You have to continue the conversation! All life depends on the conversation being continued. It's like that with Stefan. I don't know how I managed to taste anything let alone



write notes on what I tasted. It's like riding a TGV-train of talk.

If you don't already know, the estate was sold, to a very wealthy gentleman named Niederberger, who owns a Scherezzade-

like villa in Neustadt (where Hans-Günter Schwarz makes wine from .9 hectares of vineyards) and also Bassermann and Buhl, which, along with Deinhard, used to be a single huge estate.

In effect the estate will be split in two; the base-line wines sold at excellent prices will still go out under the Dr Deinhard name. The presitige-line, with all the Grosses Gewächs and their ilk will be sold as Von Winning, after the name of a former proprietor.

The handsome old courtyard is a big construction site, and work proceeds on the hotel-restaurant and the private guestroom they plan to add for the "VIP" visitor (like you, precious! I'm just happy to sleep standing up in the barn...).

There seems to be some wariness attached to the very wealthy Mr. Niederberger (who is rumored to be negotiating to buy Bürklin-Wolf) although he gives every appearance of spending wisely to rebuild this estate. I was struck by how much I and some of my fellow Statesiders like Attmann's first couple vintages com-

- **Vineyard area: 35 hectares**
- **Annual production: 20,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Kalkofen, Grainhübel, Herrgottsacker, Kieselberg, Paradiesgarten, & Mäushöhle**
- **Soil types: Weathered calcareous, new red sandstone, basalt**
- **Grape varieties: 77% Riesling, 9% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, 1% Scheurebe, 2% Spätburgunder**

pared to their lukewarm response inside Germany. I wonder if it's really about the wines themselves....

Though there is cause for controversy, as Stefan has bought new casks – not barriques, but 1000-liter *Stücks* - and he's using them for his dry Rieslings without having steamed away any wood flavor. In theory I have mixed feelings about this. In the glass the wines are mostly outstanding, with only a couple showing obtrusively woody notes. That said, I'd feel better if Stefan moved away from the notion of marked-woody flavors as signifying seriousness, let alone greatness.

For it's great wine he wants to make. At one point he said to me, "There's no point in working this hard if you're not going all out to make *great* wine. Good wine isn't enough."

I'll list them roughly in the order I tasted them, which is to say, all over the damn place....

dr. deinhard at a glance:

Big doings at this fine old name, an estate on-the-move, so grab on tight and catch a rising star.

how the wines taste:

All I can say now is they taste like great Pfalz wines; it's too soon to know what Attmann's "signature" might yet be. The collection of Grand Crus is enticing.

- GDD-044 **2009 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 Exceptionally exotic aromas, almost as if there were Scheu or Kerner involved (not that I suspect as much); the wine is super-pretty! Juicy and Jarlsberg-y, talc-y and pineap-
 ply, about as dee-lish as Pfalz Riesling gets.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 7-12)
- GDD-045 **2009 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 This is a power-bomb; blazing honey aromas with of course no sweetness; jet-blast power
 and force yet with class; a better bone-dry German Riesling has seldom reached my hairy
 lips; a sizzling serpent of massive vinosity and Riesling breed.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-12 years)
- GDD-046 **2009 Grainhübel Riesling Trocken (Von Winning Label) +**
 The site gives the most grippy masculine wines of Deidesheim, and this is a very seri-
 ous terroir-Riesling, like a Schlossberg from Weinbach; wonderful inside-sweetness;
 crushed stones, apple-skin, hyacinth and marjoram and wild lavender; this is exactly
 the kind of profound, fascinating dry white wine that tout le monde *Americain* says it
 wants, and seldom buys.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 12-18)
- GDD-047 **2009 Kalkofen Riesling Grosses Gewächs (Von Winning Label) +(+)**
 Explosively expressive roasted-corn, phosphorescently minty, thermo-nuclear spread
 of fruit and spice; allowing for cask-sample euphoria, this sure seems like massive and
 explicable Riesling, with a fruit volume recalling Nigl's Kremsleiten; potentially huge-
 ly compelling.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 12-18)
- GDD-048 **2009 Kieselberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs (Von Winning Label) ++**
 This is absurdly pretty, with wintergreen and spring-onion; the palate shows the most
 improbable sleek mass, a thin line of beauty urging to eternity; insane counterpoint of
 green and yellow elements, lime and plum, mint and corn, corn bisque with fleur-de-
 sel and maple-smoked bacon. *Some* stuff here.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 10-16)
- GDD-042 **2008 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett +**
 It needed a minute to clear its reduction aroma, but what follows is a classic ginger and
 papaya Pfalz fragrance; the palate is a parfait of roses and lilacs. There's a **2009 vintage**
 in the wings which we'll see when the '08 sells through (and which is also "+" quality);
 it's more lavish and exotic.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-15 years)



I spent some of the last Winter drinking Müller’s 2008 Trockens, just to ensure I made sustainable claims for them. I was not disappointed.

The estate remains below the trendiness radar – there are bigger “names” in Forst. But I like these forthright honest people, and their wines are excellent values and just like they themselves are. That said, I found the dry wines in 2009 rather less consistent than those sterling ‘08s.

Perhaps the vintage muscle wasn’t suited to them. The “sweet” stuff, though, *especially anything from the Pechstein vineyard*, is wonderful, and I had three candidates for our hard-core list.

With Müller you can really see the impact of exceptional land.

Allow me a small rant. Admit it, it’s entertaining when I rant! My pants are full of rants...O.K., it galls me when people obsessively learn every *lieu dit* in Burgundy but are indifferent to the Grand Crus in Germany except for the few Mosel or Rheingau vineyards they’ve heard of. These are great classic vineyards for the world’s best grape variety, and ignoring them is a form of contempt. You may not know this, but the site with the highest land-value, i.e., the one you pay the highest taxes on, is not Erbacher Marcobrunn or Bernkasteler Doktor or Scharzhofberger: it is Forster Kirchenstück. As a matter of fact.

We’re learning of many great and formerly unknown sites throughout the Pfalz today, thanks to the burgeoning of passion and quality among the post-70s generation, but I don’t expect you to have memorized these. The long-established great classics though, the

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Forster Kirchenstück, Jesuitengarten, Ungeheuer, Pechstein and Musenhang**
- **Soil types: Calcareous loam, sandstone detritus, partly with basalt and clay**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 10% Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, 14% red varieties mostly Spätburgunder**

wines that have graced many a label from venerable well-known estates (like Bassermann, Buhl and Bürklin), those you should appreciate, and failing to do so is like saying “Well I’ve memorized the Grand Crus in the Côte de Nuits, so I don’t have to bother learning the vineyards in the Côte de Beaune.”

Scold over. I’m here to help. These, at a minimum, are the sites you should know:

Forster Kirchenstück (which some feel is the best site in all the Pfalz), *Jesuitengarten*, *Pechstein*, (these are the big-3), *Freundstück*, *Musenhang*, and *Ungeheuer*.

Deidesheimer Hohenmorgen, *Grainhübel* (the best-of-the-best), *Kalkofen*, *Kieselberg*, *Leinhöhle*, and *Langenmorgen*.

Wachenheimer Goldbächel (which I’d put on par with Kirchenstück though the styles are 180° apart), *Altenburg*, *Rechbächel*, *Gerümpel*.

Ruppertsberger Hoheburg, *Reiterpfad*, and *Nussbien*.

In sketch form, the Ruppertsbergers are strong Premier Crus, but not quite entirely Grand. Wachenheim



Stephan and Kurt Müller in the vineyard.

they say is “feminine,” and these are indeed queenly and sometimes swooningly perfumed. Partisans of Forst/Deidesheim will argue which is “best.” Forst is more Cajun is the way I’d put it. Forst is full-throttle, overtly expressive, yet with breed and finesse – it isn’t sloppy. Deidesheim’s more grown-up; it’s there at the party but it goes home by midnight, after having had a roaring good time. Forst goes on roaring. Wachenheim declined the invitation because it had theater tickets. Ruppertsberg was invited but felt a little out of place. Forst stumbled into bed in the wee hours, but was up

promptly the next morning to work against deadline on an article on Latvian interpretive dance.

Weingut Eugen Müller is an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

müller at a glance:

This is a winery on the move, and the next few years will tell a new tale. There’s a sensational collection of vineyards and new energy in the cellar. This is what the Germans call an *Aufsteiger*, i.e. one who is climbing.

how the wines taste:

They used to be rather matte and caramelly as a whole, though the fabulous Auslesen from the Kirchenstück showed great fire and breed. The 2004s were harbingers of a change, as they are more “modern,” clear and bright.

GEM-105 **2009 Forster Freundstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

In bottle two weeks when I tasted it. It’s the clearest and most delineated of the dry range here, the most *spiel*; aromas are dark and cakey yet applesauce and nutmeg notes develop with air; the palate is chewier, rounder and more opulent than ‘08 yet with plum-blossom highlights; has a soft touch for a wine with such a strong punch, and the terse-seeming finish is probably clipped by bottle-sickness.
SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-12)

GEM-107 **2009 “Terra Cara” (a.k.a. Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken)**

The first of an amazingly strong series from this vineyard, it shows a *baked* terroir aromatically, yet the palate is slimmed and focused by the (invisible but infinitely helpful) RS; five-spice notes, penetrating minty length, and precise for an ‘09.
SOS: 1 (now-8 years)

GEM-106 **2009 Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb** **+**

A perfect dry Riesling, in balance, distinctiveness and terroir expression; this is lilting, chromatically melodic; iris and lilac and stone, balsam and mint; an almost Altoid-like finish. Another class here.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-12 years)

GEM-108 **2009 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett** **+**

This is actually Pechstein, which belongs to the *Grosslage* “Mariengarten,” which Müller’s private customers respect as a Brand, so we acquiesced. The wine is outstanding, the best vintage I’ve ever tasted; a sultry flowery fragrance, wonderfully romantic and lavish; grape-hyacinth and iris; often this is a “nice little wine” but not now – he picked it early to preserve its acidity, and the wine has grip and energy and an irresistible angular charm. Help preserve what was once plentiful and is now threatened – the simple Riesling Kabinett.
SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GEM-109 **2009 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

A great foamy wave of aroma leads to a palate that’s more elegant than usual, which one doesn’t anticipate from the ‘09s. Caramel and suave, it recalls a Bürklin wine of the 70s and 80s in its forthright, deliberate and warm-blooded murmur of Riesling class.
SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

- GEM-110 **2009 Gewürztraminer Spätlese** ++
 I don't recall a better German Gewürz; at least you have to go back 20 years to Catoir to encounter its kin. Classic rose and lychee fragrance without a hint of a hint of the earthen bitterness one often sees. This is almost high-toned, it smells like Gewürz but it stretches like Riesling. No perceptible sweetness yet it runs on a flowery channel of cool shade-stream. Finish of lilac and lychee again.
- Two things to add. One, if you're a partisan of the grape and have been alienated by the heavy sweetness of many recent Alsace examples, here's your wine. And two, I can recall a time when Gewürz was often blended with Riesling, and though I don't know for sure, I wouldn't be surprised if this graceful wine didn't have a little Riesling juice in the mix. Nor would I mind!
 SOS: 1 (now-7 years)
- GEM-111H **2009 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** ++
 After a somewhat perplexingly oblique 2008, this '09 roars back from the shadows. Wide-open and wonderful; superb Grand Cru aromas into a regal, complex, salty and plummy palate; a potion of smoke and marinade and a shower of plum and even car-away. This is what *Grand Cru* means, an irreducible whole that's blatantly discernible but has nothing to do with fruit – though fruit is there, toasted into a rusk that changes as it burns, into a primordial compacted magma of fruit. Amazing vintage of this wine.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GEM-112H **2008 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling BA, 12/375ml** ++
 A slim, slippery masterpiece; studious, spicy, pure...I know this isn't the language that "sells" such wines. I can only say you lift the glass 20 times and have 50 thoughts, impressions and emotions. It's lamb-y somehow, as if it was grilled over lilac shoots and secreted its own mint. A thrall of detailed ripeness; you have to expand yourself to taste it, physically, and to *get* it sensually. Price is laughable for such a wine. Go on, do it.
 SOS: 3 (10-28 years)
- GEM-097H **2007 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +
First offering, for what is plain-and-simple *a steal*. Each time Müller makes this wine it's a quintessence of this great Cru without overt sweetness, but endlessly and firmly rich, porcini-rich, milk chocolate rich, old Beaufort rich, Amontillado rich. *Where* are the buyers for such a self-evidently useful and compelling wine??
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)



herbert messmer

pfalz • burrweiler

Too bad Gregor doesn't like to fly, though god knows I understand. During our last two encounters he's been about the wittiest and most fun guys I know. And y'all are to be congratulated for bouncing sales nice 'n up the past years. Believe me, it's nothing less than this stellar estate deserves, and I'll be working to make them even more conspicuous.

Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If

you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slaty minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

"What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

"The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking'."

That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever



Linde & Gregor Messmer

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Burrweiler Schäwer, Schlossgarten and Altenforst**
- **Soil types: Slate, sandy loam, loess, red sandstone and heavy chalky clay and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 45% Riesling, 13% Spätburgunder, 10% Weissburgunder, 6% St. Laurent, 5% Grauburgunder, 21% other varietals including Scheurebe**

been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."

"Are you happy with the vintage?" I asked Gregor. The question is partly pro-forma, a sort of how's-it-goin'. Gregor, though, answered thoughtfully. "I am content with the vintage," he said deliberately. At my raised eyebrows he elaborated "I am not discontent, I am content. The vintage is good." Strange, when you meet an honest man you don't know *what* to say.

messmer at a glance:

Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

how the wines taste:

What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor's careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it's facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a **respect** for the grape which only shows when you're nature's humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor's wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

- GMS-141L **2008 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
 Hey, *yum!* Not as “studied” as this wine often is, more animated and pithy – and you do notice the acidity, but the fruit positively springs from the glass.
 SOS: 0 (now-5 years)
- GMS-154L **2009 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
 The ‘08, which we’ll offer while it lasts, is a studious, chiseled and refreshing everyday Riesling, while the ‘09 is more muscular and roasty. Both are impeccably balanced.
 SOS: 0 (now-7 years)
- GMS-153L **2008 Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**
 Blessings rain upon you and all your farm animals for making this insane PN value a hap’nin little fella; the silky texture is beguiling, the burning-leaf smokiness is fetching; then there’s the apposite combo of pale color with deep flavor, with a char that doesn’t carry the overripe gluey sweetness of many New World examples. So, don’t mind me, keep on buying it.

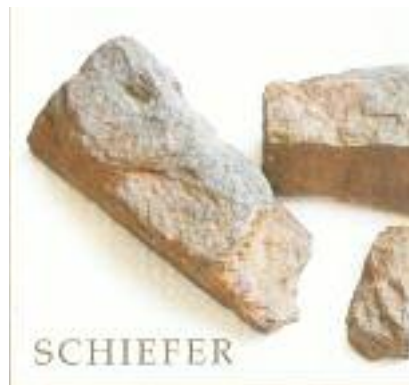
THE DRY WINES

- GMS-155 **2009 “Schiefer” Riesling Kabinett Trocken**
 The better of two tanks, and not very much of it. It has the length of an anaconda, though it’s as sleek as a quick little lizard; shows a blatant char of slate as it swells on the palate, and the finish clings in a salty crust you have to whack off with a chisel. But watch out: this is dry, and as tart as frisee and nettles.
 SOS: minus-1 (now-3 years)
- GMS-146 **2008 “Schiefer” Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +
 From the Grand Cru Schäwer. If the Pfalz VDP goes the way of the Nahe, this will eventually be sold as a “2nd-wine” of the GroGew; in the interim it’s named for its soil. I did taste the big fella, which seemed austere and persnickety whereas this one is juicy, rich and almost creamy but with an underlying gooseberry oxalis note and even some green pepper; it’s excellent dry Riesling because it’s the firm plump structure that’s seductive, not the flavors.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-13 years)
- GMS-147 **2008 Michelsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** +
 Oh man, mirabelle! And jasmine and lemon-blossom, a bursting giddy grin of joy in *this* glass. Asian pear and guava edge themselves into the parade, and the marchers march and the twirlers twirl, and the palate is like a warm purée of white corn somehow *without* the sugar, just this giddy serenity.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 12-16 years)
- GMS-148 **2008 Weissburgunder Grosses Gewächs “Im Goldenen Jost”, 6/750ml** +{+}
 GMS-158 **2009 Weissburgunder Grosses Gewächs “Im Goldenen Jost”, 6/750ml** +{+}
 A worthy heir to the magnificent ‘07, a little lighter and more compact, “sweet” and scallopy, but man this *saltiness*; it’s like a cooler rendition of Hiedler’s Maximum, lobster stock and corn and dill and meaty langoustines in clarified butter with orange zest. Splendid Pinot Blanc.
 SOS: 0 (1-12 years)
- The 2009 on its heels is slimmer, less doughy and more mussel-y, but wonderfully articulate with an almost Riesling-like focus, astounding finesse, and a lovely grainy corny sweetness comes on with air. Bearing in mind it’s an unfiltered cask-sample (which will get its first racking in mid-March) it’s potentially even better than the ‘08. You have to seek out the very best of Austria to find Pinot Blanc of this class; most of Alsace is left in the dust.
 SOS: 0 (now-8 years)



THE KIND-OF SWEET AND FOR-SURE SWEET STUFF:

- GMS-157 **2009 Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**
 CORE-LIST WINE. The more refined and compact of two options, though you could argue it's less sexy, but I'm certainly aroused enough by its polish and clarity. It's an elegant, classy dry Riesling, with good length, shot through with rock-powder.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:0 (now-8 years)
- GMS-156 **2009 Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb** **+**
 Catoir-like aromas of opal basil and spearmint and boxwood; the texture is almost silky, and the tiny wicked lick of sweetness is just hypnotic; this is a big-city, white-tablecloth Muscat, recalling one of my absolute drooling favorites, Rolly-Gassmann's Moenchreben.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-10 years)
- GMS-150 **2008 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 The '08 floats on an updraft of mineral and fragrance, it's less herbal and aloe than the '07; it glides high and serene, at home in its skin and in its air. There's kiwi and blackberry and caraway, and wonderful length and liveliness. The '08 acidity makes it taste almost feinherb.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-18 years)
- GMS-149 **2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese** **++**
 This has come along beautifully, with the winsome structure and polish of '08; a classic fragrance of roses, incense and violets; graceful and slippery on the palate; no hint of finishing bitterness. *This* is how it's done.
 SOS: 2 (now-5 years)
- GMS-151 **2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Spätlese** **+++**
 Tell you what: you buy this one and the Catoir, and we'll do a tasting showing them side by side, and if there's anyone in the crowd who *disputes* my claim that white wine does NOT get better than this, I will buy you a car. I am saying this partly because I actually physically *could not* write a tasting note for this wine. I was overcome. The radiance was overwhelming. I'd try, you know, like "Aromas of—" WHAM! Engulfed. "The structure—" WHAM! Another wave. "It has—" WHAM! So I gave up, and floated in the diamond bliss.
 SOS: 2 (now-12 years)
- GMS-152H **2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** **++**
 It's not that this Auslese is a *lesser* wine; it is a sweeter wine, a riper wine, and its stunning implacable power is comprehensible, whereas the Spätlese shows more fever and buzz than you ever see in its echelon. A year from now I may well think I was silly hedging a plus here, but honestly, I wasn't sure you'd believe me if I assigned the third, tempting as it was....My elder readers might well recall Norman Mailer's essay on sex on LSD. They'll know what I mean when I describe Rieslaners like these as psychedelic eros. This wine puts on fuck-me shoes and dances on your brain.
 SOS: 3 (1-15 years)



Granite and Slate Rocks from Messer's Vineyards

theo minges

pfalz • flemlingen

Minges' have a flock of geese out in the yard, though what they have isn't a "yard" in the subdivision sense. The geese were seriously freaked out when I was there, and spent the whole time honking irritably. Theo explained they had laid their eggs two days ago, and then it snowed. It's not bad to be reminded nature also has her fits of pique.

Not surprisingly, all of Minges' 2009s were still on their *gross* lees. I think if the Buddhists are right about reincarnation, then Li Po has returned as Theo Minges, to make wine. His cellar is like some timeless sanctuary, where the wines meander their way to wherever it is they settle on going.

I visited on a Saturday, I think for the first time. Saturday's are crazed in the Pfalz, especially as soon as the first crocuses appear. I sat in my little corner of the living room/tasting room and watched a nonstop parade of private customers come through. They eavesdropped on me (spitting and drooling) and I eavesdropped on them (buying Trocken wines and refusing to even taste anything else) and a fine time was had by all.

Minges has become quite the new-ager in his old age. Where Gregor is a cerebral sort of guy, Minges is constantly talking about energy fields and similar arcana. And he often talks about transmitting *energy* into the glass; there is clearly a sort of vibrant force he's looking



Theo Minges

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gleisweiler Hölle, Flemlinger Vogelsprung**
- **Soil types: Limestone, heavy chalky loam, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 10% each of Grauer Burgunder and Dornfelder, 5% each of Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and St. Laurent, 20% other varieties**

for. He's come to the attention of Hans-Günter Schwarz, who has been, not exactly "consulting," but available as an interested friend. Hans-Günter always said there either was or wasn't an ignition of simpatico between him and his many apprentices, and I'm sure as he got to know Minges he felt *This is my kind of man*, and he attended to the estate as a kindly force himself.

I look at the number of wines I'm offering and I can hear the admonishing from my colleagues and from you. Hell, I rebuke myself. But in response I can only say, you weren't there. I chose nine out of about thirty wines, and each one was good, and what I chose was exceptional. Maybe I need a thicker skin. It's hard to sit across from a guy who's worked all year and is showing you the results, and say "This wine is truly excellent and I'm not gonna buy it because people say my portfolio is too large." On the other hand, maybe my skin is just right.

minges at a glance:

Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board. The best, best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE.

how the wines taste:

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

- GTM-127L **2009 Riesling Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter** +
 The best vintage of this in *years*, and I mean this is perfect, PERFECT everyday Riesling; juicy, stylish, ripe minerality, nothing arch or aloof. I promise you will not – can not – find better Riesling to drink all the time.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-6 years)
- GTM-128L **2009 Riesling, 1.0 Liter** +
 Boy does Theo soar back to the top of *this* category with his '09s. All ginger and comice pear, key-lime bouncing off of mirabelle; full of charm. Dude; do you *want* your fridge to hate you? Shove it in, man.
 SOS: 2 (now- 8 years)
- And psssst! It turns out there's a super dry Scheurebe also available in Liters, which he thought I wouldn't want (!) but which we can, and WILL, score in upcoming years.*
- GTM-131 **2009 “Buntsandstein” Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 This is probably even better than the '08, though these are *really* one-at-a-time wines, not remotely meant to flatter in big tastings; there's muscle and sinewy power here, but also a certain bitterness you need to forgive as a by-product of the utter lack of fat. Theo says it's a question of extreme immaturity – the wine's, not mine - and curiously, a colder sample was more brilliant and spicy, showing no bitterness and *more* fruit, exactly the opposite of what you'd expect.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 10-14)
- GTM-129 **2009 Muskateller Kabinett Trocken**
 A gut-punch of Muscat *luv*, blatant and catty and primordial; tarragon, celery and grapefruit, light and manic, a quivering little puppy of energy, and yet a curiously suave and almost sweet finish.
 SOS: 0 (now-5 years)
- GTM-130 **2009 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese Trocken**
 From a “calm, unspectacular vineyard that lives a Buddhist life, quiet old vines...we got it from a professor who used it for his house-wine, worked it by hand, till he got too old, and agreed to sell it to us.” And the result is this gorgeous wine – yes, gorgeous; angular, oblique, herbal yumaciousness, that will really make you wonder why they thought they needed to import Sauvignon Blanc....
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-12 years)
- GTM-132 **2009 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**
 Electric, buzzing neon Riesling; has cut and a jabbing precision. Exciting wine; talc, mint, cherry....
 SOS: 1 (4-13 years)
- GTM-110 **2007 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Spätlese** ++
 Candied-ginger and freesia, talc and meyer-lemon dominate the ultra-fine fragrance; this is one of Theo's best wines ever, with sheer waves of fruit leading to an earthy, chewy mid-palate that anchors it and won't let it adore its own beauty; the finish is a koan of searching complexity. Prototypically great Pfalz Riesling of a type that's becoming an endangered species. Damn right it's on the core-list!
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)

GTM-133 **2009 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 CORE-LIST WINE, and probably the best core-list wine in this offering; “Tastes more like a Nahe wine, yeah?” said Theo, and the noble fruit embedded in the mid-palate made his case for him; mirabelle, lemon-candy Auslese tones, sweet rhubarb, the wine is superb.
 SOS: 2 (7-20 years)

GTM-134 **2009 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese** **(+)**
 The sample is still almost milky, and a bit translucent, but based on the expressiveness of the dry wine...!
 SOS: 2 (now-9 years)

GTM-135 **2009 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Spätlese** **++**
 A rarity in '09, and a shatteringly good wine in every sense, Rieslaner at its most exotic and implacable; salty banana candy but with mentholated high notes you cut with a knife, and the wine is the knife.
 SOS: 2 (now-16 years)

GTM-125 **2007 “Froschkönig” Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 But three plusses are warranted for the beauty and audacity of this idea. “In 2007, as the white-wine grapes ripened healthy and golden in the Autumn sun, we felt as vintners it was almost a shame to separate them from their vines. Out of this fascination for the energy and harmony of nature, we developed the idea to make something new out of the oldest of old methods. We sought to deliver the power of nature into the bottle as undisturbed as possible.

“We picked Riesling from our best parcels and left these wines plenty of time to *find themselves*. We trusted them entirely. From harvest day for the next eighteen months the wines lay entirely undisturbed on their gross lees until the first day we tasted them. Our trust had been rewarded.

“The first wine was bottled in May 2009”

(TT: and there’s another one *still* on the lees, that’s a little sweeter, more Auslese-like....)

I think that if Nikolaihof made wine in the Pfalz, this is how it would taste. If you love that winery, as many of you do, just DON’T miss this astonishingly singular and beautiful Riesling.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-23 years)



kurt darting

pfalz • bad-dürkheim

Darting was the sixth estate I visited, and the first one to show me the keenly sleek wines I'd come to find were possible after all in 2009. That also makes three consecutive excellent vintages for them. This makes me very happy, considering the almost apocalyptic weather challenges they dealt with between 2000-2006.

We've gotten so used to thinking of Darting as a "value" agency it's good to be reminded what they can do when conditions suit them. These wines are jammed full of extract, such that they need less sweetness than usual, and they are laden with ultra-high-density flavor goobers. If you've thought they were too, I don't know, *commercial* for you, I urge you to approach these superb 2009s, which aren't at all like you think.

When things work this well it always seems so easy; why can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it.



Helmut Darting

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4% each Portugieser, Muskateller & Ortega, 3% each Chardonnay & Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties**

darting at a glance:

reductively brilliant wines.

The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made

how the wines taste:

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-polleny with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting's wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal.

GDR-185 2008 Pinot Noir

First offering. It turns out they make PN, Meunier and St. Laurent, quite the Pinot triptych. This one's a foxy little number. The fragrance mixes PN bell-pepper with a Crianza Rioja ripe sappiness, and the wine seems compact in light of its 14% alc.

- GDR-187 **2007 St. Laurent Trocken**
First offering, and impressive! Round, sumptuous, all its dark roasty depths, sous-bois and black truffle, a char that isn't bitter; indeed the overall aspect is sweetly caressing. A snugglesome wine for your next greasy big-ass steak.
- GDR-189L **2009 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 liter**
 Easy-going, chewy, with a fruit combining Fiji-apples and mirabelles; the aromas come on with air, and the wine cries out to be *sucked on down*.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)
- GDR-192 **2009 Dürkheimer Spielberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken**
 Honestly, this was just too interesting to leave behind; a distinctive Cru profile; 5-spice, lavender, grape-hyacinth, wisteria; the palate is "serious" and firm, Riesling at its most articulate but least flattering – it's the wine you'd thrust on someone who insists all Rieslings are fruity, whereupon you get to watch someone realize wine can be delicious even if it's *not* out to charm.
 SOS: 1 (now-6 years)
- GDR-191 **2009 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Kabinett Trocken** +
 Yay crazy perfect nose and a juicy sappy and completely addictive palate. Profoundly simple, insanely charming. Your world needs this!
 SOS: 0 (now-5 years)
- GDR-194 **2009 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
 A lovely, fluffy salty Riesling with ideal balance, *juicily* dry; heirloom-apple and white nectarine aromas become an internal fruit below a chalky texture, nubby and juicy at the same time. Whatever great "food-wine" might be, it's gotta be just like this.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-9 years)
- GDR-188L **2009 Portugieser Rosé, 1.0 Liter**
 A strawberry smoothie, dewy and limpid. More cool and discreet and plummy than the '08, a little riper, and even subtly salty. Do us both a favor and drink it straight from the bottle.
 SOS: 1 (now and for another year or two)
- GDR-190L **2009 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
 CORE-LIST WINE. We'll ship the tangy tasty '08 till it's finito, and then move into the round, spicy and exotic '09, more gingery and pineapply, clean as a whistle and not overly sweet.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)
- GDR-193 **2009 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**
 CORE-LIST WINE. Another shy '09, slow to reveal its usual malt and brown sugar aromas, but it comes on solid and generous; an entirely satisfying keep-you-company wine you don't have to pay all that geek attention to.
 SOS: 2 (3-12 years)
- GDR-186 **2009 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett** +
 Again the better land tells in every respect. Finer, more precise and focused, with a spicy dialogue of salts and stone fruits, or freesia and cox-orange pippins, cardamom and papaya and pink peppercorn. A swank Riesling.
 SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

- GDR-197 **2009 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewürztraminer Kabinett**
 Um, O.K., "Kabinett" with 102° Oechsle (well well *well* up into Auslese), so it sucks away the 43g.l. residual sugar and ends up feeling (and actually *being*) drier than many modern Alsace Gewürzes. This is correct and graceful in every sense, another fine citizen of an excellent vintage for this difficult variety.
 SOS: 2 (now-5 years)
- GDR-195 **2009 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**
 This makes me think of pink sunset clouds, exquisite, vaporous, taking up a lot of space but weighing almost not a thing. It's a potion really, a soufflé of vinosity, flowers dropping their petals to reveal a peppercorn where the blossom used to be.
 SOS: 2 (5-12 years)
- GDR-196 **2009 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**
 Sage and pepper, boss. Like a Riesling that wasn't de-clawed, as precise as acupuncture, but surrounded by this '09 sturdiness and gingery juice; a wicked-good Scheu that'll be even more feral in bottle.
 SOS: 2 (now-8 years)
- GDR-184H **2008 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner BA, 12/500ml** **++**
 F-bombs were flying about my brain. This is less winsome and more complex than the Riesling. It's difficult, in the best way! It wrecks fucking havoc on your palate with its salty vicious fire.
 SOS: 4 (10-26 years)



rh einhessen

rheinhessen wines



A few of you may recall my saying, some years ago, that the Pfalz was the region to watch; it was creative, hyper-oxygenated and full of vitality—and so it was. And the press took notice, and the Pfalz was and remains established as an attractive and important wine region.

But there's a settled-ness in the Pfalz now, and this was inevitable. Eventually the up-and-coming being finally ups-and-comes. And there's a clear and present danger the Pfalz will be suffocated by the ideologies of its movers and shakers, if this hasn't already happened. Am I overstating? Try and find a single Riesling Kabinett with residual sugar on any significant restaurant list in the region! You needn't bother: you can't do it. The fetish for dry wine has cast a pall over the land.

But all is not lost. In fact the spirit of inquiry still lives. The sense of community still lives. The heady feeling of youthful energy and idealism still lives. The sense of a region *awakening* still lives. Only one thing has changed—it has migrated a few miles northward, to the RHEINHESSEN.

At this very moment Rheinhessen is Germany's most interesting wine region. And this is entirely due to its *people*, because its terroirs remain unremarkable. Indeed one laments the cruel irony; if only these young lions had grown up in the *Rheingau*. But we take passion where we can find it, and we're finding it here.



And it isn't only happening along the Rheinfront by Nierstein. One year at Gysler I noticed a poster for a tasting featuring growers in a group called Message In A Bottle. Any group to which Alex Gysler belonged was ipso facto intriguing, and I asked Alex whether any of his colleagues might be interesting to me. You'll see the results of his answer a few pages hence. Perhaps these guys were inspired by the acclaim attaching to Wittmann and Keller, who are making stellar wines from vineyards *no one* heard of ten years ago.

Sure the Rheinhessen remains home to a great deal of dross (Liebfraumilch has to come from somewhere, I

guess) but there's no equivalent buzz in the *Rheingau*, where mediocre wine from great land remains the status quo. Indeed the Rheinhessen seems to invert that melancholy formula, making excellent wine from (ostensibly) nondescript land. You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

You need a really unassailable idealism to worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the

Rheinhessen is Germany's most interesting wine region.

flattish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may be possible that *great* wines just could be written into some of this land, if you're unwilling to assume they aren't, and willing to stake it all on your idealism. And, I'd have to add, willing to sell your wine for something less than it's worth. It helps that much of the vineyard work can be done by machine, but it helps even more that these young people no longer feel alone; they are part of an informal fraternity working for a common good.

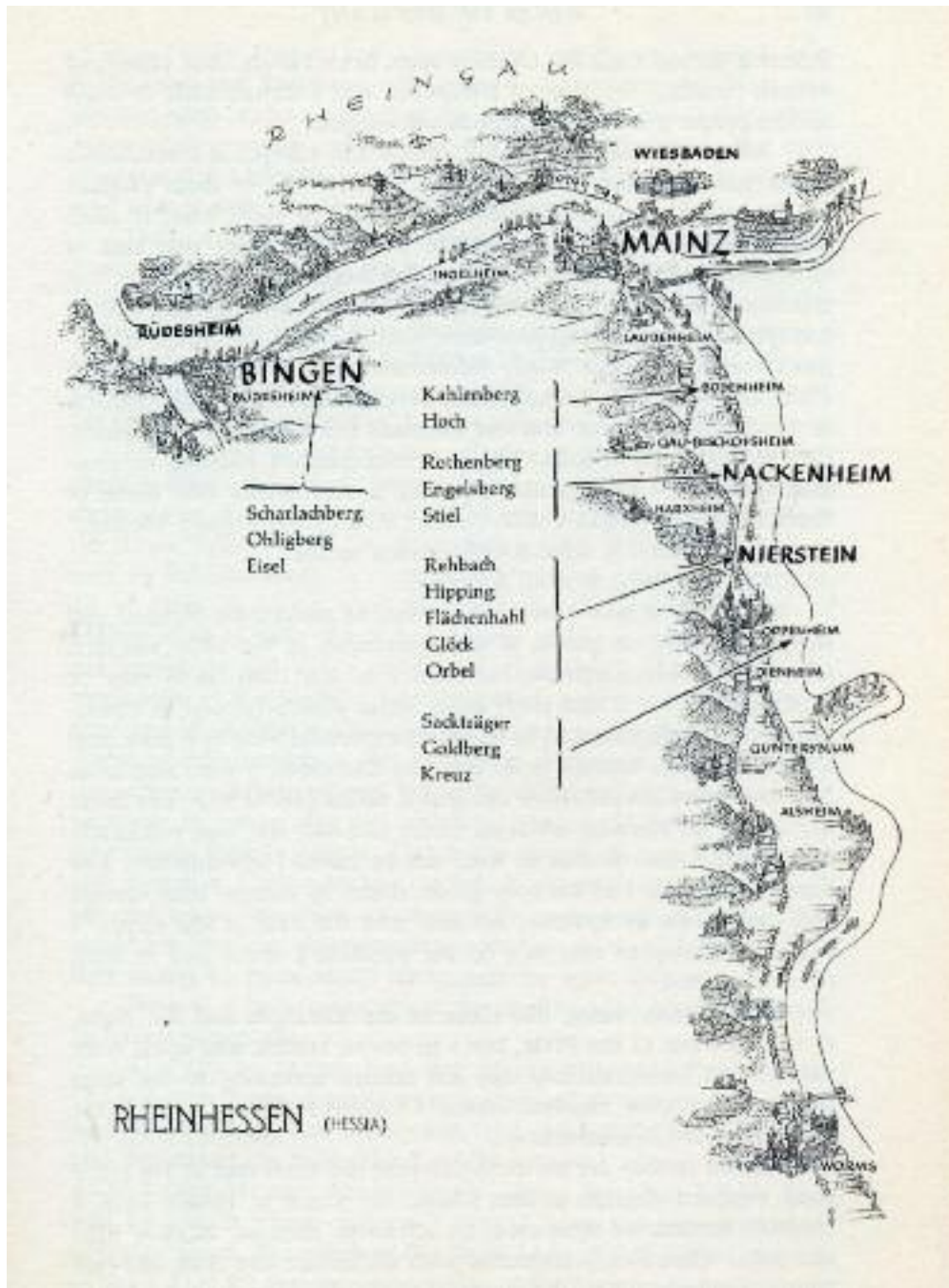
The results for us are entirely desirable: We can obtain beautiful wines for very gentle prices. For the time being! Because this too is changing as the region

grows more sophisticated. Its prices will always reflect the lower production costs of working in non-steep land, but the many growers who are converting (or have converted) to organics have increased those costs, and need us to pay for them. Will we? However much we may desire – or *say* we desire organic wine, it seems to be we desire even more that bargain prices never change. Please feel free to prove me wrong.

Another trend of concern is part of a larger impulse sweeping over Germany. I'm always looking for cool new growers, and this region is the place to look, and has been for the last several years. But almost every time I inspect a potential newbie's pricelist I see the same distressing phenomenon: overwhelmingly dry wines, punctuated by a few "dessert" wines mostly from non-

Riesling varieties. The meta-message is that Riesling is taken most seriously and thus must – *must* – be dry, but the other stuff can be sweet because we respect it less. Now and again there's a token Riesling Auslese, which doesn't help me at all.

I want some of the wines to be dry, because they taste good that way and people should have choices. I don't want all of them to be dry because they don't all taste good that way, and people have no choices. But choice and taste are anathema in the modern domestic German market. And our demand is too feeble to make much of a dent. So even the Rheinhessen, for so long a breath of fresh air, is suffocating itself with the dry dogma.



I purposely tasted these wines, Walter's whole vintage in its entirety, three weeks apart, at the beginning and almost at the end again. For whatever reason, my dear old friend Strub's wines have become remarkably, even stubbornly tardy in the last few years. Neither he nor I can really say why. But it makes things inconvenient.

Walter installed chilling jackets over his tanks about five years ago, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. "The era of *süßreserve* is over," he insists. Fair enough, it probably is, though I in turn insist it shouldn't be. Now we have about twenty-some-odd wines with different levels of

sweetness (or none at all) that have to be blended to create cuvees I can offer proudly. It is time consuming and painstaking work, and I don't mind doing it – I *like* doing it, up to a point – but it entails about 600% more time and effort than using *dosage* to fine-tune.

I made blends early on, and then Kevin Pike and I made them again on my second visit, because the wines had changed in the interim and my old blends weren't working. In case you read "blends" and think it isn't artisanal, I'm talking about blending among six tanks of potential Brückchen Kabinett, three of Paterberg Spätlese (that was the easy one) and finally creating the Soil to Soul blend which used any and all of these plus several of the dry wines from the red soils.

Perhaps this isn't clear. Today, in order to get the best possible "Brückchen Kabinett" I have to test-blend among seven parameters, ranging from 20g.l. rs to 70. It took us about nine or ten attempts to get it right. In some cases these involved intricately calibrated blends of as



many as four tanks. In contrast, if *dosage* had been available, I could have chosen my favorite tank and used dosage to focus the final sweetness. Total time elapsed; ten minutes instead of two hours. And the wine would have been better. As far as I can see, the world has gotten quite a bit worse as we – or they – pursue a deranged vision of "purity."

Which leads me to another dubious development. The Grand Cru

hillside for which Nierstein used to be (and still should be) famous – Hipping, Pettenthal, Brudersberg and parts

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal**
- **Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam & chalk**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 3% Grüner Veltliner, 2% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder**

of Rosenberg and Oelberg – is now off-limits for sweet wine. This is because, to be taken seriously in the home market, your top Crus have to be dry. The days when Walter could bottle (say) 200 cases of Hipping Kabinett, sell 130 to me and the other 70 at home...those days are gone. Which is, let me tell you, a dirty stinking bitch. If he makes it and I don't take it all, he's *stuck* with it.

The net effect of this is we don't get to see what this excellent vintner can do from his best vineyards except in the few instances when the dry wine works. Believe me, I myself am not exempt from our general failure to value those uniquely lovely wines-with-sweetness sufficiently to guarantee Walter a clientele for them. *I don't blame him* for his choice; he has to survive, and that involves selling his wine to German people of, let's charitably say, extremely narrow tastes.

So the offering is narrow. There were some potential winners among the dry wines, a fine Oelberg that was almost creamy-rich, and a few promising Orbels in a Feinherb idiom, but in each case it was too early to predict them in their final form. I might miss out on some lovely wines, but I'm loath to gamble with your loyalty by offering anything I'm not sure of.

I am very sure of these three '09s. We worked hard enough on them! The same work we did on the '08s

yielded excellent results, and the wines were well reviewed. I don't want you to see the small offering and think "Terry didn't find much he liked; these are the best of a bad lot." The truth is I could have done quite a bit more except for all the dry wines, and the general unreadiness of the range.

Walter is my oldest friend in Germany. I've known him for 33 years and we've done business for 25. His seriousness and conscience are second to none. He's one of the survivors of a really ruthless triage Nierstein has suffered over the last generation, when even the likes of Frieher Heyl couldn't stay afloat. Nierstein itself, its top vineyards, remain undervalued. I wish our market was better, and I wish theirs was smarter, because right now I don't think we're really seeing what this man can do./



Walter Strub

strub at a glance:

Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar—with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to “read” and understand.

how the wines taste:

They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. Walter's recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they're ripe and lush. They're very often reductive and spritzy, complex and long.

GST-146 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Trocken**

No you're not reading the wrong catalogue. Walter visited Austria some years ago (stimulated by meeting many of my producers when they all toured around the States together) and brought back GV clippings from Willi Bründlmayer. He claims there was a time Grüner Veltliner was traditional in Rheinhessen, after which it was supplanted by Silvaner. He's planted it in a warm parcel on limestony clay, and '08 is the sixth crop.

O.K., now it's starting to make sense, and you drink this wine as much more than a plausible curio. In fact it is *actively delicious* and a huge leap ahead of any previous vintage; juiciness and snap and true varietality; almost stern in the Urgestein direction, ore-like and almost a Chablis broth and hay note, with scintillating vitality. You can NOT stop at one glass!

SOS: 0 (now-6 years)

By the way, if you're wondering about the 2009, it was one of those wines I just couldn't get a bead on. Plus it had the “green” thing going. I won't know that wine until it's bottled. But there's no question about this yummy '08.

GST-152 **2009 Riesling SOIL TO SOUL**

CORE-LIST WINE. The '08 did just what I hoped it would; provide tasty drinking with a range of dishes (because it's not very sweet) and demonstrate excellent value. This was the wine we labored over most – because I want it to be so good that all kinds of people will like it. It has one-third each of an Orbel (so we get the red-soil savor), Paterberg and a Brückchen "Auslese" that was picked very late. The final wine is a little drier than Dragonstone – to which it compares fascinatingly.

It's the roundest and most overtly mineral of the 4 extant vintages; granular, salty, meaty, with embedded notes of sorrel and sandalwood, with a smoky length. With its new *low-low* price it's getting into the realm of insane values.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-13 years)

GST-153 **2009 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. After all the tongue-numbing work of blending it, we ended up with a fairly simple cuvée of three tanks. We waffled; one blend was really fennely (and Kevin likes fennel) but the other, we agreed, was more suave, with more polish and repose. Not that it lacks energy; it has a fine minerality and its roasted-corn typicity has less scallion than usual. Elegantly long finish.

SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GST-154 **2009 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +

CORE-LIST WINE. Wasn't that '08 wonderful? So where is it? As it happens it's a symptom of the times; Walter can't bottle a ton on spec because he has no one to sell a "sweet" wine to if we don't clean him out. So our wine is bottled to order, and there's no more 2008.

This '09 was relatively straightforward; it's vivacious and minty; it feels riper than the '08; salty and not-quite-plum, lime oil, wintergreen; a long shimmer on the minty finish.

SOS: 2 (5-18 years)

take me to your liter

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



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

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

But some of you have tried all these bright ideas and you tell me the wines still don't sell. I have one final bright idea. FORGET THEY'RE LITERS. Don't even tell anybody it's a bigger bottle. It's just a bottle of wine for twelve bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 33% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the *Super Deal* aisle at your local supermarket. Shampoo, 33% more **free**. Man we love that word *free*. Free wine!

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

- GMS-141L 2008 **Messmer Riesling , 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-154L 2009 **Minges Riesling Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-153L 2008 **Messmer Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-127L 2009 **Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-128L 2009 **Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-189L 2009 **Darting Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken , 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-188L 2009 **Darting Portugieser Rosé , 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-190L 2009 **Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett , 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-083L 2009 **Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-084L 2009 **Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter**
- GJS-091L 2009 **Schneider Riesling Kabinett , 1.0 Liter**
- GKF-148L 2008 **Kruger-Rumpf Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GSP-063L 2009 **Spreitzer Riesling Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter**
- GRH-059L 2008 **Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Riesling , 1.0 Liter**
- GRH-063L 2009 **Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Riesling , 1.0 Liter**
- GST-155L 2009 **Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

wagner-stempel

rheinhessen • siefersheim

NOW CERTIFIED ORGANIC

One evening over the past Winter we needed a dry Riesling for our dinner, and two options were in the fridge. One was an '05 Steiner Hund from Nikolaihof, and the other was Wagner-Stempel's 2007 Heerkretz GG. I said to Karen-Odessa "We can have one with gravitas or we can have a sexy one." *Hmmmmmm*, she hesitated. "Whatever one we don't drink tonight we can drink tomorrow night, so decide on the one you're in the mood for."

"Let's have the sexy one!" she said. I opened and poured. Took a sniff. *Oh man, we're in for it.* "Can you interrupt your prep for a minute?" I asked. She could. So we went out on our balcony – have you ever noticed how much more vividly wine tastes in fresh air, especially cold fresh air? "I think you might like this," I said.

We toasted and drank. I have to tell you, the first impact of this wine is like a really good acid rush. I mean, *phewww, there goes my world...!* My wife literally sank to her knees. We stood there not feeling the cold any more, just buzzed with the deranged incandescence of this Riesling. Dinner could wait. Dinner did wait.

When we'd finally come down enough to resume our lives, she went back to cooking and I went and looked at some figures, to see how much of this masterpiece I'd sold. I then got sad and angry. The wine is unquestionably expensive, and the last few years haven't been kind to pricy wines. But I think there's an overriding assumption that great dry Riesling isn't worth paying very much for. But Daniel Wagner's dry Heerkretz has been, for the last 3-4 vintages, one of the world's great dry white wines, easily the equal of anything from Alsace (including, explicitly, Clos Ste Hune), Austria or even Grand Cru Chablis.



Daniel Wagner

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Siefersheimer Höllberg and Heerkretz**
- **Soil types: Volcanic material (porphyry and melaphyre)**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Riesling, 25% Burgunder, 15% Silvaner, 10% Spätburgunder**

These aren't even "difficult" wines, you know. They aren't subtle. They have ferocious expressiveness, intensity and complexity. But, they're neither creamy nor oaky, and those seem to have become the "luxury" flavors for which we'll pay a premium. Are you happy with that state of affairs? I'm not!

Wagner-Stempel is now acknowledged as one of the Rheinhessen's big-3, with Wittmann and Keller. Often Keller is considered to be in his own class. I won't argue. They are three great, and differently great estates. Over here, Wagner-Stempel is rather the dark horse.

Daniel's wines are misaligned with the US market at the moment. First of course the crapwad Dollar. Then his dividing his assortment into either dry or sweet wines, without the in-between "Kabinett" style that gives y'all an entrée.

The estate is 13 hectares, in the westernmost district of Rheinhessen. Soils vary, but there's a significant vein of porphyry like the great soils of the Nahe (which is just a hop skip & jump over the hill), and there are times I think the world's greatest rieslings grow on volcanic soil in general and porphyry in particular. And young Mr. Wagner has baskets of various soils in his tasting room, and has all his riesling-comprising 50% of his vineyards-is planted on porphyry.

Wagner's first vintage was 1993. He arrived at the apex of the dry-wave and has only recently started making any rieslings with sweetness — I hope to provide encouragement in this direction!

The land is steeper here than in much of the Rheinhessen, and Wagner does 95% of his harvest by hand. Most musts are clarified by gravity, though some are fermented as-is. His basic-quality wines are made in stainless steel, but like many young vintners he's leaning toward more old oak for the top rieslings. Similarly he ferments with cultured yeasts for the basic wines and with natural yeasts for the best rieslings. Most wines sit on

the gross lees till February. All of this reveals a characteristic degree of thoughtfulness and flexibility for a young quality-minded vintner.

He's a self-described acid-freak, but also prizes minerality and "tannin in a subtle form," indicating this vintner prizes structure above all things. He has the luxury to do so, because the wines from his beloved Heerkretz (the steepest and highest-elevated site in Rheinhessen) and Höllberg show astonishing natural *fruit* in a stirring melange of Nahe complexity with Rheinhessen muscle.

wagner-stempel at a glance:

Dynamic young vintner making weighty, sensational Nahe-like porphyry-wines, already among the very best in Rheinhessen, and certain to be THE next superstar-estate in the region.

how the wines taste:

Generous, complex and polished, serene graceful strength and exotic haunting flavors. And Daniel swore he'd make me a Riesling Kabinett in 2010, so I'd have the entrée I need — plus I'm convinced the wine would be superb.

GWG-049 2009 Silvaner Trocken

I intended this to go on the hard-core list, because over the last 4-5 vintages I've been amazed by its salty focus and deftness. But the '09 ranges away from the herd; the vintage ripeness gives it a hay-like weediness instead of the sleek almost Riesling-like profile of '07 or '08. It's still excellent and well perfumed, but fuller-bodied and more overt. Still, *typical* Silvaner hardly improves on it!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

GWG-050 2009 Scheurebe Trocken

Here was another I'd earmarked for the hard-core list, but to my dismay the '09 Sauvignon Blanc — alas unavailable — was even better. I have indeed inveighed against Germany making Sauv-B trendy when they already have a superior wine of similar type of *their very own*, but the wine trumps the theory, as it must. In any case, to this dry Scheu; it tastes remarkably Sauvignon-like, gooseberried, redcurrant, you'd swear it was Sancerre (and a very good one); it's rounder and less finicky than the hyper-delimited '08, but it's very long and full of smokiness and mineral, with a carrot and ginger finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-6 years)

GWG-044 2008 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken "Vom Porphy"

++

GWG-051 2009 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken "Vom Porphy"

+

It's *riddled* with terroir, lavishly ripe and with a swollen minerality; it could pass for a Nigl Privat very easily. Another "sponti" (no cultured yeasts), a lash of saltiness and slight phenolic grip are overcome by this 1001-nights spiciness. If you *really* like dry Riesling, this is verging on stellar at a sane price.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-14 years)

I don't think I ever told you these are the young vines from the GGs. We'll move to this when the '08 sells out, not offer them parallel. Blatantly tangy porphyry aromas lead into apple and ginger, almost geleéd fruit — and a hint of grassiness — the palate is swaggering and cocky; it speaks in a fine loud voice and expects to have its way. It's a torrent of vinosity, a rushing stream of rock-dust, a little phenolic still; with time and bottling it may supersede the '08; there's more sheer volume, and this leaf-smoke notes could be haunting.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 9-13)

- GWG-046 **2008 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++
 GWG-052 **2009 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** +

These I will offer together, though Daniel isn't sure when he'll bottle the '09, and we might be waiting till early 2011.

The 08 was bottled extremely late or he wouldn't still have it. Höllberg is to Heerkretz as Loibenberg is to Steinertal; deeper, more exotic, more baritone, less soprano. It's masculine, solid, richly plummy, regal; wonderful dry Riesling, world-class. The 2008 is a masterpiece; creamy, with a luscious minerality (oh yes, mineral flavors can be luscious) and the fluffiest fruit over a grinning core of decomposing stones; light *battonage* flavors and endlessly expressive with – TA-DA!! – less than 13% alcohol.

The 2009 shows lots of yellow fruit, even a hint of buttery sautéed leeks; again a really swollen minerality and a billowing cloud of vinosity but without the physio-sweetness of the lighter '08. This is a hugely impressive though not especially seductive Riesling, very long; a manly-man's wine.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 10-15)

- GWG-045 **2008 Heerkretz Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++

I'm sorry I didn't give that third plus to the '07, and I'm thinking I'm gonna be sorry again. I tasted this very early in my trip but even then the fluting soprano brilliance, the rippling nervy snorting vigor – this wine is incredible. If Höllberg is lying in a splash of sun, Heerkretz is in the shade and can see its breath; it's almost not mere "Riesling" any more, like Hengst, or Bastei, it's ludicrously erogenous and spicy, with the apple and vetiver notes that mark young '08s. Expensive yes, but it's among the world's highest class dry white wines. Not just Rieslings. DRY. WHITE. WINES!

A year later from bottle, it shows an exquisite fragrance along lines of Knoll's best Ried Schütt or Dönnhoff's Kupfergrubes; quince, flowers, white nectarine, vanilla bean, all over a mid palate stretched so taut you think it will snap; herbal, with crystalline articulation.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 12-16 years)

- GWG-053 **2009 Heerkretz Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++(+)

One of the great dry Rieslings of the '09 vintage, a girls-gone-wild kind of wine. In all of its green, minty herbal way this is an orgasmic bacchanale, untamed, barely in control; extraterrestrial eucalyptus, groundswell of mineral, spicy length, sinewy power; huge potential.

- GWG-054 **2009 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Spätlese** ++

A thrilling Riesling, and less sweet than before; plums and puff-pastry and a hint of bacon; wonderful internal mid-palate perfume; it's not the sweetness per se, it's the preservation or creation of flavors the dry wine cannot seem to have, this ravishing amalgam of fruits and salts and flowers.

SOS: 2 (7-22 years)

- GWG-048 **2008 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese** ++

No hedging here: this RAWKS; lively, spicy, vigorous, as beaming as freesia. Classic and more *Spätlese* than the sometimes-outsized wines since vintage '05. And a very good value for stellar quality.

A year later this remains slim and exquisite, complex and exotic with all that ginger and incense and lemon blossom and cherry tobacco. Texturally and spiritually this is very close to Dönnhoff.

SOS: 2 (7-25 years)

weingut oekonomierat joh. geil i. erben rheinhausen • bechtheim

(hereafter referred to as, simply, "Weingut Geil")

"Can I really not persuade you to emigrate to the Rheingau?" I asked. "That land is crying out for a grower like you."

It's a common theme, the great land begging, the ordinary land full of champions. But Johannes Geil had a new thing to say. "You know, in the last few years I've let myself be proud of my land," he said. That's good to hear.

We seem to have gotten into the habit of coming here first. It works logistically and stylistically; Geil's wines are ideal wines with which to begin, they are so clean and candid. And Johannes himself is unpretentious and very easy to talk to, which I'm sure came as a relief to my new colleagues, who may have imagined all Germans would be either philosophy professors or Bruno the fashion guy. It wasn't long before they were off and running on Star Trek ephemera ("I'm still big in the battlestar galactica business," said Johannes.)

I was so delighted to have started with this estate four years ago, and y'all are buying lots of wine. Geil so perfectly exemplifies the new wave in Rheinhausen. Here's some of the reasons why.

"Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellarmaster is to preserve the available quality and refine it."

"Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don't have to drill through ten meters of rock for a little water. They deal with three meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!"

"No year is like another, and winemaking-by-recipe doesn't bring the best results. Naturally modern techniques such as cool fermentations are generally advisable. The question of whether less is more should be asked!"

"For me aroma is the most important factor; it's the



Johannes Geil-Bierschenk

first impression, and should be clear, varietally typical and express its origin."

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is

- **Vineyard area: 27 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bechtheimer Geyersberg, Bechtheimer Rosengarten**
- **Soil types: heavy chalky loam, carbonate-rich loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 35% other**

acceptable; we sometimes have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We're in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We'd prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be natural, but we do keep a little Süssreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO₂"

Bechtheim lies just where the hills begin, on the west flank of the Rhein plain. The key sites for Riesling are **Geyersberg**—the best one—made up of chalky loess and tertiary marl. The **Rosengarten** is above the village, on gravelly sand and clay, and the **Hasensprung** rolls off to the west on similar soil.



geil at a glance:

Honorable traditional Rheinhessen estate energized with the arrival of a young lion. Outstanding modern white wines (Riesling, Scheurebe, Rieslaner) at wonderfully reasonable prices. An emblem of the quixotic new generation in Rheinhessen.

how the wines taste:

Firm, delineated, clear, complex, healthy and radiant. I would teach a seminar with them, saying "This is the quality you can now expect from a solid young grower in Germany making wines in unexceptional conditions from good but not great land."

GGE-041 **2009 Muskateller Trocken**

Oh you know me and my dry Muscats. No self-control at all. This is a true (i.e., actually chaptalized) QbA, but tastes very ripe. It was a teensy crop, and it's one of those that's as much freak-flavored Riesling as jet-blast Muscat; juicy yet compact, tensile and true, with a Szechuan pepper finish .

SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

GGE-042 **2009 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

Terroir right away; a fervently smoky expressive Riesling, dough and stones; really clamps down on the palate, like a combo of Hengst and Brand; mid to high notes of puff-pastry or pie crust with rock-powder; charming leesy finish. It's likely to be more tensile after bottling.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 9-12)

GGE-040 **2009 Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE: Um, "Kabinett" with 98° Oechsle (and 40g.l. rs and 11% alc, so it doesn't read very sweet); classic sage and cassis aromas, even a little gooseberry and kirsch, yet with a molecular-cuisine mélange of pepper and berry.

SOS: 2 (now-6 years)

GGE-043 **2009 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**

Lovely aromas, mutsu-apple and mirabelles; the palate is refined yet juicy; benchmark-Riesling, without variation of region – just ur-riesling, apple-juicy and deep-fruited without "sweetness" as such.

SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GGE-044 **2009 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese**

More forceful now, not necessarily overtly sweeter or riper; a burning-leaf sort of smoky botrytis; temperamental and more "important," and the empty glass shows a smoky maltiness.

SOS: 2 (6-15 years)

GGE-045H **2009 Bechtheimer Hasensprung Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** +

This was supposed to be dry but it stopped fermenting at a still on-the-dry-side level; stunning varietal aromas, ginger, plantain, key-lime, all healthy fruit between 110°-120° Oechsle (it was the fruit pulled *out* from the BA); a tarragon note, even flinty; forceful and martial.

SOS: 2 (3-13 years)

gernot gysler

rheinhessen • weinheim

One of the loveliest things I've heard said about organics was something Alex Gysler didn't say, but would I'm sure endorse. "Working organically you get more answers from the vineyard. In conventional work you've already intervened prophylactically before you get a chance to ask the question." What a beautiful way to say it, and what a helpful reminder that organics are not only matters of environmental morality but also matters of beauty.

It is beautiful that Alex decided to convert when his first child was born. Every parent knows that feeling; you want to make the world perfect. Now his winery is almost entirely bio-dynamic (with Demeter certification) and what isn't soon will be. These are all the things you tell me are important to you.

Yet you're buying less of Gysler's wine. And I think I know why. The key wines have gone up in price by around 20% ex-cellars, not counting weak-Dollar increases, since 2006. Twenty percent doesn't seem like an awful lot to me. Gysler was always kind of ludicrously underpriced, and the conversion period is cash-draining.

With vintage 2009 Alex picked 70% by hand. That's unusual in Rheinhessen. It's more expensive also. He's also moved to about 70% natural yeast fermentations, and you tell me this is fraught with significance too. The wines are better than ever.

"Before I started working organic, I'd felt I'd gone as far as I could in winemaking," said Alex Gysler. "But



Alex Gysler & family

since I started organic I see the wines have more depth and more soul. How can you talk about terroir if you can't let the vineyard be? If you're forcing it all the time?" But Gysler's changes go deeper than that. "2008 was the first vintage we did absolutely no handling of the juice," he says. "We didn't rack, we didn't fine; the

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg**
- **Soil types: Reddish weathered soils with stone, loam and clay**
- **Grape Varieties: 30% Riesling, 30% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder, 10% Silvaner, 10% Huxelrebe, 8% Scheurebe**

wines sit on their primary lees until three days before we bottle them."

Gysler is how you can see the enormous changes in German wine in just the past ten years.

Alex assumed control of the estate abruptly due to the untimely death of his father Gernot. Father was a man of his times, an honorable and honest vintner who came of age in the post-war years, and was seduced by both technology and by all the new crossings which promised Auslese every year. "My father liked soft wines," said Alex, "And they were good of their type, but I want to change things."

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing now up to 70%. He's shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, entirely done away with dosage, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel. He's pulling out the new crossings and replanting with classic varieties (no mean feat with 12 hectares to manage).

Yet even as Alex turns the cellar completely around, in even deeper ways he is his father's son. You see it in his kindness and care and lack of artifice.

And needless to say, he's been discovered. None of the young can afford to work in obscurity; their only hope is to get on the Map fast. So they send their samples to all the necessary reviewers and they make all the necessary scenes.

gysler at a glance:

Big changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being!

how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now.

GGY-083L **2009 Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

CORE-LIST WINE: and I am very sure I'm the only dude offering a *Demeter-certified* Liter Silvaner at a price anywhere near this. The '09 is one of the ripe ones, in the sweet-hay direction like the '99. And like that vintage, I expect this will go chamomile and beeswax with 2-3 years bottle age. The wine is attractive and amenable, more discreet than the higher-*chi* Scheu coming up.

SOS: 1 (now-3 years)

GGY-084L **2009 Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Restrained sage-cassis aromas, more mirabelle than passion fruit, more meyer-lemon than grapefruit; salty, piquant, open and agreeable.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years)

GGY-087 **2009 Weinheimer Riesling Trocken "S"**

+

"S" denotes a *reserve* quality that's met stringent requirements from a Rheinhessen growers association. This one's a "sponti," (i.e., natural yeasts) with the inevitable carob aromas along with nutmeg and something of the salumeria, unusual and almost exotic; palate is juicy and rich with internal sweetness; I had a sense of *Piri* in a ripe vintage; in its way this is knockout dry Riesling, expressive and original, saturated with its smoky terroir.

SOS: 1 (now-2 years; again 9-13)

GGY-085 **2009 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE: Pretty cherry aromas as always, and here the '09 grassiness is an attractive nuance, a little key-lime to jab at the cherry-sweetness; acidity high but not freaky like the '08; a gentle mintiness into a good finish, with low notes of hay and straw.

SOS: 2 (3-12 years)

GGY-081H **2008 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe BA. 12/375ml**

Sweet Huxel tastes like white raisins and sweet straw; it has acidity and thus makes fine dessert-wines which are less celestial than Riesling, but also less expensive. This one's a curvaceous, honeyed, fine-grained and very rich BA.

SOS: 4 (12-30 years)

nahne

nahe wines



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

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

Things feel astir on the Nahe these days. Mr. Dönnhoff has brought acclaim to his region, and a number of excellent growers are in the slipstream of that attention; Schönleber, Hexamer, Schäfer-Fröhlich, not to mention Mr. Diel, who is in nobody's slipstream. A case could be made that no other German wine region has the Nahe's concentration of outstanding estates in a similarly

small area. The region is also especially lovely for wine pilgrims because it remains quiet and authentic. In contrast to the Pfalz, where every weekend from Easter to harvest is cram-a-lama with gawkers and slug-it-downers. At least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VIS-

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

ITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the *next* orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

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

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich

Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam** and **clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry**, **melaphyr**, **gneiss**, **rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honeysuckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatically filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after

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

having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other— we looked like a chain-

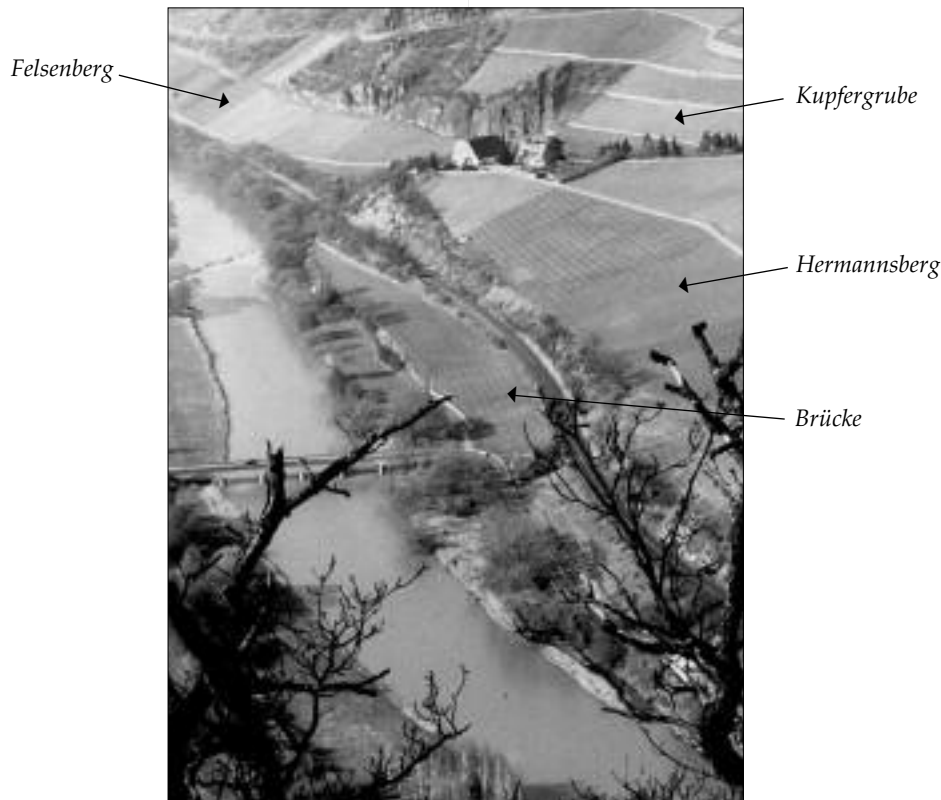
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you've just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity."

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

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil

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

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



View of vineyards from the Lemberg

forming miasmatic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being *shown* to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

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

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

dönnhoff

nahe • oberhausen

2009 was one of those vintages where Helmut Dönnhoff's wines are existentially *different* from everyone else's. Even from other vintners who made exquisite wines. This is why I get irked when people start in with the whole "Who's the best" nonsense, comparing Dönnhoff against Schönleber or Schaefer-Fröhlich, which is such a waste of time I wonder whether those people deserve to drink any of the wines. Of the three styles, I, me, this collection of protoplasm, memory, sense-apparatus, prefers Dönnhoff, and I can tell you why, and even if you don't agree at least the argument is interesting and entertaining.

Or can I tell you why? Because it's entirely definite as a matter of feeling and spiritual sense, but in language it can seem nebulous. Amongst Dönnhoff's 2009s there is a palpably effortless quality. Like a patient lover. No wasted gestures, all the time in the world, not about the chops, just about being lost and glad in the moment.

I had the impression of revelation. There were other wines even more, perhaps, brilliant, but those wines also had more glare. There were scintillating wines from other growers, but I felt them straining to ravish me, busy being amazing. Dönnhoff's wines just sat there, limpid, almost without affect, being only themselves, absolutely candidly, as if they were born knowing repose. You know how a person's face is somehow more honest, more itself when it isn't busy with gestures and expressions, when it's reading maybe, or when it's getting ready to fall asleep? You look at the face and you see the person behind the personality. Dönnhoff's 2009s are like that.



Helmut Dönnhoff

Dönnhoff's first glass (the dry estate Riesling) there was candor instead of brilliance, clarity instead of energy, or rather instead of any kind of assertive energy. It was rather a superreality charged with calm.

If I have a good fight with my wife, an important but loving one, I see myself and her struggling to make our points, clearly and cogently, and though it isn't always easy (it hardly ever is...) I appreciate our desire and how

His was the 16th visit I made. By then I had tasted many admirable and beautiful wines. Many of them were dauntingly intricate, and that's good; I appreciate a demanding wine. And among those '09s were many showing HD-flavors, giving a sense of enhanced energy and diligent brilliance. But when I put my nose in

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg & Kupfergrube, Norheimer Dellchen,**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

hard we try, and I see the trying as a noisy clamoring part of love. And sometimes we get to the far end of the quarrel and there's a peace there, a strange and stirring peace, that seems to come no other way. I think how far we go around to reach this simple place, where everything belongs and everything's all right. There lives a divine silence at the end of the urging and pushing. And that silence is the thing that lives in Dönnhoff's wines, and why I love them so mysteriously. They pour clean water over a thirsty soul.

It occurs to me we are all very lucky in Helmut Dönnhoff. Me of course 'cause I represent him, but more than that. First of all we have an unusually intelligent and articulate guy. Good so far. Next we have a guy who's uncommonly happy in his work. Then it happens that this smart, happy guy has some of the greatest vineyards in the world. And that for years the region in which he worked was so sufficiently obscure that he got to do his work in almost monastic purity. He was never in danger of becoming that most queasy and dreadful of creatures: a "wine celebrity." More correctly, when that danger first began to manifest, our hero was old enough to assimilate it and not allow it to disturb the basic integrity of his relationship to the work.

I mean, consider how often great vineyards are in indifferent hands. Practically the entire Rheingau! Think how often passionate vintners don't have sites to do them justice. Practically the entire Rheinhessen! With Dönnhoff we have not only an ideal confluence of desire

and a means of realizing it; we also have someone smart enough to recognize what he has.

I find myself in places we usually call spiritual, whatever that means. It's easy to distrust "spirituality" or the life-of-the-soul because the words are wielded with what sounds like a rebuke, that we should live in spirit or that our souls should live our lives for us. Yeah well poo on that.

Yet very often we make the opposite mistake. We insist on banishing soul from our lives. We actually make an effort to do so, a semi-conscious choice to be, what, matter of fact, grounded, "simple folk"? As if soul were a kind of spiritual elitism. I think it's extremely stupid to make either effort, to pull soul in or to shove it away. I think it's better to ignore it and go about your life, as long as you are alive, by which I mean attentive and available. Soul is pretty smart, and will show up when it's warranted, not necessarily in special experiences but in ordinary beautiful ones. Baseball season just started, and I can't wait to go to that first night-game. I'll buy my soul some chicken fingers. My soul likes the fried stuff.

Dönnhoff's wines speak to me in that place – call it "soul" or whatever more palatable name you choose – because they are ineluctably serene and tender. They are psalms of flavor. Even when they're intense they are serene and tender. They never seem to strive, to thrust or assert. In common with Nikolaihof's wines, they convey a lit-from-within-ness that stirs me deeply.

Maybe when you see someone or something that radiates the well-being expressed when one is at peace with oneself, it suggests the life that's available to you too. Then you feel hope, and longing. It can be better, kinder, more grateful, sweeter. A certain kind of beauty is an invitation to look on. Another kind of beauty is an invitation to sink in. Into the warm amniotic fluid of safety, and the beating heart nearby.

I want to know what this quiet place is, and I want to know how a wine can bring you there, and I want to know who lives there and why we hardly ever get to see it, and I want to know why we should need to see it at all. Because when we are there we seem to know, immediately, that this is something we cannot actually live without.

This quality of evanescence is one of the most interesting things that can happen to us. We are both out of our lives yet also more deeply immersed in them than ever. Everything seems true here, yet a condition for being inside this truth is being unable to articulate it. And why should that be?

It makes perfect sense the maker of these wines is himself the most grounded of gentlemen. Helmut Dönnhoff likes, as he puts it, to "speak through the flowers," to use metaphor and image. He is quicker even than I am to carry wine into that realm, yet he is also the most matter-of-fact person I think I know. I suppose he's heard his share of tasters wishing to impress him with all the stuff they "get" in his wines, but Helmut's had enough of it. It's 180 degrees different from tasting with Aubry (in Champagne), who only wants to add to his ongoing catalogue of associations. Helmut is rather the shaman who doesn't explicate but simply creates the environment for the thing to be known. What does

amuse him, and clearly exasperates his wife Gabi, is metaphor, especially anthropomorphizing.

Great wines also arise from people who are at home – or at one – with their landscape. Helmut's been hinting that new vineyards were going to enter the picture, and when he showed me two new wines from sites in Bad Kreuznach called Kahlenberg and Krötenpfuhl (two of the top-3 in this town), I asked if he was at all curious about any upstream sites. "Not at all," came his typically unambiguous answer. I asked why not. "I want the wines I make to contain a story, and the story I can offer them is that of me at home in my landscape. I feel myself a man of the middle-Nahe, that is, the area between Oberhausen and Kreuznach. You have to be at home not only in the vineyard but also in the landscape in which it's contained. Of course, I could make a perfectly nice wine from a "foreign" vineyard, but it would only be a product; it wouldn't contain a story."



Great wine is wine which is incandescent with reality, larger and more eternal than its mere ostensible self, and which speaks to that thing in each of us. But don't go looking for it. Be calm and prepared, and it will find you.

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast. The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn't bottle-ready after six months it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of all the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its real taste and structure," he says. "If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character."

This year there's a little news. Many of you know there's an imposing building on the hill opposite Dönnhoff's village of Oberhausen. It's the former Nahe State Domain, which fell into private hands some years ago, and was again sold in the past year or two. In its heyday from the 60s through the mid-80s, the estate made some of Germany's best Rieslings, from an astounding all-star lineup of vineyards.

"I reached out to my new neighbors, to get to know them and welcome them to the area," Helmut told me. "And we spoke at length and got on very well. It occurred to me that it was the State Domain that actually planted the Kupfergrube (n.b. this is correct; it was planted between the Wars by convict labor when the former director realized what a potentially great vineyard it would make.) but in the interim it had frittered away into divisions and small parcels owned by this person and that. Including, of course, my own, which I'd bought from Plettenberg."

"Meanwhile I'd started to wonder if I hadn't gone a little too far in obtaining vineyards," he continued. "Yeah," I said, "You never know the right amount of something until you actually have the right amount plus one." "Exactly!" Helmut said. "So we started talking about trading vineyards, so that my neighbor could enter the region with some of his legacy restored to him. Kupfergrube belongs to that estate."

"In a similar spirit, they were willing to trade me their vineyards in Hermannshöhle, to help complete my proprietorship over a site I'd help make famous. I got quite a bit more than I gave up, but they were content with the arrangement."

So, punters, there will be no more Dönnhoff Kupfergrube, and of course I'll miss it. But there will be not only more Hermannshöhle, there'll be better Hermannshöhle, because Helmut can be (even) more selective there. He's now the largest holder in The Great One. And this is very good news.

We won't discern it in vintage '09, as the crop reduction ended up providing roughly the usual quantity. Apropos the new vintage, I commented to Helmut how limp his wines seemed compared to others I'd tasted. "Well, some years you give it gas, some years you apply the brakes," he said. "The '09s had enough power; the question was how to steer it."

A second development is the overall moderation of sweetness in the wines. I suspect it has to do with Helmut's health episode last year. "Back to the roots," he

repeated. "Not so many different vineyards, less sweetness in the sweet wines; back to basics." It's telling to watch the pendulum swing. In the early 90s we wanted absolutely minimal rs, and some of the wines could have used more, as it turned out. Having learned that lesson, many of the wines of the late 90s and through much of this decade were quite a bit sweeter; never imbalanced, but balanced on a flowery frequency. It was the zeitgeist, to pimp up the Spätleses so they'd get high "scores," and though Helmut never fell prey to that queasy temptation, he did feel the wines needed "a certain sweetness" to guarantee their aging. And now, having had the tap-tap on the shoulder of mortality, it's back – or rather, forward towards the utmost pure honesty.

2009 is a supernally great Dönnhoff vintage. Time will tell how it compares to 2001, 2005 and 2007, but what's already clear is its place in the group of the very best. These were not only the greatest wines I tasted from 2009, they were – as I've tried miserably to explicate – of another order of being. You may recall Theo Minges is a practicing Buddhist, but neither Theo nor his wines are what anyone would call "calm." Helmut Dönnhoff is a lively fellow with a kinetic, sparking intelligence and wit, yet his wines are liquid nirvana. In my acquaintance, only the wines of Nikolaihof and (interestingly) Von Othegraven convey a similar limpid stillness. These wines are indeed revelatory, but what they reveal is the silent germ within each of us, to respond with love and wonder to the beauty of the world.

(Note: along with the wines listed below, there's a dry estate-Riesling, another dry Leistenberg called "Tonschiefer," and a dry Sb Felsenberg Riesling, all of which I admired. I'll omit them from the list 'proper' just to avoid clutter, but if you want them just ask.)

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

Some Notes On The Vineyards:

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

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

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

dönnhoff at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

Note: These Grosses Gewächs wines will be sold in a mixed case of six, two bottles of each.

- GDH-238 **2009 Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml**
 For an essentially studious wine this says a lot. (Dellchen is always both elusive and allusive; it isn't direct, and it needs to be probed.) It's a soft composition with thick chords; very long, woody like old leaves and tree bark after a warm rain; the palate is more silvery, sorely, with a touch of flint; calligraphic, studied, careful diction, as if it could be explained if you'd only listen close enough...but the answer is just beyond grasping, and remains a lovely riddle.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 12-18 years)
- GDH-238 **2009 Felsentürmchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml**
 Thicker now, more overt, more mint and stock. But the same candor, helpfulness, though with more activity than the cloister-still Dellchen.
 SOS: minus-1 (now-2 years; again 12-19 years)
- GDH-238 **2009 Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** **+(+)**
 The 2005 vintage remains the finest dry German Riesling I've tasted. This '09 is exotic, and classically specific to the vineyard; the first time the vintage-power is visible; this is fervidly expressive, even adamant, and will very likely be profound when it releases its young extract-bitterness. Already the length, depth and clarity are striking.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 11-18 years)
- GDH-228 **2009 Estate Riesling** **++**
 From the porphyry site Oberhäuser Felsenberg. What do you say any more? The wine is far too good for its echelon, and it represents a hidden value for stellar Riesling at a fraction of the price you'd expect. And boy, this '09 is perfect; a gorgeous smoky porphyry fragrance; a dynamic yet somehow gentle palate; a potion of a thousand different stones sprinkled with a julienne of tarragon and mint leaves, finished with oyster water. And a *perfect* food-wine, never very sweet, never very dry – just right.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (3-14 years)
- GDH-230 **2009 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett** **+**
 I think it's sensible to let this excellent site give us a Kabinett. There are sufficient Späts. This smells like a fireplace burning cherry wood, and one notices the lovely *moderate* residual sugar; plums and plum-blossom, salts and soft stones; a perfect old-school Kabinett paradigm, and an insanely perfect food wine.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-17 years)
- GDH-229 **2009 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett** **++**
 Again, and for the second straight year, this soars beyond its class; indeed it's impossible to imagine a more perfect Riesling on a moderate scale. It's as if it had one last chance to express its utter truth, everything it loved, raged over, believed in, belonged to, and it couldn't afford a single false word, not this time, only the simple truth as deeply as it could be mined. Sit, listen, here we go.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)

GDH-231 **2009 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese** +

These pretty wines have their affectionate partisans, I know. You'll note again the moderation of sweetness, which lets the almost licorice-y slate notes emerge; this is penetrating and digital, HD, more salty, less the flatterer; it shows things it has never shown before.

SOS: 2 (just barely!) (7-21 years)

GDH-232 **2009 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg "Felsentürmchen" Riesling Spätlese** +++

From the parcel of Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg just below the old (restored) castle-tower, this is the greatest-ever wine from this site; now begins the full wizardly mystery of Nahe Riesling. It clings insanely to the palate. The aromas are smoky hay, balsam, 5-spice, wintergreen; the palate spins you through an utterly amazing world – you need 3D glasses for your *tongue* for a wine like this. So still and calm, and every single thing to say.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

GDH-233 **2009 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** +++

GDH-233M **2009 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**

The single greatest wine I tasted from the '09 vintage.

The greatest young Brücke I can remember.

"These were the last grapes we picked," Helmut said. "It was just before the Eiswein. The crop was a bit more than half of 2008."

The word is *sublime*, and it's the only word that will do. If it were music it would be described as luminous yet delicate, as if the overtones were muted and only the pure note showed through. Juicy, salty, doughy, silvery; dynamically serene; these are entering a place beyond most human understanding, well beyond the wines that put on a show for you. This channels some kind of cellular earth-memory, a quiet force of crucial truth. And it never lets up.

I don't know (and hardly care) how it will "show" in tastings. Drink it when you have time and quiet to dream, and let it carry you.

SOS: 2 (8-26 years)

(Note: there exists a Dellchen Spätlese I agreed not to offer so that Helmut could have the whole amount to flexibly allocate elsewhere.) ("Elsewhere" does not mean gray-marketers, though it will surely entail them....)

GDH-234 **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** ++(+)

GDH-234M **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**

A liquid molten silver shower of spice; fresh, lunar, firm grip, minty; long, but it's a higher-up length, a breath-mint effect. If Brücke is a requiem, this is a wickedly comic operetta. If you prize explicitness you'll like this even more.

SOS: 2 (7-23 years)

GDH-235H **2009 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml** ++

GDH-235M **2009 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 6/1.5L**

This is a swelling crescendo of the Spät, that only shows its botrytis in final 10%. It's not a show-off pimped-up Auslese; it's an even deeper and lower-toned concentrate of the Spätlese, as these things are, at their best.

SOS: 2 (12-30 years)

GDH-236H **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml +++**
GDH-236M **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 6/1.5L**

This wine is leaping in moon-gravity, or off a trampoline; it can hardly fathom how giddy-high up it goes; here "Auslese" represents a concatenation of the apple and balsam in the Spät; it's longer and stronger, the inner perfume breathes a quick squirming honey from the center of the grape, that has to be summoned almost shamanically.

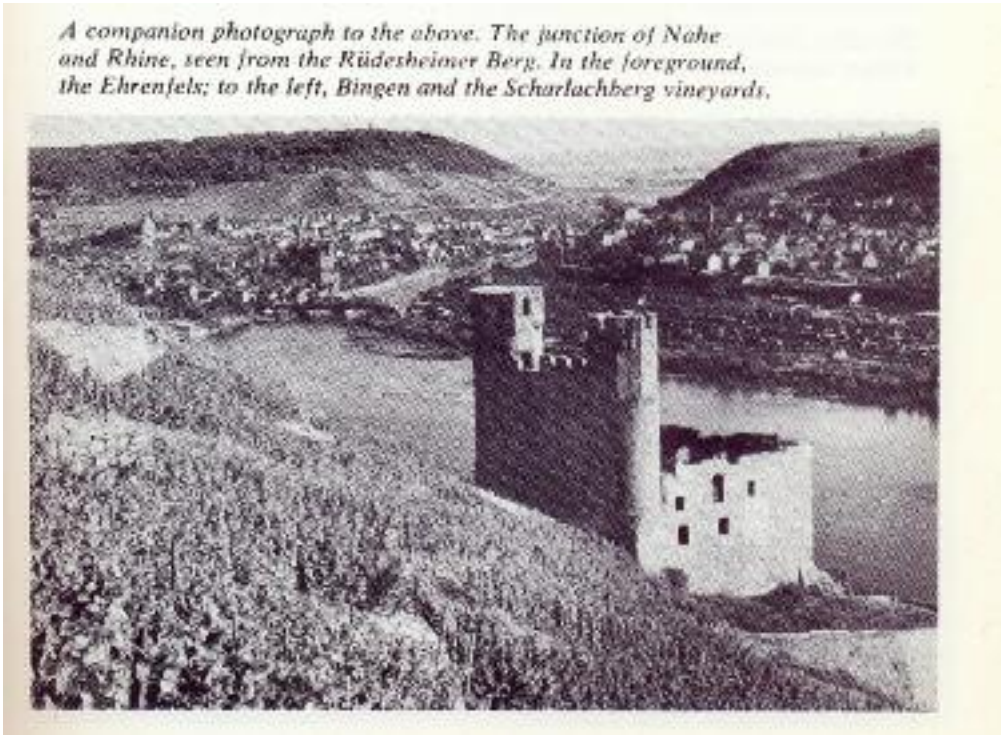
SOS: 3 (10-28 years)

GDH-237H **2009 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml (++)**

This is the lighter of two; the other was still fermenting. It's actually past my powers to describe, I will gladly admit. No matter, there isn't much, and you know you want it.

SOS: 4 (now-2 years; again 15-25)

(Note; there's also a Hermannshöhle BA in the wings. But what's really interesting is the release, finally, of a teensy amount of a TBA from the great 1989 vintage. Helmut always told me I'd get "some, eventually," and this year I suggested the time had come, on the 20th anniversary of the vintage. "It's damnable how he remembers!" Helmut said to his wife Gabi. I simply rubbed my hands and tried to look fiendish. I demurred from tasting it; there's fewer than 50 half-bottles to be had, and I'll queue up to buy my one or two. "Please inquire," as the phrase goes.)



jakob schneider

nahe • niederhausen

Schneiders are decidedly on the move. They were promoted to three (of a possible five) “stars” in the opinion-leading *Gault-Millau* guide. And Jakob’s in a group of young Nahe growers that also includes Georg Rumpf.

For all its famous vineyards, Niederhausen itself is strangely sleepy, the kind of town you can hear a kitchen alarm go off when your *neighbor’s* egg is finished boiling.

When Schneiders know we’re coming they put a little wreath on the door with a sign saying Welcome! They always have, and I think it’s sweet. But everything else is changing, and for the better. I remember first coming here, and tasting out of these really weensy little Pokal glasses, each of which held about a tablespoon of wine if it was filled to the brim, and you kept having to ask for re-pours and snorting like a bull just to get any smell from the wines. Today we taste from perfect Schott-Zwiesel “Riesling” tulips. And we can inhale like the cultured ladies and gentlemen we truly are, or imagine ourselves to be, fruitlessly in my own case. Young Jakob has fin-ished a *stage* at Knoll in the Wachau. Coincidence? Two estates cut from a similar cloth in their respective hommages to the old ways. But Schneider plans to modernize—there was no other direction in which to go—and he’s a fast-talkin full-of-beans young `un whose best wines are ahead of him.

It could seem incongruous for this (or any) portfolio to present the likes of Dönnhoff and Schneider cheek-by-jowl, one the arch-mage of polish and poetry, the other almost rustic by comparison.

And yet it was Dönnhoff himself who urged me to stay with Schneider when I considered dropping them a few years back. It is a superb, incomparable collection of vineyards, he said, and a feet-on-the-ground relationship to them. And with the influx of the new generation, there’s reason to expect fine things to happen. All of which is true — and persuasive. But there’s another layer of truth which isn’t easy to get at.

We all know the difference between bad wine and good, good wine and fine, fine wine and great. And we

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Klamm & Felsensteyer, Norheimer Dellchen & Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry , melaphyre; 52 different soil types**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Pinot varieties**

prize the splendors of great wine, as we should. Yet I am wary of the tendency to reach only for great wine. Anais Nin warned: “Beware of the esoteric pleasures, as they will blunt your appreciation of the normal ones.” And in the Pfalz there’s a proverb: “There is nothing better than that which is good,” and we all know the saying “The great is the enemy of the good,” and it has to do with outgrowing the insistence that only the best is good enough for moi.

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. We all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don’t care what parties I’m invited to. I do care, though, about Mama-Schneider throwing her arms around me when I arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

With the 2007 vintage the estate attained a new level of quality. Young Jakob is out to make a statement, and these were the very best wines I’d ever tasted from this house.

The ‘08s continue the upward trend. We changed our appointment date to buy some time for Dönnhoff to get out of the hospital, which meant we were three days earlier than Jakob had planned for. “I wanted to fix the blends and show you the final product,” he said. “But this way we can do it together, if you have the time and don’t mind.” Don’t *mind*? I delight in looking “back-stage” and working collegially with a vintner. It was the best of all possible outcomes.



schneider at a glance:

“Colorful” stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted.

They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great wine-y depth in the best of them.

how the wines taste:

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, more contemporary now.

But you’d be well advised not to even try isolating any single consistent denominator from a village with 52 different soil types (!) That said, it’s clear these hail from great land.

GJS-092 **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Trocken“Magnus”** +

If Schneider were a VDP estate this would be their “GG.” It was the pick of a not-entirely-convincing range of dry Rieslings, and it’s a massively interesting wine. First of all, it’s massive, a grumbling leviathan of turbulent vinosity, a roiling blast of flower and smoke and new leather, patriarchal and *alpha*, a near-great dry Riesling that will not meet you half-way—not even 10% of the way – though it yields its cherry and mint eventually. I tasted from an as-yet unfinned cask sample; it’s a *sponiti* (natural yeast) picked at 101° Oechsle, but still less than 13% alc. You can almost taste Jakob’s months in the Wachau.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 8-13 years)

GJS-091L **2009 Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter** +

You know, if you asked me “Show me a wine, Terry, one single wine that encapsulates why you do what you do,” I think I’d reach for this one.

You wouldn’t find it without *looking*, and you wouldn’t look if you merely followed the guides to the perceived-“best” estates. So, what collection of Grand and Premier Cru sites makes up *this year’s jug-wine*? *Kirschheck, Rosenberg, Klamm*, and a little bit of a plateau site called Pfaffenstein that sits atop the Klamm. This is spicier and more flowery than recent vintages (which have been fruitier) – iris, hyacinth, lilac, mint – less peachy and honey-ham than before; moderate-seeming rs; a racy, polished, complex and tangy finish. *It is absurd, ridiculous value!!!*

SOS: 2 (now-9years)

GJS-093 **2009 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett** +

Please notice the new low-low price; it’s a 1-time experiment to get this wine the luv it deserves. Again it seems drier than it has been, which may just be the body and muscle of ’09; there’s the usual roasted corn and maple smoke but shot through with limey highlights, a “green” sweetness; it’s somehow both sinewy and lush, thick and racy, firm and juicy. Like me, babes!

SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

GJS-094 **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** ++

Here ensued a fascinating and telling conversation. The wine is perfect, and I said as much to Jakob. "Really?" he asked, "You don't think it needs something more?" "Like what?" I said. "Oh I was thinking I'd put some Eiswein or Auslese into it..." "Really? Why? The wine is ideal as it is."

"Maybe...but if I make it sweeter and more intense than it scores near the top in its category, and I want this to establish my reputation," he continued.

"I appreciate that," I said. "But as far as I'm concerned you'd only establish a reputation for needlessly pimped-up Spätlese. Whereas the wine you *have* is impressive and useful," I insisted. "At least sell this wine to me."

It was rare to see the whole seamy drama enacted so openly. I don't remotely blame Jakob. He's young, ambitious, and savvy; he *knows* just how he has to wiggle to get the attention to build his Name. But I want no part of it.

So, to the *honest* and superb wine in the glass! It's racy and vigorous, insanely long and ideally balanced, as precise as a paper-cut; it's the classiest wine ever from this estate, less meaty, less fatty than they sometimes were; more impeccable, with gorgeous steely cut. Bravo!

And I am sure the wine *au naturel* will "score" 87 points or some other damn-with-faint-praise in the German press, whereas the wine Jakob seeks to contrive will "score" higher. It will be less honest, and he'll have squandered both its integrity and usefulness to show he can jump through the necessary hoops like a trained poodle. *HE DESERVES BETTER*. And we should be ashamed we support such a venal system, that would tempt a talented young man to corrupt his wines.

SOS: 2 (6-21 years)

GJS-095H **2009 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++

Yes it's expensive, but since Dönnhoff doesn't make his Eiswein from the vineyard, this is our only chance to score a quintessence of the Great One. It was still fermenting when I tasted it, but it's potentially stunning.

weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

Hexamer is another study in success for a modern on-the-move young vintner in Germany. He's growing his property because good vineyards are available cheaply, and the deals are hard to resist. His dry wines are (mostly) too dry and his sweet wines are (sometimes) sweeter than they need to be – because these are the shapes the German market insists they take. What is salient about Harald Hexamer's winery is imperiled as he fits himself into the mainstream. And those things are, first, his identity as the keeper of the Rheingrafenberg vineyard, an outstanding site of which he is by far the biggest owner; second, his rare ability to make consistently gorgeous dessert-wines – few if any have the gift of keeping them sleek and racy even when they're massively concentrated. And finally, the diamond-like cut and clarity of his wines overall, as if he refined them beyond refinement.

But that's O.K. Sometimes you have to let things get far enough out-of-control that you're forced to step back and ask "Who am I really? What do I want to be?" I don't think Harald is there yet, but there's some fraying at the edges of coherence.

Which made it all the more heartening to see the deftness of his '09s, as fine a group of wines as he's ever made, and in the best possible sense, dialed down a little. Starting with his 2008s he began to see his wines in a rather different light, and this trend seems to continue. Hexamer's wines are balanced in the ultraviolet spectrum; they're steely, almost antiseptically clean and transparent, acid-driven, and because of that they've tended to be equally high-toned as regards RS. A balance of two extremes is still a balance, but I find Harald's wines are getting deeper and moderating their extremes into something more drinkable, and even, dare I say, more wholesome.

Or else I'm full of shit; who knows. I liked the fact the new wines were less marked by their attack and more by their inside-flavors, so I probe for the hidden meaning, I'm such an earnest goofball.

Curiously the milder Schlossböckelheimer, with its riper acidity, showed more of the '09 grassies than the firmer Meddersheimer. Maybe the ladybugs again? The



Harald and Petra Hexamer

dry wines were better overall than I'd ever seen them, and one Riesling really sang out. But before that, there's a total surprise I could never have anticipated.

He's bought a parcel in the Grand Cru (and

- **Vineyard area: 17.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weathered sandstone with high percentages of quartzite, conglomerates and porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 62% Riesling, 12% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 11% Spätburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 12% others**

painfully named) Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen from a Kreuznach estate selling off vineyards. The site is virtually unknown except to Nahe-fiends; it's small (6 hectares altogether) and the soil is sandy-stony loam over sandstone and conglomerates based on rhyolite.

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

less steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart." Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way.



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

hexamer at a glance:

wines of terroir.

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

how the wines taste:

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

- GHX-062**2009 Sauvignon Blanc**+

His first vintage. I was quite ready to despise it on principle. I found I couldn't, because I adored it too much. The wine is every bit as refined and graceful as SB can be. Grown on loamy sandstone; more lime and wintergreen than grassiness or bell-peppery vegetality; super-sleek and articulate, with lovely spice. I doubt there's classier SB available for this money from anywhere. Prove me wrong if you can!
SOMMELER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now- 4 years)
- GHX-061**2009 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Trocken "Non Plus Ultra"**+

Former vintages have been called "XXL," which suggests the wine is fat and brutish. Harald isn't sure about the above name, which sounds maybe a bit high-and-mighty. On the other hand, the *wine* is stunning; the last Rieslings picked (at almost 100° Oechsle); wonderfully cox-orange and stoniness mix in the fragrance; truly elegant fruit, a wine of noble refinement and not just power or crude alcohol; it has an almost Kupfergrube-like coolness and high-toned complexity; it's a *happy* wine, a high-water mark for dry wine from this fella!
SOS: 1 (now-2 years; again 9-13)
- GHX-060**2009 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit"**

CORE-LIST WINE; less flowery and pointed than the '08; a heavier (but not heavy) fruit and a less acid-pointed body, bur with air it becomes passionately fragrant, like a room full of yellow roses and a big bowl of blatantly fresh apples; long and granular palate, almost like pears and Parmesan with a smidge of orange-blossom honey.
SOS: 2 (now-12 years)
- GHX-063**2009 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett**++

I don't remember a better one; it's less arch and taut than usual, more serene somehow; euphorically lilac-y fragrance; wonderfully balanced moderate rs; focused but not pointed; just pure melody and silky texture; sings like a bird in the sun, it can't help but sing.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-15 years)

- GHX-064 **2009 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese*** +
 This year I went for the silky ones. And this is slinky and seductively angular, with superfine wintergreen and mirabelles; a bit drier than '07-'08, with a lot of payaya and talc on the finish.
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GHX-065 **2009 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese**** +
 Only a little sweeter but a lot creamier and a lot more salty; it's a crème-brulee, even to the slight bitter snap of char; more impressive and more robust *chi* than the 1-star – most drinkers will find it more impressive – but I wonder if it's quite as deft.
 SOS: 3 (8-22 years)
- GHX-066 **2009 Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen Riesling Spätlese**** +
 Botrytis now; this is actually a delicate Auslese, salty and with that porphyry 5-spice note, but it's both kaleidoscopically filigree *and* deconstructed and also silky and almost caressing; really lights up every cell on the palate; peach, key-lime, salt, maple syrup, applewood smoke.
 SOS: 3 (7-21 years)



kruger-rumpf

nahe • münster sarmsheim

Something's sure up at this winery. Maybe it's because his children are growing up and helping out (kids have a way of giving their dads a kick in the pants, don't they . . .), and maybe it's just simple ambitiousness, but there's no doubt Stefan Rumpf has taken a significant step forward in each of the last three vintages. I'm just guessing here, but I intuit a subtle kind of competition between Stefan and son Georg. Dad has an audience now, and he wants to show off a little, to earn the boy's respect. I saw them spur each other on while we were tasting, and felt the frisky new energy.

It's also worth pointing out the wines are improving in matters of texture, of polish and gloss and a finer mouthfeel. Fruit was always there, but the *tones* have improved. In fact everything is improved yet the prices have stayed the same. Hmmm. . . .

It used to be quite the decathlon tasting the young vintage here, but Stefan showed me his '09s in nearly-finished form, and the vintage was far less bracing and phenolic than any of its predecessors. We were done remarkably fast (my rough notes from the cask-samples used to look like an engineer's diagram for a cyclotron) and we used much less dosage.

I do think a small tribute is in order for his geniality.



Stefan & Georg Rumpf

Many producers, especially young studs in their twenties, can be quite the divas. "I make the wines I

like and he takes them or leaves them" is a typical sentiment. And it's reasonable enough on its face; it only locks a door whereby collegial interaction might benefit grower and buyer alike. But hey, I understand, having been an insufferable twit in my twenties, and I didn't have to deal with boffo reviews before I was old enough to handle them grace-

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer, Pittersberg & Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch, Binger Scharlachberg (Rheinhessen)**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, quartzite, loess**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe; the rest mostly Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder & Spätburgunder**

fully. All of which is to say that Stefan Rumpf's collegiality is becoming rare, which makes its underlying gesture of respect and friendliness even more precious. I am also delighted to see their willingness to still use *dosage* as a means of fine-tuning, which is part of a larger willingness to eschew dogma and surf all possible options according to the needs of the wine. I'd like to hire a plane and fly a banner over the Mainzer Weinbörse—**DOSAGE IS NOT EVIL, BUT DOGMA IS**. A good dosage from top-site Riesling, used to fine-tune just before bottling, nearly always works better—which is to say *tastes* better—than throwing in a BA or other sweet wine, which often muddies the waters. This is out of tune with the *Zeitgeist* but the *zeitgeist* is full of shit. Buncha smug young twits with their holier-than-thou posturing and their purity tests. . . .

A PROFILE OF THE SITES:

Dautenpflänzer is one the leading Grand Crus of the lower Nahe, with a typical mélange of soil types within its borders. Rumpf claims some of it is slatey and some of it is “sandy loam,” which agrees more with the standard references. It is in any case singular and immediately significant, giving a sometimes damnably complex set of aromas and flavors including coconut, violet, soursop, leaf-smoke – it is a very long list even if you’re sober. In any case it belongs with the vamping exotics of the Nahe.

Pittersberg is the other of the top Crus, and this site is more classic and less mischievous than its neighbor. Stefan refers only to “slate” and very often the wine smells just like Mosel wine – in fact just like Graacher Himmelreich. “In parts dusty loam over slate,” according to the textbook. Pittersberg is related to the Rüdeshheimer Berg Schlossberg, which is just over the Rhine less than two miles north, though without the Taunus-quartzite of the Rheingau site. Diel’s great Pittermännchen is also on slate; I’m sure the similar names are not coincidence. Pittersberg gives firm, nutty Rieslings.

Rheinberg is the steepest of the three, on weathered quartzite and dusty loam – “similar to Rüdeshheimer Berg Roseneck,” according to Stefan. It’s flavors are indeed virtually identical, though the Nahe wine has a grace and curvaciousness the more stoic Rheingauer lacks. Sweet apples and yellow fruits are paramount here, though the minerally terroir notes give a firm foundation. These are wines of true charm, not merely winning ways. I’d categorize it as a 1er Cru.

Scharlachberg is a Grand Cru, but in fact a Rheinhessen Grand Cru, as it sits across the (mighty!) Nahe from Münster-Sarmsheim; it’s a serious prow of hillside acting as a kind of warm-up to the Rüdeshheimer Berg just to its north over the Rhine – though on a radically different soil; a mélange of rotliegend and various volcanic derivatives (e.g., porphyry). The wines are, or can be, superb, seeming to mingle the succulence of Hipping or Pettenthal with the exotics of Felsenberg or Dautenpflänzer.

kruger-rumpf at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

They’re as sturdy as before but there’s more flesh on the bones. There’s more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you’ll see the truth behind the cliché.

THE DRY STUFF

GKF-149 **2009 “Schiefer” Riesling Trocken**

Actually Pittersberg, a noble name, which can’t be used for some asshole VDP reason, or so I suppose. It’s a very attractive dry slatey Riesling; nutty, apple-skin, lime, nothing too demanding; it just slips on down.
SOS: 0 (now-2 years)

GKF-150 **2009 Dautenpflänzer Riesling GG, 6/750ml**

You need a high tolerance for tartness. The aromas are fine, almost Scheu-like, and the texture verges on the silky. Lots of herbal and lime notes with gingery high tones and minty footnote. I think this is a successful rendition of the style they crave in Germany, an “acceptable” wine for any taste, but a desirable wine for a certain evidently isolated clientele whose desires I, for one, cannot fathom. This wine is *good*, and it would have been *great* with more rs – not a lot, just more.
SOS: minus-2 (now-2 years; again 8-12)

WINES WITH MORE RS – NOT A LOT, JUST MORE:

GKF-148L **2009 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Actually from Rheinberg. Mirabelles and jonagold apples and hyacinth; juicy and dry; lush in the middle and snappy on the finish; a tasty wake-you-up glass of wine.
SOS: 1 (now-4 years)

- GKF-151 **2009 “Schiefer” Riesling Feinherb**
 Again Pittersberg, a different lot than the Trocken. Viscous, almost walnut-oil-like; this is *really* pretty, long, granular and fibrous but with enveloping fruit, up to the firmly dry finish; air brings an iris fragrance; it’s by far the most adaptable wine of the range thus far.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)

FRUCTOSA-NON-GRATA; ARGGGHHH, THE SWEET STUFF:

- GKF-147 **2009 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +
 CORE-LIST WINE, the essence of true German Riesling. Saw some large casks and is all the better for it; this old-school melding of apple and subtle woody mealiness has the soul of an apple-cellar; it makes for a kind of nostalgia and tenderness, though the wine itself is frisking and stretching; a tic drier than earlier years, less girlish. But this lady knows things the girl has never even dreamed....
 SOS: 2 (5-13 years)
- GKF-153 **2009 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** +
 CORE-LIST WINE, a Grand Cru exotic at a sensible price. I took the lot without botrytis, which was marginally less exotic but a lot more articulate; highest of high-tones, mint and ginger, playful and kinetic, even a hint of slate in the mix.
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GKF-154 **2009 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese** ++
 Over 100° Oechsle – “Right now it’s the monster,” says Georg. A big flourishing Spät, patterned after Spreitzer’s “303,” and this is outsized glam-Riesling shimmering lustily and laden with the *whew!* factor, yet it ends dry and never stops developing; the finish is a poem of many stanzas.
 SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GKF-155 **2009 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese** ++
 At this point this was only the second Auslese (other than Catoir) I let myself select. I told myself I had to be overwhelmed. And wow, this is sensational, a monument of Nahe-Riesling; 56-year-old vines, 122° Oechsle with 25% botrytis, and the reputation of ‘09 will rest on wines like this, a swollen mass of apples and crushed rocks and walnut-extract; infinitely rich but not blatantly sweet; salty, like a *tarte flambée* with slices of apple.
 SOS: 3 (9-25 years)
- GKF-152 **2009 Scheurebe Spätlese** +
 These have been changing the last couple vintages, less elderflower and more cassia and sage; this one’s really spicy and charred, with a tangy sweetness, bacon and currant and cloves. God I do love Scheu.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (now-12 years)
- GKF-156 **1999 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** +
 We drank this with dinner and I don’t write tasting notes at the dinner table (as I require both hands to cram the food into my gaping maw), but there are 14 cases of a lovely ready-to-drink Riesling, and I know at least twenty of you who always say you want older wines – so!

schlossgut diel

nahe • burg layen

Have I got timing or have I got timing! We started representing Schlossgut Diel right on the eve of the Dollar spiraling down the toilet, and then we segued into the worst economy in seventy five years. Not the most auspicious of conditions for a blue-chip estate with blue-chip prices. Mind you, we're not talking about Weil or Egon Müller prices, but still; however superb these wines are – and they are – there's only so much superb expensive German Riesling being bought at all.

Tasting at Diel reminds me of tasting at Bründlmayer, because both estates do a remarkable range of things remarkably well. You grow certain of a strong guiding intelligence and craftsmanship. These are smart wines, through and through.

Caroline Diel is settling in. She showed me the wines with Dad at her side, and seemed a little miffed when I was distracted by a side-chat with Armin about VDP politics. Caroline also told me, with a not-quite-concealed sigh, that she hadn't done much traveling of late. But even more she positively lit up talking about the vineyards, which she's "getting to know" (and she has the schmutzy vineyard boots on her feet to prove it), and it's always fun to see a woman as charismatic and lovely as Caroline come clomping into the tasting room in her mud-caked footwear. I think her boots should attain



Caroline & Armin Diel

iconic status, like Marc Veyrat's hat. That's what I think.

She's a very rare and special person; intelligent, disarmingly charming and friendly, the

- **Vineyard Area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top Sites: Dorsheimer Goldloch, Pittermännchen and Burgberg**
- **Soil Types: loam and gravel over rocky subsoil, quartzite and slate**
- **Grape Varieties: 65% Riesling, 20% Grauburgunder, 10% Spätburgunder, 5% Weissburgunder**

kind of person who could have done anything, anywhere, and lived a life of "glamour." She chose instead to continue the winery. That takes some heart, baby! Caroline is my hero, and no wonder Armin is humming.

The Rieslings hail most importantly from a trio of contiguous Grand Crus: Goldloch on thin loam and gravel over a rocky subsoil, Burgberg on quartzite, and Pittermännchen on Hunsrück slate. "The age of the vines are similar in the three sites, the microclimates are similar in the three sites, only a few meters separate them from one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir," says Armin.

schlossgut diel at a glance:

Elite blue-chip estate on the lower Nahe, producing scintillating terroir-driven rieslings ranging from tingly slatey to baroque. Attentive viticulture and intelligent craftsmanship in the cellar make this one of Germany's leading estates.

how the wines taste:

The temptation is to compare them to Dönnhoff, he-to-whom-all-riesling-producers-aspirer and all that, but I think Diel's wines are too different to tolerate direct comparison. These are more studiously brilliant, more explicit; they're no less pure, but it's another kind of purity. I'm tempted to wonder whether Diel's are the Nahe wines Hans-Günter Schwarz might have made had he not made Pfalz wines.

I published a piece in WORLD OF FINE WINE on the subject of evanescence and the unsayable, and it deals in part with a comparison of Diel's and Dönnhoff's wines, not to determine which is "better" but rather to try and explicate their disparate existential lives. In short, Diel's wines "add up" and Dönnhoff's do not. In the five vintages I have tasted in their entirety at Diel, I've never seen a wine askew. Please don't misunderstand; I am not saying the wines are too perfect to have soul. They have plenty of soul.

But it's a kind of soul that has its shirt tucked-in, and the shoes match the purse. They are visible and depictable. With Dönnhoff there is always something para-sensual that resists compressing into language. Not everyone loves this quality, just as many people prefer baroque and classical-period music to that of the impressionists, with their greater tonal ambiguity. I'm fascinated by the differences between these two types of wine, and relieved I don't have to choose only one.

DRY WINES OF THREE COLORS AND TWO GRAPES

- GSD-105 **2009 Rosé de Diel, 6/750ml**
 In good years this takes its place among the finest Rosés in the world. All Pinot Noir, this '09 is about as pretty and as substantive as the *genre* "rosé" ever gets; exceptional perfume, not as thick as the '06 but less evanescent than either '07 or '08; strawberries and peonies; it's rich on the palate but dissolves like a meringue on the finish. There's a silvery almost mineral nuance to this delightful, sophisticated wine.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years)
- GSD-093 **2008 Pinot Noir "Caroline," 6/750ml**
 Again, a smart and elegant Pinot Noir; in '08 it's cooler and more compact, with more blueberry and less sandalwoody sweetness than in riper years. Violet and grape-hyacinth; the finish spreads out in a sweet, somewhat oaky wash; this is graceful as always, and long considering its basic lightness. It reminds me of old Saintsbury PNs, the same adult restraint.
- GSD-094 **2009 "Nahestein" Riesling Trocken, 6/750ml**
 Sleek, with lots of "secret" sweetness (the stealthy sense of rs conveyed by physiological ripeness); mirabelles, silky texture (this feature is marked throughout Diel's '09s); an exceptionally refined apple profile and lots of precise charm and length; ultra-fine in its class.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-2 years; again 7-10)
- GSD-095 **2008 Eierfels Riesling Trocken, 6/750ml** +
 From the high slopes above the Goldloch, it's a warmup to the Extremely Serious GGs to come; it's a richer and more ample wine than Nahestein, with even greater polish, more middle and a more seductively slippery texture; hints of green herbs (marjoram, sorrel, savory) and quinoa; polished and graceful finish.
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 7-11)
- GSD-096 **2009 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** +
 GSD-096 **2009 Pittermännchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** +
 GSD-096 **2009 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml**
- Mixed cases of six, two bottles each.** That way you get to sample them all. I kind of got to sample them all. I mean, insofar as they were ready to be sampled in early March. Armin wants me to come over later, but *they all* want me to come over later, and if I did that you'd get your wine in, like January. Plus Diel's GGs are the most immature at this stage of any I tasted.

That said, the Burgberg seemed the most complex and profound of the trio; ample yet sinewy, and a real epic of rocks and charred ore-like terroir. There's a love of sorts in it; stern yet ultimately tender. It reminds me of Gaisberg or of the Grand Crus from Ribeaupillé. Pittermännchen is slimmer but just as rock-dusty, and even more arch and mischievous; quite piquant and slinky and salty; the slatiness grows sweeter-seeming on the middle and finish. Burgberg is earnest and professorial, but Pittermännchen's the wine with jokes and puns. Finally Goldloch is potentially the best of the three, but it's still smoldering and nowhere near unfolding its mighty baroque stuff.
 SOS: 0 (1-3 years; again 12-17)

WINES CONTAINING THE LOVE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME, a.k.a. <sweetness>

GSD-097 **2009 Riesling Kabinett** **+**

CORE-LIST WINE: and it's ridiculously charming a loveable, dancing wine; a little girl very neat in her school uniform, playing hopscotch on her way home; among the most innocent and child-like of any '09 I tasted; lots of lime and garrigue and saffrass, piercing brightness, whistling to itself as it skips out of view around the corner. One can be fond of wine like this.

SOS: 2 (4-16 years)

Note: I actually think that's important, and something we don't consider nearly as often as we should. That is, what is the nature of our emotional response to a wine. It's healthy to do this, because it connects us to how we feel, and reminds us how irrelevant scoring systems are in terms of feeling. I was greatly struck by something David Schildknecht wrote – coincidentally apropos of a wine from Diel – in his recent 2008 report.

“With all respect due to the best dry German Rieslings – and Diel renders some of the best – this little, sweet Kabinett offers genuine intrigue, not to mention a set of virtues whose like you cannot remotely approach with any other grape or in any other country on earth. Furthermore, I'm waiting to taste the Grosses Gewächs that has the energy, agility, or elegance to challenge this flyweight Riesling after 15 years in the bottle.”

Now David's not the most explicitly emotive guy in print, but he has several high-chi words floating through that passage – “intrigue,” “agility,” “flyweight,” – and I know he's feeling some dee-light, and contrasting it to the cooler admiration one feels for the self-consciously “important” Big Dry Guys.

And this is part of why I am sure the world will be diminished if we stop appreciating these charming, useful and affectionate “little” Rieslings with their lilac frivolities and fluting lyric melodies.

GSD-098 **2009 Goldloch Riesling Kabinett** **++**

I think this a great wine; at the very least it is stunningly good. Opulent yet firm, tropical yet mineral, sweet yet salty, a tsunami of extract on the mid-palate; quintessential, incomparable, endangered German Riesling!

And remember that word “yet” in a tasting note, mine or yours or anyone's, because it denotes something *paradoxical* in the wine, and that paradox is the most important prerequisite of greatness. Think of any great wine you've had. There's always a sense of “How can *this* exist alongside *that*?”

SOS: 2 (5-20 years)

GSD-068 **2007 Burgberg Riesling Kabinett** **++**

An astonishing wine! Apples and herbs and sweet grasses and flint; this has it all, wry and grinning and fleshy and fibrous and vaporous and long; a *panna cotta* of violets and stones; a salty acid-driven finish; Riesling as rendered by a crazed and loony Muscat. Serious joy!

SOS: 2 (6-24 years)

- GSD-100 **2009 Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese, 6/750ml** **++**
 As often, the class of the Späts here; the Edenic strawberry and super polish of Christoffel's 2-star Auslese; silky and euphoric, full of cox-orange-pippin; the palate pulls down to a pebbly dry core, and the finish is like licking the very slate.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSD-101 **2009 Scheurebe Spätlese, 6/750ml** **++**
 The best sweet Scheu in this (or anyone's) portfolio of '09s! Impeccable grapefruit and sage; a cool spicy Scheu, a bit on the sweet side but it really *stalks* your palate like a lynx on the hunt; satiny and gingery with a roasted pineapple finish. But use it as you would an Auslese.
 SOS: 3 (now-15 years)
- GSD-104 **2005 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** **+++**
 I reserved the last 20 cases of this staggering masterpiece from the supernal 2005 vintage. All three of the Auslesen were wonderful but this one had that tiny extra dimension which induced a kind of swoon; fragrances of iris and blown-out-candle and moonglow pear; length enough to defy credulity, and a riveting dialogue between stones and honey. If you missed it then, don't miss it again. This is Riesling not merely aristocratic, but divine.
 SOS: 3 (15-45 years)
- GSD-103 **2009 Burgberg Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** **++**
 The stern adamant Burgberg is often my favorite of Diel's Auslese; it is somehow made heart-rending by the loving sweetness. This wine is full of dialogue, vital, alert and alive, full of quince, delicate but endless; a sort of dissolved stoniness, deep yet weightless, concentrated yet refreshing. *Why* is this such an endangered species??
 SOS: 3 (9-27 years)

THE "TEN-YEARS-AFTER" SERIES

- GSD-099 **2000 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Kabinett, 6/750ml**
 GSD-102 **2000 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese, 6/750ml**
 I like being able to offer at least weensy amounts of wine that's out of diapers. These 2000s were great successes in the context of that challenging vintage; the Kab is golden and exotic and actually quite juicy and good and limpid; the Spät is saltier and riper. I wouldn't suggest pouring these by-the-glass but if you can open and finish a bottle within an hour or two, these are each very tasty Rieslings.



The Diel Family

rh einhsa u

rheingau wines



Eventually, in the business and marketing curriculum at some wine university or other, we'll see a course called "How To Squander An Impeccable Reputation," and the subject of study will be the Rheingau.

30 years ago the Rheingau and Mosel were considered the two great classic Riesling regions. Pfalz and Rheinhessen were outliers, and no one knew from Nahe. But the Rheingau rested on its laurels, and quality began to slip. This was obscured by its ready local clientele, as the region sits astride a little megalopolis of three cities (Frankfurt, Mainz and Wiesbaden) and everyone can get there within thirty minutes – can and did. Alas, most of those customers seem to have been content with any-old wine as long as it came with an imprimatur—the Germans love those.

These days one hears an equal number of tales of great "name" estates still making mediocre wine from supernal land as well as lordly estates who seem to be fitfully improving. One also hears of former names going under, which is sad. What one doesn't hear is any stories of an ambitious young generation determined to make the most from the great vineyards they were endowed with. This is even sadder. And when I taste the splendid wines of my two suppliers I have profoundly mixed emotions, grateful for them and despondent at how few of them there are.

There's still distressingly little buzz about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted concept of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and

arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a "true" Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent sense of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of fun here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rudesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes,



Early Spring at the Rudesheim Schlossberg

the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Nahe and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly different from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of them. Taste any of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is not: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an

age of leisure. They are wines for "experts" who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like polished, impeccable, aristocratic sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them big scores? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he's less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the cheapest guy in town!—that a wine content to merely make a "statement" seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I'm quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

"The vine is cultivated with loving care . . . and what the Riesling gives in return is beyond praise." A shrine in the vineyards, near Erbach, in the Rheingau.



josef leitz

rheingau • rüdesheim

Johannes Leitz, or “Yo-zee” as many of you know him, is an emotional guy, and he is always in love with his latest vintage; a crush on the crush, if you will. “When I am honest, this is my best vintage ever,” he is wont to say, and he hasn’t an insincere bone in his body. He means it. I love that he means it.

And I love being able to say that 2009 really is his best vintage ever, or at least the best in many, many years. Leitz was *in the zone* in ‘09. But I have a piece of advice for you. When you serve his dry ‘09s, don’t serve them too cold (cellar temp around 55° is ideal), and if you can, decant them an hour out. The results will amaze you.

In the candid daylight of the tasting room, I see the first few gray hairs peppering the temples of my friend Johannes. He wasn’t much more than a boy when I met him. Riding around the courtyard on a cute little tricycle....

Do I even need to write a profile on Leitz for you any more? He’s here all the time; y’all know him as well as I do! Ah, but you didn’t know him back in 1990 when I first paid a visit to a baby-faced young man with all of 5 hectares to his name. Who could imagine what would ensue in the last 15 years?

He’s up to a whopping 26 hectares, in large part in order to supply us with enough “Dragonstone,” but also because success accrues to success and good growers often find access to good land. Johannes has secured parcels in two fascinating sites hovering just above Rüdesheim as well as the Erbslöh estate in Geisenheim, with its scarcely known Grand Crus. If he obtains any



Johannes Leitz

more important land, he oughta split the estate in two and put one of those passionate young Rheinhessen guys in charge of part of it, just to shake things up.

I must say I like best of all to see him there, at home, lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-wine-guy can obscure some of what gets you there — any clod can climb on a plane — and what got Johannes Leitz

- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rüdeshheimer Berg Schlossberg, Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland and Berg Kaisersteinfels**
- **Soil types: Weathered gray and red slates, sandy loam and loess, chalk and quartzite**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire.



leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

how the wines taste:

His wines are like he himself is, a mixture of serious and playful, finesse and earthiness, open and robust but also earnest and commanding. They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." And it's not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz's lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type—when it's true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes' wines taste "sweet." They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are **intensely** fragrant, as though they wished to **convince** you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don't show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn't get there with bazillions of yen or with mega-technology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

DRY RIESLINGSGJL-164 **2009 Riesling Eins-Zwei-Dry "3"**

CORE-LIST WINE; and punny name notwithstanding, this is from the Geisenheimer Rothenberg, which a greedier guy would (and could) bottle as an Erstes Gewächs and sell for the price of an Alba truffle. Thus a mind-boggling value.

But why? The vineyard came into Leitz's hands through the demise of the old Erbslöh estate. It was too good to pass up. But did he really want to add to his already ample lineup of "serious" dry Rieslings? And did he want to confuse his identification with *Rüdesheim*? He opted to use the fruit to make a far-too-good wine at a price permissive of everyday use. That way a lot of normal folks can drink it on normal occasions. Let's just pause for a second and consider how humane that is.

The '09 is by far the best bottling yet. Superb aromas of grains and berries, rhubarb and raw dough; the palate is higher-toned and salty – allowing for bottle-sickness (2 weeks) – but there's still loads of Grand-Cru mojo, all kinds of non fruit erogenous jazz, pancetta savor and stock-y juiciness.

SOS- 0 (now-2 years; again 8-13)

(Note: as Leitz is highly successful in the UK and Norway, there are other "named" wines in the mix, including one or two that were created for us. Things like "Leitz Out" and "Magic Mountain." These are available on a here-and-there basis, but I'm not cluttering the offer with them. I need less ado with the queue of skus.)

GJL-172 **2009 Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Trocken "Alte Reben" +**

The first of a sterling lineup of dry wines. And this is glorious dry Riesling! Magnificently salty and yet willowy and flowery; billowing slate aromas with iris and even a hint of Muscat; tarragon-snappy and focused to within an inch of its life.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 9-14)

Rüdesheim Vineyards:

Usually the Taunus hills sit back from the Rhine about two miles, with vineyards carpeting their lower slopes. Only at Rüdesheim do the hills advance almost to the river – all the way to the river beneath the Schlossberg. The so-called Rüdesheimer “Berg” is one of Riesling’s most remarkable homes, an imposing mountainside facing due south, sometimes brutally hot and dry. It should be a UNESCO zone. The three great sites are SCHLOSSBERG, from which the most delicate minerally wines issue, from slatey soil with quartzite, like a Mosel-Rheingau marriage. ROSENECK is the fruit euphoria, with lyric and gracious aromas from quartzite with flecks of slate. ROTT-LAND is lower down; the wines are massive and brooding and earnest; Riesling as Serious Business.

Above these Grand Crus lie the DRACHENSTEIN (above the Roseneck) and the recently reclaimed BERG KAISERSTEINFELS (above the Schlossberg). To their east, rising imposingly behind Rüdesheim itself, sit a range of sites on richer soils ranging from limestony loess in the MAGDALENENKREUZ to a similar soil but mixed with slate in the KLOSTERLAY. Rüdesheim is an open-air living museum of *terroir*!

GJL-167 **2009 Rüdesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling “Alte Reben” ++**

I think this is barely above the legal limit for “Trodden” but I also don’t care, because to any sane palate this is *perfect* dry wine; the invisible rs turns it away from what might have been sharp or snippy and gives it grace and harmony; magnificently wild and stony, complex and deft and absurdly long, with the coolest minerality; for me this is the great dry wine from Leitz; fennel-frond and garrigue and lemon balm, into a tactile and clinging salty farewell.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years; again 12-18)

GJL-173 **2009 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Trocken “Alte Reben” ++**

Just to be clear; my previous issues with some of Johannes’ dry wines was they often flirted with bitterness and excessive alcohol. I had to be picky. Not this year!

I want to rub this splendid 12.5% alc wine in everyone’s nose, starting with the Great Gods of the Wachau and their often flaccid Federspiels, and then every nimrod who thinks you *require* alcohol to have depth, power and length. For this wine has it all – it’s like a *bonsai* of Kellerberg, all the grainy meaty umami, the barley and quinoa, the oleaginous texture and *demi-glace* richness – a rare and truly savory dry Riesling.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 12-20)

THE WINES-WITHOUT-DRYNESS:

GJL-163 **2009 Riesling “Dragonstone” +**

CORE-LIST WINE: The return to the old classic form is complete now. Our old friend “Draggie” had gotten a wee bit sweet around ’03-’04, and it’s been coming back down ever since. I tasted a bottle right off the bottling line; a lovely and again *savory* fragrance; the palate is bright and salty; has some of the flint and kirsch of the site but also wisteria and mint, all in a suave context. This, by the way, is all Johannes’ own fruit again. A tank-sample tasted alongside showed an ’09 eucalyptus note which may or may not reappear. But this is potentially the best Dragonstone in many years.

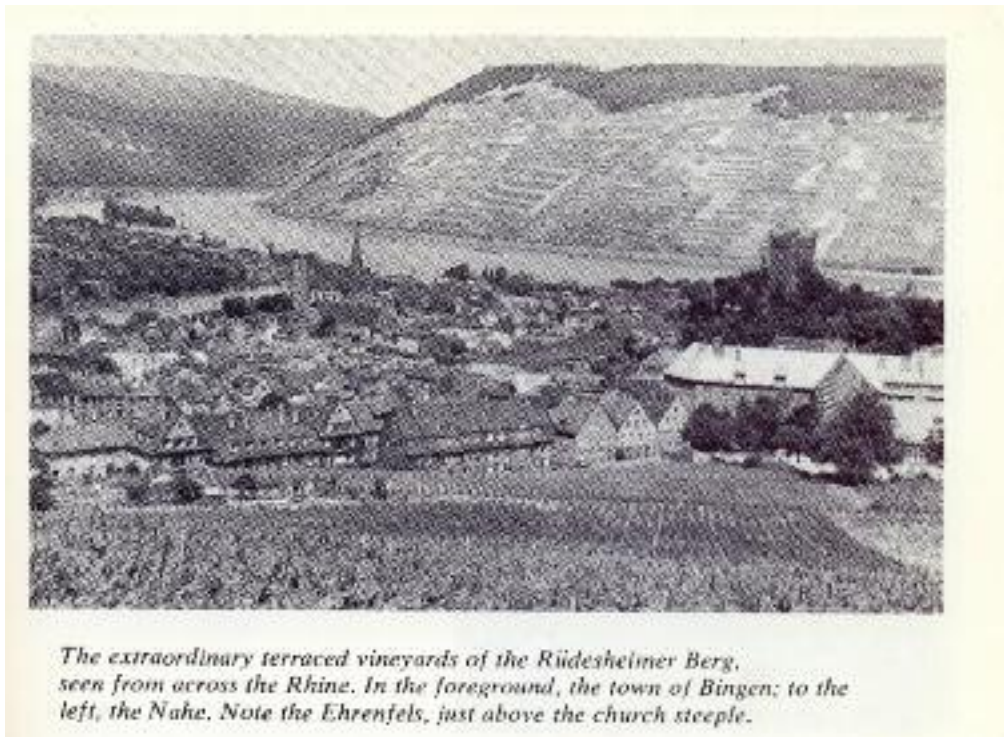
SOS: 2 (now-12 years)

GJL-165 **2009 Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**

Cool slatey fragrance, less minty than usual, but the palate goes very *green*, winter-green and tarragon; taut and zippy and brash in a nice way.

SOS: 2 (4-15 years)

- GJL-166 **2008 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese** +
 GJL-166H **2008 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
 GJL-166M **2008 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**
 CORE-LIST WINE: Next time anyone trots out the hoary old cliché about “German wines don’t sell because no one can pronounce them,” I’ll tell them how much of this guy we sell. Though in fairness, even Leitz himself refers to it as “Maggie,” (and so can you!) The basic profile here is apples and a soft stoniness, and the ‘09 adds balsam to the euphoric mix. It has the serene fruit you’ve come to expect, and the stubborn clinging finish of the vintage.
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GJL-169 **2009 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** +
 In effect this is an Auslese without botrytis; high toned and still needing to integrate its lavishly vanilla-flowery sweetness; it’s a highly regal wine, impressive but not really calm, and it will reward patience – lots of patience.
 SOS: 3 (10-33 years)
- GJL-168 **2009 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Spätlese** ++
 From the sirloin parcel “Hinterhaus,” this is Leitz’s first sweet Spät from Rottland for many years. Nice he doesn’t do things by rote! It’s a rich, dense wine, a powerful masculine Spät in the patriarchal Rheingau paradigm; dark bread and chestnut puree; alpha-dog Riesling, not a demure or yielding bone in its body. Shows how to be gorgeous without being charming.
 SOS: 2 (9-27 years)
- GJL-174H **2009 Rudesheimer Klosterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +
 I like this even more than a much richer Drachenstein Eiswein, but then I’m weird that way. I love the purity and *drinkability* of this beauty; a virtually perfect and relatively “easy” Eiswein – not that it’s simple, it’s wonderfully complex - but it’s scrutable, it can be understood, apprehended. The question is whether it can be *obtained*, as there are some 200-or-so bottles in existence. Maybe don’t delay.
 SOS: 4 (now-3 years; 15-27 years)



spreitzer

rheingau • oestrich

Because they're in Oestrich, where the wines tend to run fruity, one can forget this is a Rheingau estate. But one taste of the astonishing Jesuitengarten Spätlese brought home why this region attained its reputation for aristocracy. It is, however, a bastard to put into words.

Let's try anyway. Rheingau Rieslings are alpha. They assume the right to be in command. They have the natural bearing of the born leader, including the geniality that makes the best leaders. Yet behind it is an essential indifference to the *impression* they make on you. This isn't haughty, but they aren't going to preen for you. They have no desire nor need to ingratiate

themselves. You'd seldom use a word like gushing or seductive to describe a classic Rheingau wine, but you'd use words like splendid or impeccable. And all of this is entirely compatible with deliciousness, just as all leaders display an irresistible magnetism.

Spreitzer has ascended to the top rank in the Rheingau. No one is better, and few are as fine. Yet the



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

German press is likely to feel otherwise, in large part because of the emphasis they lay on the dry wines. This is reasonable enough. For my part I simply don't consider a German grower's dry wine. If they are good I am delighted, and offer them. But this is an extra, not the thing I come looking for. They could cease producing them altogether and I wouldn't mind. Nor would the wine-world be discernibly the poorer.

The wines certainly speak in the prevailing "syntax"

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen**
- **Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 96% Riesling, 4% Spätburgunder**

of the times: crystalline, refined, perfume and polished. These are Rheingau wines as Armin Diel might make them. Indeed it could be their diametrically opposed personalities to Leitz's wines which allows the two to coexist so benignly, without "competition" (the close friendship between the two helps I'm sure!). Where Johannes' wines are ruggedly individual, Andreas and Bernd's wines are, in the best sense, fashionable, spiffy, well turned-out. Thankfully the two of *them* are plenty unpretentious.

The wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined and they often show reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

spreitzer at a glance:

ness in store.

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of great-

how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

- GSP-064 **2009 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Alte Reben**
 They could call this “Spätlese Trocken” but no one likes that juxtaposition any more. Not that I’m so damn fond of it either. But I *really* like this wine; super aromas reminded me of Nigl, a Kreamsleiten when it’s a little feral; this is a craggy, mineral wine, dry but with convincing force and a lovely smoky-salty finish. Balanced on the ultraviolet side, but balanced. SOS: minus-1 (now-2 years; again 9-14)
- NOTE: These Erstes Gewächs wines will be sold in a mixed case of six, three bottles of each.*
- GSP-069 **2009 Lenchen Riesling Erstes Gewächs, 3/750ml** +
 GSP-069 **2009 Wisselbrunnen Riesling Erstes Gewächs, 3/750ml** +
 I want to mix these, they’re so yin-yang in character, and each so outstanding in its way. They form the 2-sided face you see in old theaters; Lenchen is giddy and happy, life is *good*, everything is a source of joy and laughter, while Wisselbrunnen is, not exactly tragic, but insistent that life is *serious* business, it’s profoundly nutty and solid as Jura whites can sometimes be. It’s what a fine dry Riesling *should* be, full of character, large but detailed, without a bit of sharpness or asperity. Lenchen, meanwhile comes swanning into the picture giggling and preening – “Oh come on, enough with the big serious language, let’s get it on man, life is for fun!”
- By the way, we’ve shortened “Grosses Gewächs” to GG, because it’s being done in Germany. But I haven’t seen the Rheingau’s version (Erstes Gewächs) shortened to “EG” and so I demur.
- GSP-063L **2009 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter** +
 I didn’t even know there were liters of non-Trocken Rieslings from here until I saw one on a local wine list. I wish I’d known! Because the dry version was quite-good-if-you-like-*really*-dry-Riesling, but this one is just way more fun. It’s still dry, but not as austere, and it’s full of juicy fruit, and the special polish of the Rheingau, which doesn’t preclude it being a perfect **fridge** white. And you may not know this, but when you turn out the kitchen lights each night, your fridge whimpers and almost sighs, because it *misses* having the perfect wine lying on its dark cold shelves. You’re so cruel. SOS: 0 (now-8 years)
- GSP-065 **2009 Riesling-101**
 It’s the Riesling foundation, this one, and a perfect adjunct to Dragonstone. Where Leitz’s wine often is as much *edible* as drinkable – it always has the savor of grub – this one is a super-polished, charming and incredibly flexible wine; aromas of peonies, lilacs and stones; the effectively invisible rs (27-28g.l., drier than Draggie) confers a coolness and refinement. The dry wine would be too arch, the sweeter one too eager to please, but this one is long, loveable and perfect. Welcome!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)
- GSP-062 **2009 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: I wish I’d had a notary present, because I felt this wine was too sweet and asked if we could blend it down some. Happily there was a dry Lenchen at-hand, 10% of which made this a much happier fellow. It wasn’t that the original was cloying; it was just one-note, all apple-peach fruitiness, which began to pall after a sip or two. The drier (but not dry) wine loses a little of that explosive fruit but it *gains* much more: saltiness, a multi-dimensional structure, angles and corners; in short a more animated, *interesting* palate, very long, really markedly deliberate finish of apples, plums, spices, aloe vera and tilleul. SOS: 2 (4-16 years)

- GSP-066 **2009 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 There's a consistency among these wines that heralds an excellent vintage. First aroma is violet and wisteria. That leads to a hint of botrytis, and then to corn, scallion and plum. The palate is solid, complex and yet it glides in a sweet slippery arc as if it were a floating anvil. Even as the mid-palate billows and swells, the fiend has a lick-your-chops salty-sweet finish – it's a beautiful '09, showing the vintage at its best.
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)
- GSP-067 **2009 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303", 6/750ml** **++**
 It hails from a sub-parcel called Eiserberg (due to its iron-rich soil), from which a record-setting TBA with 303° Oechsle was gathered in 1920 by Spreitzer's great-great grandpappy. This record Rheingau must-weight prevailed until 2003.
 It's become a signature for them, and has been exceptional in every vintage since I've known the wines. This '09 is remarkably piquant, with salty botrytis and flowery refinement and a burning-leaf smokiness. It seems a tic drier than the Jesuitengarten. There's more iron here, more ripeness and more alcohol, and overall it's more demanding than usual – in the best way. Rheingau Riesling *should* be demanding, and this one gives hours of interesting happy things to ponder.
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)
- GSP-068H **2009 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++(+)**
 I know, who needs it, another great Auslese. You and I do, but only one of us knows it. This is a monument to a sublime Riesling culture, where a wine can be profound but also delicate, evanescent and also endless. It takes the 303 and adds a rich muscle of vinosity, a long-braided richness, a swollen salty end. The wine should have UNESCO status.
 If I seem irritable, I'm really not; *I'm confused*. I taste this resplendently beautiful wine, I respond spontaneously with something like bliss – how else are we to respond to such loveliness – and then it hits me there's almost no "demand" for a wine like this. Is the world really this fucked up? Must be.
 SOS: 3 (9-27 years)



mittlerweile

mittelrhein wines



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

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

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

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to rep-

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

At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated

in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A specie of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old castle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like Müller. But I'd



wager that a generation from now, the Josts and Weingarts will have become the standard "great names."

The vineyards fall into two groups: the riverfront sites (giving the slatiest, most minerally wines) and the side-valley slopes (whose wines are tangier and spicier). Soils are Devonian slate and quartzite, so the wines bear

a strong resemblance to Mosel wines, though fuller in body, more "masculine" and sometimes with more lavish fruit. Most Moselans sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.



"A time of general rejoicing . . ." Harvesting Riesling grapes on the Rhine.

florian weingart

mittelrhein • boppard-spay

I've never known a vintner like Florian Weingart. He's unusually intellectual, and his demeanor is sweet and humble. He seems pensive, at least when I'm there. It takes time to taste, because we're always off on some side-track conversation that fascinates us both.

And he's a quiet revolutionary, our hero. He allows himself the occasional heretical wine, and he's willing – at least with me – to say some unusually radical and provocative things. Let's talk about dry German Rieslings, shall we? Most growers accede to the style as a matter of commercial survival. It's all they can sell to other Germans. It's hard to know how they actually feel about the wines, and I often suspect they've made a virtue of necessity. “<Sigh>...if we must produce such wines then of course we'll do our best, both to make the wines and to pretend we

like them....” Now no one has actually said that, and I have an axe to grind, but I'd bet serious money it's how many of them feel.

Florian makes unusually consistent dry Rieslings. He understands the basics of the beast. And yet this year, as we both reached the place on the table where the sweet wines began, he mused – with no prompting from me – “One day I will only produce sweet wines, sell what I can and drink the rest myself.”

It's not enough for Florian Weingart to be considered the “top” estate in his region and one of the elite Riesling estates in Germany. He is inherently modest and restless. His is a mind that chews things over, and I doubt he even has an auto-pilot function. We were talking about the reduction-aromas which often attend the early stages of wines fermented with wild yeasts. This came up not only because we're a bunch of pencil-necked geeks – he isn't but I probably am – but because Florian has returned to “spontis” and ambient-temperature fermentations after a decade using more modern (I dare say trendy) approaches. “After ten years I've come back to many of the things my father did,” he observed.

A few weeks later, back in the States again, I had this email from him. He had continued to mull the question over – typically! How can you not be fond of such a guy?

“I just thought about your question concerning the volatile S-compounds in spontaneous ferments: In many spontaneous yeast societies there are types that are more capable [of] break[ing] up proteins and amino-acids that contain Sulfur than in cultured yeasts (which have been selected especially not to produce off-flavors). Those released S-bindings can react to H₂S (and so on) in the reductive climate of the fermentation. I have probably just been lucky that the right [yeasts] are at

- **Vineyard area: 11 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Engelstein, Feuerlay & Ohlenberg, Schloss Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder**

work. Another reason – [which has] proved to be the most important S-source in volatile-S-compounds (US-research) – is elementary S from late crop protection treatments with Sulfur. This is probably more important than the differences in reductivity of the fermenting wine (barrels or stainless; small or large cell numbers) but again I don't really know. I think though that reductivity during fermentation and after has not been given the right attention for white wines [in terms of] their aroma development and their aging abilities.”

The Bopparder Hamm is one of the few due-south exposures in the Mittelrhein, and one of the few hillsides with almost no abandoned vineyards. Boppard and its neighbor Spay are an isolated warren of activity in a region that's grown ominously sleepy. The sites are slaty of course, but there's also a residue from the volcanic activity of

the Eifel hills to the north, which imparts a certain ripe tropical note. Florian may have missed it, I don't know. But it is singular, and maybe unique.



Adolph Weingart

weingart at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

GAW-104 **2008 Spätburgunder**

Here you go; Pinot Noir from steep slatey slopes in the Mittelrhein. There must be *some* upside to climate-change. And this is elegant, graceful, grown-up PN; a modest nub of tannin; grown in a mélange of slate, loess and limestone; shows a huckleberry-blackberry fruit that reminded me of Santenay or even Pernand. I'd suggest decanting this, and issuing at least a mutter of gratitude that the wine world can still surprise us.

GAW-098 **2009 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

The soil's a mix of slate, loess and volcanic ash; this was the slimmest and most refined among a group of dry wines; more malic and less tropical than Ohlenberg and less peachy than Feuerlay...so the wine becomes not quite like anything else, *sui generis*; plum, maize and hay aromas; great force and yet great detail; a little jalapeño heat at the end; adamant and cocky.

SOS: minus-1 (now-2 years; again 9-14)

GAW-099 **2009 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**

From a side-valley about 35km upstream from Spay, offering a much slimmer more tensile kind of Riesling; this is a lissome, lilacy wine; remarkably complex blend of flowers and a delicate minerality; a pretty, dewy, girly sort of wine; pinpoint balance, limey and salty, and trilling in a high breathy voice.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 9-15)

GAW-100 **2009 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett Feinherb** +

It's the antonym of the above; extroverted, with balls-to-the-wall expressiveness and chi up the yinyang; it would almost be blatant if it weren't also so complex and delineated, while it jumps on you with its muddy paws, panting and grinning and lapping your face. But this dawg can balance your checkbook. Good boy Towser!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-12 years)

- GAW-101 **2009 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Kabinett** **+(+)**
 Ah, here's a masterpiece of the vintage, a superb '09 and a superb Weingart wine; the essential '09 aromas are almost erotic here; the palate flies on a giddy arc, a thrilling exciting Riesling. I'm trying *really* hard to stay cool....
 SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GAW-102 **2009 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese** **+**
 An outsized trophy-wine, hugely rich and expressive, not subtle, not searching, though if you drink it cold (and after it's bottled) I expect it will slim down. Right now the stewed-fruit aromas and flavors are pronounced, though there's an energy, a rocky musculature below the salty foaming tides of fruit and vinosity.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GAW-103H **2009 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**
 This wine is too young to write a proper tasting note, but it also has tremendous potential.



mosel-saar-ruwer

mosel-saar-ruwer



Back in the mid-eighties a guy like me had his pick among literally dozens of interesting growers, who quietly and inconspicuously made honorable Mosel wines—which is to say fine Mosel wines. In the case of an estate such as Merkelbach, most of the wine was sold in bulk. Hans-Leo Christoffel and Willi Schaefer were simply below the radar. If one searched diligently enough, eventually one found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But this generation is aging. In many cases their children have moved away to easier and more lucrative careers in the cities. But what's really shaking things up isn't the ones who left, but the ones who remained.

This isn't easy work! You have to love it in your bones, and so the young generation of Mosel vintners has self-selected its most enterprising and conscientious members; if you're a young

guy making wine at all along the Mosel, you're probably making excellent wine. You wouldn't have chosen the life if you didn't love wine and didn't plan to excel.

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his name, he places himself on the *scene*, and customers ensue. This means a guy like me just isn't going to make the kinds of "discoveries" which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he's not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he's aggressively marketing himself.

The second major change, the more important one, is economical. Until around the late 60s, there was equilibrium between costs of production and prices paid. Few vintners were cash-rich but most did well enough. Their expectations were modest. They defined "affluence" differently than we do.

I look for slate. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness.

Then in the 70s costs began to rise, driven by labor, driven by the disinclination of the young to break their

balls on the steep-slopes. For a while the growers lived on whatever fat they'd been able to accumulate. By the late 80s - early 90s, they were scraping bone. The young man or woman emotionally committed to assuming the reins was only going to do so if he could make a decent living. These young people were far more cosmopolitan than their parents; they traveled widely, drank other wines, knew other markets, and *saw the prices vintners were getting in other parts of the world*.

All of us who love German wine share a certain guilty secret; we know they are grossly underpriced. They are the last absurd bargains of the wine world. But we cannot expect young people to carry on this beautiful culture, this noble craft, for nothing but the altruistic *glamour* of it all. Glamour don't pay the bills. Prices are going to rise. It is the cost we all must pay to ensure the survival of the people and the wines we love so much.

For everyone along the Mosel plays the same lament; **labor**. It's hard to get, and because it's hard to get it commands a high price. The slopes are forbiddingly steep—it's physically dangerous to work such land—and there's very little feasible machine work. Hand-labor on steep slopes in this satellite-TV world is not consistent with Kabinett wine costing \$10.

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want



Trekking up the Erdener Treppchen

Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for *pfennigs* (or *cents* in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his window at the perpendicular mountains I know he has to work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we're going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

Here's something I'll bet only a few of you knew. There are very likely some *half-million* ungrafted vines on the Mosel, about 10% of the total. The proportion is shrinking, as the law stipulates you must plant grafted vines whenever you re-plant. Meanwhile, I know you're into ungrafted vines and willing to pay a premium for their wines, if the wines are French or Spanish or Italian. Right? Yet a few pages hence I will offer you a wine from vines planted in 1896 which costs the consumer some \$25, and sorry but y'all aren't clamoring the way you might be.

It's just another example of un-told stories emerging from Germany, because no one *examines* the place as carefully as they do other places they actually care about. In the interim this is a good thing for the few and proud partisans of Mosel Riesling, because we can own it for a pittance. But is it sustainable?

Speaking of sustainability, some of you have heard of an *Autobahn* bridge that's being built over the valley near Uerzig-Rachtig. It's terribly important, you see, to get truck traffic moving efficiently, along with getting

discount-fliers to the airport at Hahn, the old U.S. Air Force base. These are useful things, but at what cost? One might similarly argue for the demolition of a wing of an art museum in order to build a parking garage. After all, how many people look at paintings? But everyone's gotta park!

It was in fact agreed to by the *Mayors* of Erden, Rachtig and Uerzig, who argued it would assist local tourism. I don't know if it will be the debacle some claim, but I'm very sure it risks blighting the landscape, and no matter what it's a shameful choice to have made.

When I wrote my book I found myself talking a great deal about the Mosel valley. It's one of the few remaining places that demonstrate such cohesion. You know you have entered a very singular culture, which is valuable enough, and *then* it's also so beautiful.

The Mosel is also a self-contained culture. Despite the length of the river (and its tributaries) there is a certain cohesion there, more so than in other German wine regions. This isn't always good, mind you; there's more than a little Hatfield vs. McCoy chicanery along with the petty jealousies afflicting small village life throughout most of the world. One day Andreas Adam planted a quarter-hectare. When he went out the following day to continue, everything he planted the day before had been vandalized. The young man is sure of himself (as he has every right to be), and this infuriated a neighbor. These cultures are not exclusively lyrical! A well-known grower filed suit seeking redress for vineyards he said he "lost" as a result of *Flurbereinigung*, and which ended up in the hands of a nearby neighbor with whom relations had always been cordial. The courts determined the case was frivolous and baseless, but what struck me was that it was filed at all, in such a narrow valley, such a fish-bowl culture, in whose narrow perimeters it wouldn't seem prudent to roil the waters. Yet I have rarely seen such a spirit of true neighborliness as I have on the Mosel, at times, among families where there's mutual respect and trust.

mosel regionals

Mosel wine is one of the easiest wines in the world to enjoy, yet when the novice has cut his teeth on the usual regional blends, the real thing may be too steely for him. Most regionals come from Müller-Thurgau grown in flat sites on the alluvial side of the river—if they come from Germany at all (hell, if they come from **grapes** at all). Most are bought on the bulk market as grapes, must, or unfinished wine, commissioned through brokers who are ordered to procure X thousand liters at X per liter. It's a market that calls another breed of procurer to mind.

I'd like to encourage people to drink genuine, honest Mosel wine. I think you agree. Therefore it seems to me if we want to trade people up from regionals, we'd better establish a true style among those regionals. That means Riesling. My regionals are 100% Riesling. Even their Süssreserve is almost always Riesling. They are not purchased on the bulk market, but cask by cask

from growers with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "Piesport customer" only wants a price. One thing I can promise you. He will never care about quality if you don't.

I'm occasionally asked why I ship regionals at all. What's a nice guy like me doing trafficking in Piesporters and Zellers, anyway? Well obviously, the category exists and this gives me a choice with a high road and a low road, and I can choose the way that makes me proud. Plus it's tonnage. Oh yeah, that. But a few years ago Johannes Selbach and I began to wonder whether we could create our own wine which would fulfill all these commercial functions, provide easily memorable "brand" identity and fill containers and give us something we could call our own, which wouldn't have to be defended as we must even with our honorable Piesporters.

Thus, the development of what we're certain will

prove to have been an epochal event in the history of wine commerce. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy: I give you TJ Riesling!

The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

We wanted to charge enough for it to distance it from the Piesporter genre, and also to give us latitude in choosing excellent base wines for the blend. We wanted a wine that tasted slatey and appley as all the best Mosels do, and we wanted a wine that would accommodate the widest possible variety of foods. That means we wanted just a discreet hint of sweetness, enough so the wine wouldn't taste acid or sharp. Finally we wanted a wine that would be sensitive to vintage, not a product that would always taste the same. We remain committed to the **profile** of TJ as a consistently slatey and crisp Mosel Riesling which should be both *agreeable* and *serious*.

TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market.

Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:

- GSR-109 **2009 Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-209 **2009 Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA**
- GSR-309 **2009 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-709 **2009 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-809 **2009 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-609 **2009 "TJ" Riesling**



Having written at such fulsome length about Selbach so many times, and wanting to shorten this unwieldy beast of a catalogue, what is the absolute *pith* of the message?

It starts with a simple declaration: Johannes Selbach, his family, their wines, embody every virtue I hold dear. Not just virtues pertaining to Mosel Riesling, but virtues that touch upon questions of honor and even morality.

The wines are beautiful, in many and varied ways. And that is the *point*, because Johannes is above all flexible. He makes some wines in steel and others in old Fuders. Some are *spontis* and others use cultured yeasts. Still others blend the two, tanks and casks, natural and cultured

yeasts. All of this is in the service of crafting interesting, tasty and useful wines, destined for the table and not the tasting room.

Sometimes Johannes and I have co-presented seminars about this & that, and I've lost count of the number of times I've sat and listened to him and thought "That is exactly the right thing to say and the best way to say it." He has no dogma except the inherent mistrust of dogma. He instinctively steers his wines toward honesty and integrity. He is a *shaman* of terroir. Given a choice between making a wine more ostentatious or more *genuine*, he always chooses the latter. His wines have an incomparable mid-palate depth, so that you start by dancing on their polished surfaces before you fall slowly through the cloud-like substance below, and then you finally get to taste the essence of slate on the clean dry finale.

The word "gravitas" comes to mind except that it suggests solemnity, and Selbach's wines are never solemn, just serious. And at times, consistently six or seven times in every vintage, they're *seriously* serious. There are no more important Mosel wines than Selbach's astonishing trio of bloc-picked *m i c r o c r u s*, Anrecht, Schmitt and Rotlay.



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

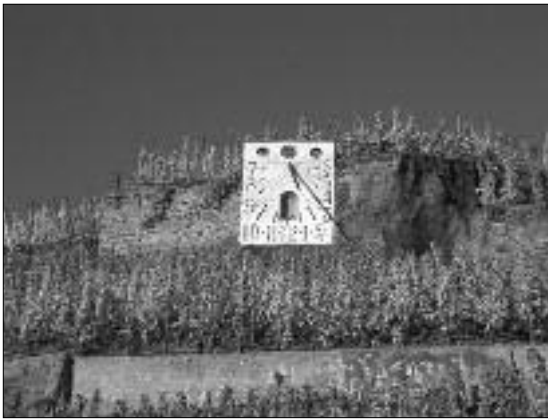
I spend the best part of a whole day tasting Johannes' vintage. Not only because there are a lot of wines – and variations of many – but because I find it important to taste these with nowhere else I have to go. There is something in them that builds, which you

- **Vineyard area: 18 hectares**
- **Annual production: 9,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Schossburg, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst**
- **Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam**
- **Grape varieties: 98.5% Riesling, 1.5% Weissburgunder**

don't find if you're in a hurry. They take you inexorably toward wordlessness. The more you know, the less there is to say, or that needs to be said. Reality, after all, is simple – it's just real. There it is. It is simple, but man is it elusive. Because when we encounter it, we're often confused or even annoyed.

Often I go through the membrane into a mystic zone when tasting at Selbach. The wines consolidate into a great chord of beauty, and they do so in an especially allusive way; they crawl in your windows while you're running to get the door. Selbach's wines aren't like books of poems, where you can dip in here and there or dog-ear your favorites; they're more like novels, where you can certainly indicate passages you like especially, but where you can't just start reading any old where. Any given vintage is a whole story of which individual wines are scenes or sometimes chapters. This is also true, I think, for the progression of vintages. For as the Mosel is a weave, the Selbachs are woven through the weave, and the wines are woven through the family which is woven in the big tapestry called Mosel. They are so connected it is hard to see them in the isolation we insist upon when we judge them merely aesthetically. And yet we must, of course; they are bottles of wine we buy and sell—and drink.

One morning I came in from my daily tromp and I must have been glowing. Johannes' wife Barbara met me at the door, saying "Well look at you!" and I said something about how beautiful it was up there in the vine-



yards, and Barbara said something sweet and memorable; when Johannes returns from his many travels he is often renewed and heartened by having such a lovely place to call home. I have a range of producers along the Mosel, and I love all their wines, but none of them embodies a sense of home with more purity than

Selbach. As much and as often as Johannes flies hither and yon selling wine, he has somehow managed to remain more profoundly anchored to Home than anyone I know. Not just to his particular dwelling, but to the holistic being of Zeltingen and the Mosel valley. Do his wines express this anchoring? Of course they do. It is why they themselves are so grounded. Can I explain how this occurs? Not really. I doubt if even Jo can.

Few wines — few things — take us to such places. You can't identify that slippery little thing soul in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they peel and echo. It is how quickly they leave themselves behind and lead you elsewhere away from "wine." Johannes told me that he wants "soul" in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a value in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.

A Look At The Vineyards:

I find my notes are shorter the past two years as I didn't want to repeat the basic adjectives that depict vineyard characteristics. I wish I had a dingbat I could use each time I want to say "slate and apple!" So below are general descriptions of the Selbach sites.

BERNKASTELER BADSTUBE is a small Grosslage; the component single-sites are distinct from one another, but one can organize them thus: LAY stands alone. DOKTOR-GRABEN (at least the good parts of Graben!) stand together, and MATHEISBILDCHEN-BRATENHÖFCHEN stand together, and give us what we see now; heavier understructure, not quite as tensile, due to richer soil, and signature flavors of kirsch and almost Pouilly-Fumé flint; the piquant exotics of the Mosel. Typically, they are medium in body.

ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG is mineral to the MAX! I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Flavors are a *borealis* of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cursed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

WEHLENER SONNENUHR is like Zeltinger Sonnenuhr feminized, slimmed down, and refined. If Zeltinger Sonnenuhr is oaken, Wehlener Sonnenuhr is willowy. It can show a ravishing elegance. Butter-vanilla, very delicate slate and equally delicate apple, now with a slightly herbal tertiary flavor. I would say light-to-medium body, but the beauty in these wines resides in class and actual flavor, and not in size or fullness.

GRAACHER DOMPROBST: I doubt there's a better site on the "great ramp" (as Hugh Johnson terms it) between Bernkastel and Zeltingen. Domprobst is invariably starched and magnificent; its flavors are always standing at attention. It has a particularly emphatic slate statement, with nuances of pistachio or pecan, cassis and quince. Medium-bodied, high-bred and snappy, coltish and itchy to take off full-gallop.

ZELTINGER SONNENUHR is the Premier Grand Cru. Basically All Of The Above; slate, lime, apple, butter-vanilla, rich, almost chewy earthiness, great depth. Some parcels are prized by locals as the best sites in the entire Bernkastel-Zeltingen ramp — DOKTOR notwithstanding! These wines are full-bodied. Selbachs are now the primo owners in this great site, and have inaugurated an era of selective harvesting and a quality potential such as we have never before seen. Meanwhile, you'll see by the number I offer that the wines had me in a weak-kneed thrall, and - redundancy be damned — I just couldn't walk away from any of these.

selbach-oster at a glance:

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection.

how the wines taste:

Johannes' explicitly stated wish is to make wines for people to drink and not for geeks and writers to preen over. If he says (and I agree) "The best bottle is the first one emptied," it can sound mercantile, but it isn't. The useful wine is the *friendliest* and most companionable wine, not the most "impressive" one. But Johannes earns the right to claim this value by making many of the *most* impressive wines you can drink – depending on what exactly impresses you. If you want bombast and primary-fruit perfume and excess sweetness, look somewhere else. These are meant to drink with food up to and *including* Auslese in most vintages. There is a striking conciliation between brilliant acids and a kind of leesy plushness. There's plenty of minerality, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

NOT-TO-BE-MISSED!

Note: This is not an estate-bottled Selbach-Oster wine, but rather a few casks they bought from a VDP estate on the Saar whom we're not allowed to identify.

- | | | |
|---------|--|---|
| GSR-408 | 2008 Selbach Saar Riesling Spätlese | + |
| GSR-409 | 2009 Selbach Saar Riesling Spätlese | + |
- We'll sell '08 while it lasts, and then slip into '09.

There isn't very much if you buy it like you should. Stop reading now and check out the price. It's not a typo. It really is stupid cheap! It is an *insane* value. I won't sell you "a case." I'll sell you twenty cases to floor-stack or five cases to pour by the glass, because this *kind* of value comes along v-e-r-y rarely.

So how *did* it come along? It is bought in cask from a well-known VDP estate in the Saar. The vineyard is a Cru. I don't know why the fellow wants to sell this wine in bulk; maybe he needs cash at harvest-time. No matter: *we* are the beneficiaries.

The '08 has the loveliest pink-grapefruit fragrance, along with quince and a gentle slate; barely perceptible sweetness; just a delightful crisp refreshing Riesling.

The '09 is even more extroverted; fuller-bodied than the icicle-pointed '08; 95° Oechsle, and more mid-palate of '09 yellow fruits and tropical nuances; the length here is ridiculous; gorgeously spicy and tangy; rhubarb and pink peppercorn.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (for the '08) 2 (for the '09)
(6-17 years, if you can stand to lay off it right now!)

DRY WINES AND KABINETTS:

- | | | |
|---------|--|---|
| GSO-343 | 2009 Riesling Trocken "Schmitt" | + |
|---------|--|---|
- "This year we decided to make a little of it dry, just to stir the pot," says Jo. Partisans of this micro-cru in the heart of the Zeltinger Schlossberg know it is one of the singular *primo* Mosel wines being made today.

For palates of a wavelength to appreciate dry Mosel Riesling, I'm letting go of a (fruitless) yearning for any fruity charm, and saying O.K. – if you really like dry Riesling then here's a mouthful of exceptionally complex terroir expressed as minerality and racy grassy green tea. Mind you, it's no more austere than, say, Bert Salomon's basic Kögl, and the stuffing – I mean, this baby is *loaded*, fills the palate with a slatey wave that conveys a kind of salty sweetness.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 10-15)

- GSO-344 **2009 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 GSO-344H **2009 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken, 12/375ml**
 This feels drier than usual because '09 is so muscular and, in this case, fleshy and ample; a vivid spearminty fragrance leads to a much fluffier palate than you expect; the wine is lovely and flattering in its Chartreuse-y way, not as arch or penetrating as sometimes, but long and loaded with personality.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years; again 12-16)
- GSO-345 **2009 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**
 GSO-345H **2009 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 Here we're into mirabelles and lilacs and high toned slate; a charming, tasty Mosel wine of barely discernible sweetness. Val-Yooo!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-13 years)
- GSO-331 **2008 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 It's rather an embarrassment of riches among the Kabinetts, so I picked my favorites, and if they sell out I'll move on to my next-favorites which are still PFG; there's a silky sleek length here along with the classic jade-vanilla flavors; wonderfully playful and sophisticated with a streamlined lime-parfait lightness.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)
- GSO-332 **2008 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 GSO-346 **2009 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 GSO-346H **2009 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 CORE-LIST WINE: We'll stay with the '08 while supplies last, a big juicy soulful Mosel wine, with a reverb of mid-palate energy burnishing down into a limey smoky finish. The 2009 is a big glam Kabinett in Selbach's context, but what really impresses is how a jab of slaty precision pierces through the kafir and apple first impression, giving a tactile palate double-take as you see it's not quite the wine you expected, but rather a classic Mosel.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-18 years)

RIPER WINES

- GSO-347 **2009 Riesling Spätlese**
 GSO-347H **2009 Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
 Surprisingly pointed limey focus – it's mostly Himmelreich – and it realizes the goal of a characterful wine without appreciable sweetness, but still stylish.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-19 years)
- GSO-348 **2009 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese** ++
 A mint and cherry parfait with wisteria fragrances and gorgeous fruit, all in an ethereal powder of slate.
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GSO-307 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 GSO-350 **2009 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: and was I ever happy to see the '07 still available. The wine is utterly lovely, mirabelles, cox-orange-pippins, herbal and citrusy and shady and it seems to almost *lead* the palate toward some point deep in the cool fragrant woods. The 2009, which will be offered later, is similarly shady and balsam-like, with a panoply of inferences; quince, nutmeg, fennel, sorrel – but that is Schlossberg, the miasmic allusive spell it casts.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GSO-336 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** +
 Streamlined, twiggy, quinces and pistachio; just a quicksilver stream of precise terroir and taut fruit and copious herbs, green apples, mint and pepper. Not as plush as its fellow Späts, but a more satiny feel than, say, Schaefer's wines.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

- GSO-352 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** ++
Sensational; all starched and brilliant, a marching-band of slate and fruit and a sort of *ur*-Mosel soul, as Graach can be – you seem to eat the flavor within the flavor. A touch sweeter now. Here's a completely screwed-up observation; the finish has certain things in common with the aftertaste of good white-corn tortilla chips. Earth to Terry....
SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GSO-351 **2009 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** ++
100% *sponti*, from the rockiest soil near the cliffs; just a stunning Mosel classic, yet with a wild spice, like walking into a Penzey's; firm and even adamant slatey spine, a steel rod of limey terroir below shimmering fruit.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-353 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** ++
This is eerily like an '05; exotic, tropical (guava), ginger, talc, perfect botrytis, really superb.
SOS: 3 (9-28 years)
- GSO-354 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**** +++
An insane neon masterpiece! Late-picked and botrytisey but not a hint of sultriness or mushroom; rather an urgent essence of WS that will stand comparison with *any* super-nal classic *anyone* has ever made there; a taut rippling tense energy. Wow.
SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GSO-357H **2009 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein "Junior," 12/375ml** +
The master has yet to take a false step I've ever seen; Jo knows the froze stuff, a virtually perfect source for Eiswein. This one will love you all up.
SOS: 4 (now-20 years)

THE EN-BLOC HARVESTED MICRO-PARCELS

In a sense it doesn't matter whether they're Spätlese or Auslese; they are the full picking of the ripest possible grapes at the best possible moment, and their business is not to fit into bureaucratic categories, but to tell the *truth* of the vintage.

I'm going to quote from a letter Johannes sent to Lorena Ascencios of Astor Wines & Spirits when she asked him what "Rotlay" signified.

The Rotlay is the single best parcel within the [Zeltinger] Sonnenuhr. Rotlay is an old, local term for a rather unique piece of vineyard which is tucked between a massive wall of slate as the upper border and the large water surface of the river with it's mirror effect as the lower border. On the sides it is open and flows into the other local parcels called "Kakert" and "Lehnschaft" though there [are] some large outcroppings of rock in the border areas, creating a unique geographic scenario, similar to a "clos" in France, with a rather unique microclimate.

The slope that comprises "Rotlay" faces straight south here and the soil is very stony, covered with big chunks of blue Devonian slate. (The slate is the compressed silt of the seabed of the giant ocean that once covered most of the earth some 450 million years ago alongside the single continent Pangea.) The inclination of the vineyard ranges between 45 and 60 degrees. Hand labor is a must.

"Rot" in German means "red" and some people interpret this as a sign for the high mineral contents of the soil which is visible where iron components, exposed to the elements, actually do rust. "Rodt," in older German orthography, also stands for "cleared" in the sense of barren, stripped of vegetation, and some people say it's the massive wall of rock and the surrounding outcroppings of rock, which are barren, resp. indicate a bald spot in the slope.

Either version has its justification since the vineyard is a steep, barren, rocky, hot piece of "dirt" where only deep root systems can survive the always warm, at times hot and arid microclimate. Drought is often a concern here.

Selbach-Oster owns the biggest piece of the Rotlay and, in 2004 we began to pick "Rotlay" as a single block, with no selections pulled from the vineyard prior to harvesting. This brings the unique, diverse mix of greenish-yellow, golden, slightly overripe copper-colored, as well as botrytised berries together, creating a truly wholesome wine which reflects the true expression of this great site's "terroir," without the influence of human selection.

We refrain from skimming through this vineyard but rather prefer a long hangtime to pick at optimum ripeness without pushing for over the top sugars.

Terry here again: I'll pick up on an implication inherent in Johannes' thinking here, which is that the *en bloc* picking is in essence a search for *truth*. All the wine books tell you that Auslese is/was made by successive passes through the vineyard – indeed it's what "Auslese" means – and yet 20-30 years ago only a few growers had the wherewithal to accomplish this. Usually they waited as long as they could bear and then gathered it all. As Hans Selbach was old enough to have lived through those days, I'm sure he contemplated what might have been lost in the modern obsession with skimming the cream from the vineyard in search of higher must-weights (and the "points" such wines engender). Put concretely, you lose a holistic flavor containing both the ultra-ripe grapes plus the less-ripe ones and the grip and green they impart. And which *also* constitutes terroir. It's not much of a leap to infer this is a quest for a deeper authenticity; it's one thing to select *which* flavors you want and another thing to pick the whole magilla and see what flavors you *get*. See why I love this man?

- GSO-349 **2009 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling "Anrecht" ++**
 A top south-facing parcel in Zeltinger Himmelreich; this is really the archetypal vineyard spice and mint but with a cold stream of concentrated slate, but this barely suffices to describe an interplay you almost can't comprehend but you know is important; insanely seductive notwithstanding its fervor of slate. Done in steel, by the way.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-355 **2009 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling "Rotlay," 6/750ml ++**
 GSO-355H **2009 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling "Rotlay," 12/375ml**
 Wonderfully restrained after some of the bombshells before it on the table; An emerging almost Rotliegend-like mineral aroma; so deep its depths have depths, but right now the giant is asleep...
 SOS: 2 (12-27 years)
- GSO-356 **2009 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling "Schmitt" +++**
 GSO-356H **2009 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling "Schmitt," 12/375ml**
 My wine of the vintage. Oh man, a stupidly pungent minerality here, in a sinewy tense char of slate – really the aroma doesn't have a cognate in the worlds of fruits or flowers, or even herbs or stones. It's a cliff-face, a defile chiseled by some violent slamming of water; it's glacier-dust, apple-skins, scree; in enacts an inscrutable primordial intelligence, yet it's crammed with mojo; it's ringent with flavor, not easy or flattering or seductive flavor, but mesmeric, haunting flavor. Go on, kiss the mountain.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-28 years)

erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

The estate is changing its label and its name, to Jakoby pur, which translates to “Just-Jakoby.” The label is stark, almost denuded, as if to say Here we are. No frills. Onward!

Lots of fresh wind in Kinheim. I know I’ve said this elsewhere, but it’s one thing to take the reins of an estate in a glam-location, and quite another to do so in an out-of-the-way place like here. Stefan and Peter Jakoby are obliquely within the Selbach nexus, but that doesn’t automatically mandate their claiming the hardscrabble life of the steep slopes. Wine is a singular passion.

Kinheim is a village stuck between Kröv on one side – much beloved of tourists for its Nacktarsch (bare-bottom) bottlings – and Erden on the other. In early editions of Johnson’s Wine Atlas this standard reference says “Kinheim begins a decline,” as indeed it does. There are no Grand Crus (though there are micro-parcels of near-GC quality and well-known as such by Mosel insiders) because the soils are lighter. Thus prices for Kinheimers are low. And low prices don’t stimulate thoughts of increasing production costs. It’s one thing to make high-

- **Vineyard area: 4.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Spätburgunder**



Peter, Erich, and Stefan Jakoby

ly visible grand Quixotic gestures like the outstanding Daniel Vollenweider estate is doing – if you can ask (and receive) stratospheric prices in return. It’s quite another to labor in modest obscurity on behalf of an idea that isn’t remotely sexy, but every bit as passionate.

If you go downstream from Ürzig-Erden you first come to Lösnich and then to Kinheim. Immediately behind the village there’s a crazy-steep hump of hill formerly known as Eulenlay which was considered first-class land in the famous 19th-century classification for tax-assessments. Behind it the slope undulates, sometimes steep, sometimes gentle. The soil is lighter. Yet good Kinheimers are scrupulously pure Mosel Rieslings on an everyday scale. Overachievers such as Merkelbach and Jakoby will give us incredible values.

jakoby-mathy at a glance:

Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father’s illness called him back home. Thus: Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, and 2007. They’re always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I’m having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

how the wines taste:

As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive appley flavors with typical minerality. Other than a small section of the Rosenberg, directly behind the town, there isn’t a Grand Cru slope here. But Erich’s wines excel by sheer **vitality**; they’re upbeat, vivid wines, exuberant and Spring-y.

- GJM-073 **2008 Riesling “Balance”**
 GJM-077 **2009 Riesling “Balance”**
CORE-LIST WINE: And *Bravo* for resurrecting this in-between style of Riesling that will frustrate every brainless clod who insists “The wine must be either entirely sweet or entirely dry!” He can kiss my happy grits, because this ‘09 is bright, frisky and lively, nicely stony and juicy and with the stealth-sweetness so many great Rieslings show; streamlined, focused and perfect entirely-dry-enough Riesling. We’ll sell the remaining cases of the very good ‘08 before switching to this guy.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-6 years)
- GJM-078 **2009 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This is quite rich and mouth-filling for a Kabinett and for a Jakoby wine in general; apple compote and cinnamon; almost chewy; typical ‘09 dialogue of juice and muscle; this is countrified and forthright.
 SOS: 2 (4-14 years)
- GJM-079 **2009 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**
 This time I chose the sensual darling over the more soulful *sponti* (they gave me three different options), because we do get to be seduced once in a while, right? This is a salty corn fritter of a wine, with an applesauce dip. Trust me, that nails it.
 SOS: 2 (7-18 years)
- GJM-080 **2009 Kinheimer Hubertuslay Riesling Spätlese Goldkapsel**
 Indeed! This is the saltiest wine on the table, with stylish Mosel buoyancy and cut; there’s real class here, and lovely articulation, and good length, and IMO this warrants trading-up to.
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GJM-081 **2009 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese “Eulenlay”**
 This has super-charming fruit and represents excellent value – enuff said!
 SOS: 3 (8-22 years)



meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

mosel • erden

WINERY OF THE VINTAGE

This makes me happy, because I've known Stefan Justen a long time, and a more decent and honorable guy does not exist.

But he and I haven't always agreed about his wines. Stefan likes the ones with big fruit, while I prefer the ones with racy structure, because all of Stefan's wines are fruit-driven, so what matters is the spine.

I've also tended to like them best in the Kabinett-Spätlese levels, finding many of the Auslesen too much of a good thing. So imagine my amazement when these '09s really hit their stride with the top Spätlesen, culminating with an absolutely sensational range of Auslese – that cost a small

fraction of what similar wines would cost from “name” estates.

The day had been interrupted by my visit to the osteopath, and we hadn't allocated much time for Stefan. I arrived sore and cranky, with no idea when I was scheduled, and afraid I was late. Stefan opened the door to my apology, but he said “You're actually 30 seconds early; I had you down for 5:00. Shall I close the door and open it again in 30 seconds?”



Stefan Justen and daughter Barbara

So how did this amazing vintage happen? Could it be because Stefan is now the (acting) mayor of Erden? “No one wanted to do it, so I couldn't say no,” he explained. Still, his phone rang often with vitally urgent business. I never got to ask whether he could pass a law forbidding Trocken wines....

- **Vineyard area: 4.25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Prälät and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 11% Müller-Thurgau, 9% Kerner**

In any case, we have one of those vintages a grower seems *born* to have made. I'll leave my notes as close to verité as I can, so you'll see my growing amazement as one masterpiece followed another.



Meulenhof at a glance:

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moderate for impeccable quality.

how the wines taste:

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They are comparatively straightforward and "easy" to understand because the fruit is overt and in-your-face. Even a cursory glance into that fruit, though, will reveal the proverbial Coat of Many Colors: interplays of flavor and texture that can be absorbing and rewarding. And the wines both keep and age.

- GJU-117 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**
 CORE-LIST WINE: We blended two casks (17 and 103, if you must know) and it was the best cuvée available from four possible lots; shows style, nobility of fruit, slatiness, and no edges; this is apple, white peach and subtle saltiness; vigorous and lively, and seeming drier than it's been the past few years.
 SOS: 2 (5-19 years)
- GJU-118 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: the liveliest among four casks, with the most vivid dialogue between fruit and the many things pulling at it; call it green energy, slate-pepper; a wonderful, euphoric Wehlener that's both rich and animated.
 SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GJU-116 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese*** +
 A real fruit explosion here, anchored not to a balancing set of flavors as-such, but instead to a nervy vigor and energy; if you ever had a *peche-de-vigne*, it's like that – the peachiest thing you ever bit into, but the acidity! So if you were making a juice you'd blend in some sweet cox-orange-pippins, and then you might add a few granular minerally granny smiths, give it some snap, and you'd get it right and know you did a good day's work. Here, the wine's already done it for you.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GJU-119 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben** ++
 This isn't just eyewash; when Erden had its *flurbereinigung* there was a section near the cliffs which couldn't be "rectified," which means it's both the only segment of Erden vineyards with old (60+) ungrafted vines, and it contains the best parcels.
 And man, the wine! It has the salty, pulpy richness of old-vines low-slope Erdeners; tangerine juice, cardamom, and a hint of rye toast; shows a salty, clinging profundity and a billowing swollen complexity. It doesn't let up. Check out how *serious* a "fruity" wine can be. This compares to the greatest of 2001.
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

- GJU-120 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese #36** **++**
 This extends the Alte Reben, and oh – by the way – it’s one of four *fabulous* Auslesen that hardly anyone holding a U.S. passport will buy. More than enough shame to go around, starting with mine, for failing to convince you how precious these kinds of wines are. A botrytis masterpiece in its charred salty smokiness and dark solidity; celestial tangerines grown in black lava.
 SOS: 3 (12-36 years)
- GJU-121 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese #14** **+++**
 I was overcome. Every prudent bone in my body begged me not to offer more than one Auslese, but my prudent bones don’t taste wine for me. And this was an amazing collection, one of those where the whole was more than the sum of the parts. This shows a haunting high note of burning leaves with a heart-rending fruit and green tea and flower (orchids, jasmine) below; juicy, clinging salt, like the 250-year-old Mongolian salt we had the other night. And all this leads to a squeaky clean slate finish. Jeez, what the fark!?!
 SOS: 3 (12-36 years)
- GJU-122 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** **+++**
 I’ll stand this up against any J.J., with the proviso you don’t have to wait five years for this to stop reeking. This is sublime Wehlener, briefly said! Orgastic green elements, wintergreen, lime blossom, verbena, all the site-typical herbs and butter in an apotheosis of expressiveness.
 SOS: 3 (11-33 years)



alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

It was a nice day last year when we arrived along the Mosel, and since my colleague Leif had never been there, I planned some time for a hike through the Würzgarten. There's a tractor-road that climbs quite steeply out of the village, and when it ends there's a dirt path that meanders high above the cliffs. You're surrounded by this lunatic steepness, and remote little parcels on such lonesome

terraces you'd think the workers would have to be lowered by helicopter. It's almost shocking when you see it for the first time. *Who had the idea that people should do this??*

We were descending and almost down when lunchtime was over and the workers were returning to the vineyards. A tractor was huffing its way up the road, and I thought I knew the profile of the two fellows in it. As we passed each other, lo it was true: Rolf and Alfred, going up to bind in the sunlight on the first nice day in weeks. We exchanged our surprised delighted greetings and said we'd see them tomorrow.

Since I've been ringing the bell at this house for twenty five years now, I will confess to the arising of a certain sentimentality. It's not based on the exchange of intimacies, but only on the passage of time, and on gratitude for durable things. It has little to do with how "good" a Merkelbach vintage happens to be, but a lot to do with their basic honesty and the loveliness of the culture they embody.

After greetings are exchanged, we sit at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf or Alfred bring out the wines one by one. Each bottle represents a single cask of wine. They are presented not by name but by cask number.

As always, when we've finished tasting the new wines we're invited to drink an old one. Any requests, we were asked?



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

Well, Leif was born in 1981 (a middling-good Mosel vintage but not the kind that people cellared) and he'd never had a Riesling from his birth-year. The Brothers were thrown off their plan – it turned out they had a bottle ready, a '90 I believe. It was duly poured and we all admired it. Alfred disappeared. In the chatter we hardly noticed his return, but he'd brought a bottle to present to Leif, an 81er. It was wrapped with cheap green paper so that it could be unfurled to show Leif his birth-year bottle. The little cer-

emony was unbearably touching. I thought of Alfred finding the bottle, cleaning it, possibly labeling it, then wrapping it, all to give to a young man he'd never met. He seemed surprised when Leif embraced him.

- **Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

Alfred was looking poorly this year. The weather had suddenly warmed a couple days earlier, and everyone was out pruning and binding, and I suspect poor Alfred overdid it. I hope he's all better now.

There's a number of boarded-up houses in Uerzig, as many of the small growers go out of business. Merkelbachs have survived because their wines were remarkably good, which led them to me, and I've been buying happily and keeping them going. They do love the work; they even bought a new vineyard. *In their early seventies*, doing basically all the killing work on the steep slopes themselves, and they're buying land. This is something hard for most of us to grasp. We go there and see the ferocious steepness and we imagine the growers have sacrificed themselves somehow, in service of a greater good. It hardly occurs to us that someone might enjoy the work. I mean literally enjoy, experience a vivid happiness. But they do, some of them at least.

With each passing year Merkelbachs echo more deeply out of the past. The wines are just what you'd have found in the 60s and 70s – from an outstanding grower. The prices don't seem to have budged in twenty years. They are, for me, a Mosel tabula rasa, before anything stylish has been imposed. They won't forever be with us. They, and the two men who make them, are high amongst the most precious and meaningful things in my world, and in my life.

We will mingle the remaining '08s with a few '09s I cherry-picked.

KINHEIMER ROSENBERG: this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It's the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg's wines often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years they can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

ERDENER TREPPCHEN: this is a completely different expression of Treppchen from Justen's or Christoffel's. The site is broad; the upstream sections lean in the Prälater-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and green apple. Now that Flurbereinigung is complete and everyone's vines are young one sees the importance of parcel. I was delighted by the absolute Treppchen fingerprint I saw in even these brash new wines.

Finally the great site **ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN**, which gives Merkelbach's most memorable wines. A vein of red clay running through the soil gives them their eponymous spice—the name means “spice garden”—but it isn't just the extra zingy cut of spice that marks these wines; such a strong flavor could pall if not for their redeeming class. Their feel is feminine and lithe; their aspect is springtime blossomy, and their underlying flavors of slate and mineral attain an apex of refinement. Wines of baroque opulence can be made from here, but Merkelbach's are the most primary and fundamental of all Ürz Würz., as though you are tasting ur-Würzgarten

merkelbach at a glance:

The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my most beloved Mosel agency.

how the wines taste:

These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of structure supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there's someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he's closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I've poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.

GME-167 **2009 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**

We really couldn't stop talking about it; it was as if the newborn essence of the Mosel had been delivered to us. When this wine is working, it's as pure as the thing gets; a super-attractive gobful of slate and apple and the skin of apple. Look at the price! *POUR* that thang!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-16 years)

GME-161 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**

A blend of fuders #7 and #8. The '08s here are racy and lighter than '07 was, but they have way more than enough fruit and more acidity than '07 did, for them as likes 'em better that way. #7 was a crunchy old-school Mosel, entirely delightful in its rural honesty. #8 has more polish. The blend is *perfect*, articulate slate over cool granular apples. I want to fall to my knees in gratitude for the honesty of this wine – Mosel as a wine of the *country*, without “polish,” purely itself.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-17 years)

GME-160 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**

+

Fuders #9 and #10 together. Oh-so-slightly riper and with a puff more sweetness; it's slightly more articulate, the slate is more determined and serious. Honestly you could combine the four casks, but they don't have a holding tank large enough! So this is the “Reserve” Kab.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-19 years)

GME-162 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**

+

Fuders #11 and #20. I found myself wishing they had a few duds in the mix, but everything was super-good. This was a sonnet of slate with delicate caraway and strawberry notes. Perfectly itself. These are the wines we *say we want* in this somber economy, cheap-and-cheerful and as quick as a hiccup.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-17 years)

- GME-163 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +
Fuders #16 and #22. It has *quite* some perfume plus an adorable little elixir-note of salt and the Würzgarten *garrigue*. The richest and longest of the group of Kabinetts.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-20 years)
- GME-164 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #21** +
Single-fuder. That's 110 cases, ideal for someone to just buy it all. This stand-alone cask shows wonderful substance and length, with a richer fruit now.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-19 years)
- GME-165 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #23** +
This is the most elegant and strawberried of them all; graceful, with a lovely mélange of high and mid tones.
SOS: 1 (7-20 years)
- GME-166 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +
GME-169 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese**
CORE-LIST WINE: The '08 will ship while supplies last; it's an absolutely pristine lovely Merkelbach wine. The '09 blends casks #20-#21, which means there isn't very much of it. It's Merkelbach at their most fetching, racy and juicy.
SOMMELIER ALERT! (both) SOS: 1 (both) (7-25 years)
- GME-168 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**
For its pure, slaty and walnutty notes, and its lovely dryness – with 50g.l. rs! Amaze your friends!
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-23 years)
- GME-170 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #17** +
A wonderfully pretty wine, the most feminine among the Späts; spiced apple and caraway, the loveliest salty-plummy juiciness, and a cool kind of length.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GME-171 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese** +
Wonderful perfume, classic Würzgarten; the palate almost overtakes you with its beauty and clarity; if it were an apple, the orchardist would win a Nobel Prize for horticulture. Delicate, gauzy yet long and clinging. And it's cheaper than many growers *Kabinetts!*
SOS: 2 (8-24 years)



Rolf Merkelbach

Hans-Leo was there, and looking good. The recently-bottled '09s looked good too, though you'll note a sort of schism between the snippier Erdeners and the more forthcoming Uerzigers.

I suspect the '09s will be more hale and chipper than the '08s were – or, turned out to be. Those '08s showed spectacularly very early on, and sometime in the latter six months after bottling they seemed to split apart. The Germans have a good tasting word *Gespalten*, literally, crevassed. We'd say unknit. It's hard to fathom the '08s won't turn out fine, but approach them warily for a little while.

In general the wines continue to present with polish and brilliance and digital focus. (Eymael's own *Mönchhof* wines are rather more baroque.) They are certainly more masterly than Merkelbach, and at many points in each vintage they are wines that raise your eyebrows and send a flush of pleasure through your senses. They're high-bred and racy, and at their best they touch upon mystical qualities.

- **Vineyard area: 2.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Treppchen, Ürziger Würzgarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**



Hans Leo Christoffel

christoffel at a glance:

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the “big three” among the Mosels I offer. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty.

how the wines taste:

Dashingly aromatic, brilliant luster of flavor, inchoate depth which begs for study. The kinds of wines you keep adding to your notes on; each sip reveals another facet, the second glass differs from the first, the very last sip is still saying fresh new things. There’s a jewel-like firmness here; these aren’t leesy or plush. In general, the Erdeners are thicker and more thrusting; they show better younger. The Ürzigers are refined, fastidious and sleek.

- GJC-184 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**
Ripe, chewy and sinewy; seems drier than usual (which wouldn’t be at all a bad thing) but still crystalline and typical; very long, with a stern slatey profile.
SOS: 1 (6-20- years)
- GJC-182 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +
CORE-LIST WINE: And quite ravishingly impressive! Noble and clear and gorgeously integrated; relatively full-bodied but by no means over-endowed; a pure and utterly classic Würzgarten. Want to see what “Kabinett” means these days? 98° Oechsle, well into Auslese, 68g.l. rs, 8.2g.l. acidity. This would have *been* Auslese in the 80s....
SOS: 2 (6-22 years)
- GJC-185 **2009 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +
CORE-LIST WINE: these are really nutty and muscular in ‘09; it seems to suck away its sweetness; the wine’s a tad unknit a day after bottling (!), but there’s lovely promise of an old-school on-the-drier-side Mosel; wintergreen and balsam.
SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GJC-181 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** ++
While I was writing this an email came in announcing the dumping of a pile of Screaming Eagle at an auction house. Many were the atrial fibrillations attending to that news. Boy, am I glad I’m in *this* business and not that one....

This is a thicker and more sassafrassy version of the Kab; it increases not in sense-of-sweetness but instead in tangible *depth*; pungent aromas, round, many-layered silky palate, crammed with Würzgarten garrigue.
SOS: 2 (8-26 years)
- GJC-186 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese*, 6/750ml** ++
A couple years ago I led a group up the steep road through the Würzgarten, and showed them the remote and scary terraces among the cliffs. “That parcel is called *Wertgarten*,” I said. “Wow, who in his right mind would make wine from such a vineyard?” someone said. “Well, Hans-Leo Christoffel gets his 1-star Auslese from this very parcel,” I said.

The wine always has a *para*-slate nose, as if the slate were toasted; the wine’s like one of those receivers that picks up interstellar magnetic disturbances, and this ‘09 takes its worthy place in a chain of singular masterpieces. It’s zingy and even a little phenolic, with a penetratingly minty fragrance; high-toned and typical, with an almost mordantly slatey char. I’ve collected these in every vintage since 1992, and I know I’m less smart than you.
SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

GJC-187 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese**, 6/750ml** **++**
 This may be the greatest vintage ever of this wine; it's certainly the most mineral and herbal; the strawberries are still out in force, though, along with basil and crushed stones; about as ravishing as Mosel wine can be.
 SOS: 2 (10-27 years)

GJC-170 **2007 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**, 6/750ml** **++**
 Not a typo; I could have offered the '09, and it's very good, but this still-available '07 is not only *better*, it's closer to being ready to drink – O.K., a little closer. Now and again I get to be the idealistic asshole who offers the best *wine* and not just the necessary commodity called "The Newest Vintage."
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)

GJC-188 **2009 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese***, 6/750ml** **++**
 "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than 40 hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from it in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in."

It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it. This atypical '09 has a gentle botrytis, and shows mirabelles, silk and salt; a really esoteric aroma and a meltingly tender yet complex and aristocratic wine; the first truly "sweet" wine yet; it will age into a classic in the '75 or '71 vein.
 SOS: 3 (12-35 years)



heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

My old friend Martin Kerpen's wines fall into two groups. Up to and including most Auslesen, they are what I'd call "shady" wines. They refresh the way sudden shade does on a warm day, and they have a cool kind of glow, they are woody and leafy and dapply. Once botrytis enters the picture they seem to about-face, and become much more overt.

All the wines are done the old-school way, in Fuders, as I like them best. But that is as far as I think one can go in describing them. It's as much as you can be certain of getting in every vintage. But compared to, say, Christoffel or Schaefer, whose wines are to some extent predictable – delightfully so – with Martin you'll sometimes be surprised. You can taste everywhere else, you can reach any conclusions you like about the nature of a vintage, but you can't quite guess what Kerpen did until you're in his winery tasting.



Martin Kerpen

- **Vineyard area: 9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**



kerpen at a glance:

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the "Wehlen premium" but are still below the levels of many of the richer and more famous!

how the wines taste:

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Leesy along Selbach lines, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not *just* pretty.

- GKE-128 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: Another in a string of pretty, winsome wines; sweet-apple and apple's granular texture, along with the Wehlen balsam and key lime, and with the '09 saltiness – this is Mosel at its most demure, lissome and winning.
 SOS: 2 (5-16 years)
- GKE-129 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
 As you see, a consistently *fine* vintage for Martin, though (for me) rather less successful among the dry wines than '08 was. This Spät was both riper and yet – at first – more pensive than the Kab. I'm a guy who's immediately intrigued by anything that's present but *quiet*. This wine isn't flirtatious, but it's absorbing and mysterious. Shorter in perceived sweetness but longer in juiciness than the Kab, and with a fine minerality softly but thoroughly embedded. The alert drinker will see at once the singular way of Mosel Riesling – so loveable yet also so serious, exhaling its particular lyric gravity.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GKE-130 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* (Artist Label)** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: our friend the bird in the boat, still sailing insouciantly, since long before the whole treacly critter-label crap. With this wine we're throwing a party again. No meditation here! This basket's fruits are oozing to be eaten. The wine is alight with prettiness. There's a taste like the butter you just sautéed the apples in, and a hint of delicate honey. The wine is blatantly tasty.
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GKE-131 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese*** ++
 Something took place late in the season in the Sonnenuhr. I don't know what it was, but once a certain ripeness was reached, the wines are just astonishing. I mean, we can get snobby at times, saying stuff like "Oh, I'm just so *past* Wehlener Sonnenuhr; I'm into Thörnicher Ritsch..." (as if!) but it's good to be reminded why this site obtained its stellar reputation. This wine is ablaze with a clean salty botrytis and a long vein of sweet lime that together create a balsam-wintergreen and narcissus finish that settles in on your palate. A kind of high-tension ripeness that finally and poignantly resolves into a sea-salt caramel farewell.
 SOS: 3 (10-28 years)
- GKE-132H **2009 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++
 A lot of growers made more than one Eiswein; the frosts lasted over 2-3 days. And Martin told me there was a "big one" still fermenting. But man, this one's good enough! A clear, exquisite, salty, complex and pristine Eiswein.
 SOS: 4 (now-18 years)

willi schaefer

mosel • graach

Lots of graphic material associated with Schaefer this year. Not *that* kind of graphic, you sick freak. Normal stuff.

I hit upon the idea of getting air-views of the vineyards, maybe Google-earth or something similar, in order to show how the parcels are spread around. When you see wines with cask numbers on the label, you might expect it's just the Germans being insufferably exact, but really those casks are usually parcel-specific pickings, which differ from one another in *fascinating* ways. So if you think the precision these single-parcel bottlings indicate is geeky or inconvenient, think again. What they really mean is that a few people still exist who are willing to show you the *intimacy* of their accord with the land, and the beautiful detailing of nuance that results.

Picture A is downstream a little. It shows the downstream edge of Graach, and that little isolated building to the northwest is the Josefshof. The furthest northwest parcels, with the blue borders, are Schaefer's pieces of Wehlener Sonnenuhr. Those lower down to the southeast are various parcels in Domprobst. (The black squiggly goop below is the village of Graach itself, along the purple Mosel.)

Picture B simply extends the view upstream. In the southeastern corner, where it gets anarchic and squiggly again, this is the Graacher Himmelreich *which has not undergone furbereinigung*. You can see the bedlam of the parcels.

But if you think about both pictures you'll see right away why Schaefer (and many others) bottle parcel-specific wines in many vintages. In picture B you have two higher-up parcels (8111 and 8114), and one forbiddingly steep one (8113), whose wines can be expected to be harder, stonier, but in hot vintages these can give fantastic wines. The mid-slope parcels have micro-variations in exposure and soil, and the lower ones, which are still quite steep, have the most weathered soils, *feinerd* (fine-earth) as they're called, and these usually give creamier and more elegant wines.



The Schaefer family!

So, this barely-4 hectare estate has more than 100 parcels, half of which are over 50 years old and ungrafted. And Schaefer's make as many different wines as are called for.

And then there's that picture of three generations of Schaefer at harvest time, which makes me nearly weep with joy. A landmark was attained, or rather determined

- **Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

in the last year. Christoph's family had been living up the hill in a little "suburb" of Graach called *Schaeferi* (because in the old days the shepherds grazed their animals up on the small plateau), while (Grampa!) Willi and his wife lived in the old family house in Graach "proper." The family decided to trade houses. Willi and Esther don't need all the space any more, but the young generation is growing. I suspect they also wanted that slight bit of *remove*, and to look down over the slopes and village where they have lived their lives. "It won't really matter; I'll be down here at the winery all the time," says Willi. But the installing of Christoph there is an advent, a gesture – "It's yours now, my boy."

Thus are family dramas enacted. Thus does love move, even now, in our world.

I arrived alone, late and out of breath. I'd tromped through the vineyards from Zeltingen. It's no big deal, but I was so blissed out I missed the turn and ended up wandering around the Domprobst taking the long way. No one minded.

Later after we'd done tasting the stellar '09s, we sat down to dinner and Willi asked me what we should drink. "Normal wines!" I replied. I wanted to go back to the baseline, now that I was just drinking with old friends. So Willi brought three wines from the 60s, all of them still limpid and sapid and unnervingly fresh. I've had a lot of old wine with this dear old friend, and they are almost never blow-you-away wines. They are friend-for-life wines. If your friend is busy blowing you away, how will he help you be relaxed and happy? Sometimes you just crave some ease.

When I finally did descend into the village, there was the little *Gasthaus* on the corner where I once burned

the roof of my mouth on a schnitzel...and there was the house of the Kunsmanns, who had a B&B and where I once slept in the attic under the eaves, and awoke one morning to the deliberate creeping of a huge spider toward the center of the ceiling....and I realized also that the flavor of Graach was the flavor of "Mosel" to me, a flavor I still can't isolate into a procession of adjectives and associations, but a flavor that felt right away like *kin*, like something the world had led me to, some lost thing that would show me where home was, and where I belonged.

You know, you try to be open-eyed, to convince yourself there are dark veils of shadow and *thanatos* even around these happy-looking lives. You don't want to sentimentalize them. But you sit in the house with father and son and you look at baby-pictures and you see everyone glowing just-because – I mean, why wouldn't you glow? And you find yourself, your miserable skeptical self, thinking "Life is supposed to be like this, and sometimes is." And a dopey sort of desire visits you. *Pare it down. It isn't that hard to be happy.*

schaefer at a glance:

For many tasters, these are the *Ne Plus Ultra* of Mosel wine, and they have attracted an almost religious following. Thus my most frustrating agency, as there is never enough wine.

how the wines taste:

It is hard to put a finger on exactly what it is that makes these wines so precious. There is a candor about them that is quite disarming. They are polished too, but not brashly so. They are careful to delineate their vineyard characteristics, and they offer fruit of sublime purity. They are utterly soaring in flavor yet not without weight. What many of you seem to have warmed to is their clarity, precision and beauty of fruit, so maybe I'll leave it at that!

- GWS-165 **2008 Estate Riesling**
A big fragrance and a tangy slatey racy palate. Forthright and salty, not as polished as the *Prädikatsweine*, but you can also knock it DOWN, man, heedlessly and irresponsibly, without feeling guilty for the attention you failed to pay. So slurp away.
SOS: 2 (now-12 years)
- GWS-172 **2009 Estate Riesling**
There's far less of this than of the '08. It's also more extroverted; indeed a whole basket of yellow fruits bursts in the mouth; this is really enveloping for a Mosel wine; slate and aloe and mirabelles; pretty ticklesome Riesling!
SOS: 2 (now-15 years)
- GWS-173 **2009 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**
This is high-toned and bright for a Himmelreich, which is normally more in the mutsu-apple genre; it almost shows Domprobst exotics, but over a gentler structure. It's lissome and yummy.
SOS: 2 (6-22 years)
- GWS-174 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** +
Oh, class here! Boy oh boy oh boy – what a Domprobst. And Kabinett?? *Fuhgeddaboutit.* Massively salty, lavishly juicy and yet with tautly stretched fruit; as energetic and laughing as I ever recall.
SOS: 2 (7-25 years)
- GWS-175 **2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
Verbena, aloe-vera, melisse, lemon-balm, and finally the usual apple; the palate as always is shady and cool, though more overtly mineral than usual, but the finish crescendos into a salty tide that clings and doesn't quit. I love when Bob Parker writes about finishes that "last a minute." *A minute???* Dude, this little insignificant 7.5% alc Riesling has a finish you taste for *ten minutes*, and the only way to obliterate it is with the next wine.
SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GWS-176 **2009 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese** ++
Again more overtly yellow-fruited and high-toned; more of the cox-orange pippin and less of the mutsu, and all magnetically pretty yet with a tactile manic complexity and a spreading salty finish you swear would outlive you.
SOS: 2 (9-26 years)
- GWS-177 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10** ++
At this point I'm actually hoping for something I *won't* like so much, so as to give the appearance of being "discriminating" and "selective." This pitiable stratagem was doomed. Now we entered the zone of the rare and stellar, the place where Riesling does what no other wine can do, and Mosel Riesling does what no other Riesling can do. One can yammer about ginger and pistachio (both Domprobst signatures), and I have and will again (and just did in a sneaky way), but this wine has an utterly heart-rending restraint below the celestial singing fruit.
SOS: 2 (9-30 years)

GWS-178 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5** **+++**
 GWS-178M **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5**

If anything even more so now, even denser, still cool, with literally incredible refinement, purity, a calligraphy of slate, exotic salty length – one of the great '09s I tasted.
 SOS: 1 (10-35 years)

GWS-179 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11** **++**

A lovely cool fruit is front-and-center now. One falls rather helplessly in love with a wine like this. You want less to drink it than to *lick* it. No one has any right to be this pretty. It casts a fetching gauzy glance, your eyes meet across the room, you're done for....

SOS: 3 (12-35 years)

GWS-180 **2009 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese** **+**

There's just a homeopathic amount of it, alas; here we do get to that deep-within-the-apple place you normally suppose the Kabinetts will show. This is riper but more *interior* than they are; it's direct and candid, albeit of course infinitely refined and gracious, but we're taking that for granted by now. Same for the loving solicitous length of all these sweet friends.

SOS: 3 (13-36 years)

GWS-181 **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #15** **++**

Also just a pittance. I remember when I visited Willi with Michael and Harmon Skurnik; we were in the cellar, and Harmon wandered off only to return a moment later asking "Where's the rest of the cellar?" *That's it, that's all there is*, Willi replied. "Ah....now I see why we get so little wine," Harmon said.

To the matter at hand; this is the big sister of Spätlese #5; just a sweeter fruit profile and still no blatant botrytis, maybe the littlest bit of talc, but mostly meyer-lemon and white nectarine. Near to as-good-as-it-gets, and I only hedge the third plus while that youthful sweetness finds its channel to melt into the slate.

SOS: 3 (14-40 years)

GWS-183H **2009 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 6/375ml** **++(+)**

If I were as smart as I think I am I'd take the whole allocation myself. I could easily drink it. You could join me! We could drink it together, instead of letting all these *strangers* get any. The wine, god help me, is ultraviolet, spectral, piquant, molten-ice; it will be a masterpiece; it's not nearly syrupy, but an essence of pure virginal fruit.

SOS: 4 (now-20 years)

GWS-182H **2009 Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+++**

This is as good as it gets.

Johannes Selbach came to drive me home (as I'd walked over), and he tasted his way through the range. I watched his face when he got to this BA. He grinned and almost blushed. This is as good as it gets.

No wonder I've been experiencing sticky-ennui, because they don't *taste* like this. A quintessence of everything about the Spätlese; fruit, mineral, salt, but cool and slim and pure, and while the fruit is rapturous the whole of the wine isn't remotely decadent but instead like a little diamond that catches and disperses every fleck of light. Miraculous, and very rare.

This is as good as it gets.

SOS: 4 (18-45 years)



O.K., I'll admit it; I feel a little smug. I've been saying for what, eight years now, that Andreas Adam would be a stellar estate, and already was making remarkable wines. And now he's done caught on. Here's what Jon Bonné had to say when he placed Adam's '08 Kabinett among his top-10 wines of the year (at #5):

2008 A.J. Adam Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Spatlese (around \$40; Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

Andreas Adam, from the tiny Mosel town of Dhron, makes fewer than 1,000 cases a year, and his Rieslings burst with absolute purity. They are made with indigenous yeasts (a rarity in German Riesling) and no additions beyond a bit of sulfur dioxide.

In a lean vintage that left some bottles too nervous and fragile, Adam's wines feature electrifying fruit and dense minerality.

I had plenty of great Rieslings to choose from this year, including a 1937 Steinberger Trockenbeereauslese from the Rheingau's Staatsweinguter Eltville. But now I understand why Riesling lovers become giddy at seeing Adam's ornate label.



Andreas Adam

Yuh, giddy, that's me; giddy and smug. I'd like to be a better person, if only I could. Smug, baby!

As Andreas grows his estate (and his American importer watches smugly), he has options where he can buy land. It's heartening the degree to which he seeks to be identified with his home village of Dhron.

He's picked up some parcels in Piesport also, but he was intrigued when I said I was unsure those vineyards were suited to his style. "What would be better?" he asked. "Well, I know it's farther away, but I'll bet you could get some vineyards in the Thörnicher Ritsch," I said. "Oh yes, that's a damnably

- **Vineyard area: 2.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: under 1000 cases**
- **Top sites: Dhroner hofberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with clay**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

good vineyard..." he answered. Perhaps I have set something in motion...?

Adam is both his own man — very much so — yet also emblematic of the new wave in German wine-think. I don't agree with everything he espouses, but his bedrock passion is stirring. I think of that instant of ignition when I tasted my first Adam wine, and it all starts to make sense.

"The hardest work of vinifying a great wine takes about nine months, from February till the beginning of November — rather like a pregnancy — during which time we let what happens happen, without disturbing or perturbing nature, but rather we watch over and work in harmony with nature's larger power."

"An aside: I'm sitting here writing on our terrace under a blue sky. Nearby sits a fallow vineyard, to which a vintner is carrying chemical fertilizer. . . .

"I renounce any and all such treatments. I sustain my vineyards by intensive soil-work (I was ploughing this morning; it smells so wonderfully of fresh earth and slate) to bring the essential nutrients up from the primary rock, the natural compost of a vineyard. This completion of the bond between the elemental soil and the work of the vintner is another piece in the puzzle of terroir. "

Well-said!

"We love our Dhronhofberger, in its lovely quiet side-valley, which leaves stress behind and is out of the

stream of all which is trendy in German wine-growing; today Cabernet, tomorrow Sauvignon Blanc.”

Hofberg is one of those sacred spaces, I think. It isn't merely symbolic that it faces away from the river-current. One has a 180° view from it, but it isn't a grand aspect – rather a sweet, almost intimate one, of little valleys and old houses with slate rooftops. It is also very quiet, except for the many birds. A perfect place for a thoughtful introvert to work, I think. And what flavors come from this ground! Andreas says: “Even young it often shows a striking exotic fruit, subtle spice, *wild* slate aromas and a finesse of acidity.”

I agree. The only reason this site isn't front-and-center among Mosel Grand Crus is the lack of a flagship-estate — until now. Hofberger is one of those Mosel sites with *complex* slate, in this case with a vein of clay and with a measure of the sandy slate-variant of the Nahe. It is both archetypal Mosel yet also extra-Mosel; it sometimes makes me think of Dönnhoff's Brücke.

Next I ask about terroir.

“I think in Germany we see terroir as a unity of grape, climate, soil, and the mentality of the person who works the vineyard. But the essence of that mentality is a knowledge that the geology of his terrain indeed creates the flavors in the grapes which grow there. Thus if you consider Riesling from blue-gray slate from the Goldtröpfchen, in its youth it's herbacious, with delicate lime fragrance and mineral-salty on the palate. Contrast the Dhronhofberger Tholey, with its brittle blue clay-slate mixed with quartz and *Klimmer*, whose riesling tastes almost as if it emerged from a tropical garden; maracuja, papaya, pineapple and with a slight breeze of honey and caramel. Here on the Mosel we have lovely variations of slate and exposure.”

And vinification, I ask? Anything which separates you from the prevailing norm?

“Actually we do nearly nothing differently than did our forefathers in the '20s: small yields of late-harvested Riesling grapes are gently handled and pressed (we still press some in an old wooden press); after an open must-oxidation the wines fall bright at cool temperatures in stainless steel, and later ferment in old wooden Fuders. **Finito!** That's all, nothing else, just wait for the wild yeasts to begin their work. No must or mash sulfuring, no enzymes, no gelatin, no added vitamins, no bentonite — **pure nature!**”

To the extent we employ technology it is only in the

service of cleanliness.”

He has a telling comment to make about deacidification: “A great Riesling with a rather high level of acidity is no catastrophe on the palate; it just needs time. But if we ever needed to deacidify, we'd have done it before the grapes ferment, via reduced yields, intensive soil and leaf work, air-flow management, sun-exposure management, and finally a selective harvest where we only pick ripe fruit. I can get aromas from the skins in the press-house, and also reduce acids by must-oxidation, which also eliminates undesirable tannins and phenols.”

Or, one might add, you can take it easy and just dump in some chemicals.

Finally, as I run through the basics of his vineyard and cellar work, I need you to understand the extent to which this is emblematic of the new thinking in quality-minded German vintners, a thinking which has undergone a 180-degree turn in the last twenty years. These basics are:

- Exclusively organic fertilizing
- Green-harvest to reduce yields
- Hand-harvesting only
- Must-clarification by gravity (no centrifuges or filters)



- Ambient wild-yeast fermentations (There are many shades of opinion on this question.)
- Long lees-contact (4 months, followed by another 6 weeks on the fine-lees)
- No dosage (I happen to disagree with this but applaud the purism which prompts it)

adam at a glance:

Tiny, grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

how the wines taste:

They taste *deep* and leesy, and they never seem sweet and almost never seem *dry*, even when they are in fact either sweet or dry. Flavors are both thick and opalescent, and one is aware of a sense of stature: this is immediate. It's self-evident these are wines of profound terroir; it's their *raison d'être*. And for me it's a great pleasure to *finally* offer you Dhroners which embody the greatness of that land.

GAD-036 **2009 Hofberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml**

Interesting in two ways. First it's very dry, unusually so for Andreas; second, he did it in steel, as the quantity was awkward for *Fuders*. It's a huge mouthful of mineral, a circus of slate, and if this makes sense, it has a noble, aristocratic bitterness, in an insanely long palate. An almost staggeringly expressive wine without a hint of charm.
SOS: minus-1 (now-2 years; again 10-14)

GAD-033 **2009 Dhroner Riesling**

Sweet lees show now, a few flowers poke up; the wine is creamier, if not quite "creamy;" here's a dry wine that does exhibit some charm; it's spicy and licorice-y with an ore-like slaty char, and a rye-rusk Achleiten touch.
SOS: 0 (now-2 years; again 9-13)

GAD-032 **2009 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb** **+**

100% in wood now, and still (in March) on the gross lees; fetching, gingery, complex aromas; the palate shows all the benefits of the *smallest right* amount of residual sugar, which needn't be elaborated on again here. It is lovely, it is absolutely dry enough, minerally yet it angles obliquely among spices, a musky sort of slate, a tic of mint, a whisper of frisee snap – which may vanish after filtration.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years; again 8-12)

GAD-034 **2009 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett** **++**GAD-034M **2009 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett, 6/1.5L**

CORE-LIST WINE: I don't recall when this wasn't masterly, and in '09 it's of course riper and more extravagant than the more finesseful '08. A juicy parfait, almost a panna-cotta of malt, white chocolate, ginger and golden delicious apple, leading to a salty-sweet finish like steeping slate and vanilla beans in a scallop-shell stock.
SOS: 2 (5-18 years)

GAD-037 **2009 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**GAD-037M **2009 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**

It feels more tensile, taller than the Kab, so its extra weight seems differently dispersed; it's more articulate, a little darker in flavor profile, until those yellow fruits rush from the glass and yield to an onrushing tide of liquid salt on the finish.
SOS: 3 (8-23 years)

GAD-038H **2009 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**

130° Oechsle; on the Mosel you can (by law, hahaha) make BA with 112°. "In principle I want one wine per Prädikat," says Andreas, "And though I have a certain envy for lighter Auslesen, I want mine to be dessert wines." This contained 30% gold-yellow clean fruit and 70% botrytis, and it's the wine you dream it will be, blazingly clear without it's riper than ripe.
SOS: 4 (12-27 years)

These old-school wines need a lot of time, so I'm glad to still have '08s to offer. They also dramatize the contrast inherent in the '08-'09 tandem.

We had a talk about ripeness, because I have often found Piesport at its best in less ripe vintages, when its voodoo fruit is more anchored to some tangible structure. This came up because the father Hugo Schwang can remember periods when underripeness was the norm, whereas his son Mario can not. "Do you ever think yields may have gotten too low?" I asked.

"Perhaps," said Hugo, "But I think even more important is the trend away from the old heart-binding we used to do here on the Mosel." (n.b. this binding method can still be seen; it consists of two stalks curving away and back toward the trunk from opposite sides, in the shape of a Valentine-heart.) He went on; "The new system keeps more leaves, which increases assimilation."

The Moselaners describe the citizens of this village as "rich kids" because everyone wants their wine and will pony up accordingly. And here's an estate giving their wines all the time they need, not caring to make wines that will flatter the palate five months after the vintage. This I think is known as integrity.



Mario Schwang

you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but

These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr, Falkenberg, and Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Müller-Thurgau, 2% Regent**

these wines aren't really made for our frantic world. SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more attentive mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to notice stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-yeast wines can display.

reuscher-haart at a glance:

Leesy, old-fashioned Piesporters that need time. Great resonance and depth in the best examples.

how the wines taste:

At their best one can see why they're held in such renown. Schwang's wines can have impressive, almost majestic corpulence without being fat, plus a positive depth and stuffing from the lees. When that happens the Piesport fruit shows its **raison d'être**; an almost lurid court bouillon of bewitching fragrances and flavors; patchouli, passion fruit, bergamot, mango. And all in a voodoo voluptuousness that's the wine equivalent of an erotic trance. We should have to get our PARENTS' permission before drinking them. My parents would have refused!

- GRH-063L **2009 Piesporter Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
 It won't be long before we shift to this, as the '08 is nearly sold out. The '09 will satisfy its partisans; it's appley and charming, riper than the '08 but maybe less pretty and flowery. The contrast is apt; '09 if warm fruit and '08 is cool flower. '09 is more phenolic, '08 is more acid-driven.
 SOS: 2 (now-5 years)
- GRH-061 **2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**
 Much as I liked the '07s here (and I did and still do), 2008 is the kind of year that's *very* kind to Piesport; it adds form and core to the wines, which can sometimes seem to sprawl. In this case it's *apple* that's prominent, not the voodoo-fruit, though a tangerine note is also present. There's lots of juicy yet solid substance and an almost peppery note on the slatey finish.
 SOS: 2 (5-17 years)
- GRH-064 **2009 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**
 This has grip, but it's more a hammer-blow than a chisel-cut, as the '08 was. It seems sweeter than '08, but this may be a function of its acidity. Look, honestly; be *glad* you can still get the '08 – it's by far the nicer drink right now, and by the time we get to this – maybe early in 2011, it will have found its grace.
 SOS: 2 (6-18 years)
- GRH-062 **2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese #12**
 Again it smells like a *Mosel* wine, not like a *séance*; cox-orange with a hint of cinnamon; seriously juicy and somehow solidly plump. Hugo agrees with the parallel to 1993 – a superb Piesport vintage – and this is like eating a wedge of apple and one of nectarine in the same bite.
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GRH-066 **2009 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese #12**
 This time I have no great preference between the two vintages; the '09, again, has a very firm tread, let's say. It's like a basket of plums and apples left in a sunny alcove; more thrust but less grace, yet with its own kind of length, a chewy echo of earthiness.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GRH-060 **2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese #10** +
 The best young wine I've tasted here in fifteen years; it tastes *steeper* than #12, more elemental and purely fruity; riotous golden-delicious and honeydew aromas; massive vinosity and fruit solidifies into a stiff wave of slate on the finish; wonderfully rich yet deft and articulate.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GRH-065 **2009 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese #10** +
 Again more Mosel-typical aromas and a big *chomp* of slate; a profoundly rich palate that isn't a bit fat, but just capacious and muscular; for sheer force and resonance it's hard not to be impressed. The '08 is more frilly, in contrast – which I like. But this '09 reminds me of this estate's greatest vintage of my acquaintance: 1990.
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

Sometimes I'm in so close I don't really see what *effect* the wines have, and it was good to be reminded (by some fulsome Spectator reviews) how well these charming wines can *show*.

I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he did. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2 hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fer-



The Hoffmanns

- **Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg, Köwericher Laurentiuslay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent**

mentations but not all. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. The cellar's all stainless steel now.



hoffmann-simon at a glance:

Solid estate making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart.

how the wines taste:

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give—which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

GHS-052 **2009 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

Curious story here. I actually preferred the Köwericher Laurentiuslay over this, because it had the acidity to ameliorate its considerable sweetness. But I asked Dieter whether he couldn't blend some of the PiesGold *Trocken* Spät to bring its rs down. He could, and did (though not by much), and once he did this became the better wine. It's odd, all the time I have to rail against the dry-at-all-costs doctrine, only to find *excessive* sweetness where sweetness is found at all.

SOS: 3 (7-16 years)

GHS-048 **1998 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese**

There isn't a ton but there's *some*. I wonder if 2008 will turn out similar to its older sib...this is an excellent Spät from a ripe but high-acid vintage, at the start of its grownup life, showing its typical orange and pepper notes along with mirabelles and what y'all call "petrol;" it's a juicy and tasty adult Riesling.

SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

GHS-053 **1999 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

One of the first wines I tasted of Dieter's. It's not as lively as the '08, with less grip but also less sharp claws; classic '99 in its tangerine and malty grain; it's fairly dry but replete with salts and spices. A finely developing wine.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

GHS-054H **2009 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

In a new 6th-use barrique; another in Dieter's series of lovely and *drinkable* dessert wines; the strawberry and kirsch and caramelized banana recalling Jurançon but without the high alcohol, and without the overweening gooey richness of much of what we encounter as "sweet wine"; a tasty, even salty after-a meal wine you enjoy drinking when its too cold for Moscato d'Asti.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 4 (now-26 years)



weingut ansgar clüsserath

mosel • trittenheim

I find I must issue a gentle admonition. You don't show these amazing wines nearly enough *LUV*. The time is now, as Eva Clüsserath's '09s are her best since 2005.

Last Fall I accepted an invite to do a tasting for the Yale undergrad wine society. It sounded like fun and it was. I took a random bunch of wines from inventory, including a frickin' *stellar* '05 Apotheke Spätlese from Eva Clüsserath. The wine shocked everyone and it even shocked me. Simply great Mosel Riesling.

Size, vineyard and cellar work are unremarkable in the context of conscientious Moselans. The cellar is virtually all wood fuders. "We work with little influence from technology," says Eva. She ferments with natural yeasts, filters only once, leaves the wines on the lees till March or April. No one will ever improve on these old ways.

What is significant, I think, is Eva's palate. She's more cosmopolitan than her parents were, I'm sure, and her marriage to Phillip Wittmann gives her a drinking-sweetie in another region plus a comrade with whom to explore the wine-world. They love Burgundy. But Eva herself wants "our wines to be minerally and individual, even more; unmistakable." Good for her! You can always



Eva Clüsserath

trust a Riesling palate that starts with mineral. That's what Riesling is.

One year I had a telling conversation with Eva. We're not selling what deserves to be sold from here, and part of the reason why is that ol' Mosel-stink problem. If you didn't read my intro to this catalog, this is the smell of H₂S resulting from the lees; it vanishes with something between seconds and 2-3 minutes of swirling, and it will vanish in bottle in a couple years. It's not a "flaw;" it's a marketing nuisance.

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling; 10% other**

And it tends to be exaggerated in big-tasting situations, where you have 20 Kabinetts lined up on a table and suddenly one of them is stinky, and it's oh-kayy: NEXT! Even if you know such tastings almost demand that you form the most superficial impressions, you still can't help it.

I said as much to Eva, and she agreed. She's been to the tastings and she's no one's fool. But, she says, it's crucial for her to make what she feels are honest wines; she does not wish to "form" them for commercial considerations, and so she'll continue on her grounded old-fashioned way and what we sell, we sell. Curiously, the "problem" appears solve-able by using cultured yeasts to ferment, but for a certain mentality this is tantamount to diluting terroir. However awkward this may be for me, I must say I applaud anyone who's striving for *truth* in her wines, and I am proud to show you these inconvenient little stinkers! Maybe we'll put a stack of pennies next to Eva's bottles . . .

clüsserath at a glance:

Mid-sized Mosel estate making old-school slatey-leesy classics and selling them at fair prices. Under the careful eye of a smart young woman, these have nowhere to go but up.

how the wines taste:

A charming amalgam of Trittenheim's charmingly pliant fruit (less stiff than say Graacher Domprobst) with striking minerality.

- GAC-026 **2008 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett** **+**
 A wonderful angular mineral intricate Mosel wine, with amazingly clear diction and digital precision; apple-skin along with the most piquant floral note, as if it were a salt bath with wisteria petals floating in it. If rocks had souls (and who knows that they don't?) this is how their souls would speak.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)
- GAC-030 **2009 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett** **++**
 I warn you; we're not gonna let you ignore this wine, because a finer Mosel Kabinett has seldom been made. A remarkable, masterly wine, expressive, *drenched* with terroir, beautifully balanced, with smoky char and herbal granny-smith tartness; spearmint, amazing mid-palate length and seductively juicy yet uncompromisingly, even obdurately slatey. *Wow*.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-22 years)
- GAC-031 **2009 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 I have the sense this is a breakthrough vintage for Eva, or maybe it's I who have broken through. Because this wine absolutely *rawks*; more heirloom-apple now, apple-cellar, lovely granular crunchy apples, over a hot pit of "sweet" slate; less char than the Kab, but the same length, sinewy length, salty tensile richness. Blow-you-away stuff.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GAC-025H **2007 Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **+**
 Why aren't more Auslesen like this? It intensifies every aspect of the site, especially minerality; it loses neither precision nor focus; it tastes like itself, it's still brilliant and delineated, and the botrytis comes as a welcome nuance instead of the annoying lead guitarist who keeps turning up his amp. This is ultra-elegant and useful wine.
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)



carl loewen/schmitt-wagner

mosel • leiwen

Our hero's on the move again. This time he's removing all village names from his labels, so that "Thörnicher Ritsch" will become, simply, "Ritsch." With abject apologies to my colleagues who do label-compliance work, I do think removing superfluous words from labels is a good thing.

He has about 50 cases left of his Klostergarten Kabinett from 2008. I just drank a bottle of that wine three nights ago; it's not only perfect, it's *delicious*, and it's none-too-sweet, and no country on earth makes anything like it. But Loewen needs us to clean him out of those 50 cases. Want to know why?

Because he cannot sell such a wine inside Germany, because the Germans won't deign to even think about drinking such a thing. And you know what? I think the gloves have to come off; this is nothing but fucked-up blinkered philistine pig-ignorance (thanks Python!). It has nothing to do with anyone's *true* taste, and everything to do with a pathetic need to adapt to the prevailing taste. It is ugly and repugnant, because it has the effect of smothering something precious. It is wrong wrong wrong. Because TASTE IS NEVER UNIFORM; PEOPLE AREN'T UNIFORM. The Germans are a charmingly opinionated folk; the cliché is if you have ten people around a table you'll have eighteen opinions on the topic of discussion. How then is it that *they all like precisely the same kind of wine, to the exclusion of anything else?*

Forget the minor inconvenience to me; I'd like to skip straight to the 2009 Kabinett, not because the '08 isn't wonderful (it is!) but because it's the previous vintage – it's yesterday's news. But I can live with that. What I *won't* live with is the demise of a kind of wine that offers an incomparable beauty, usefulness and uniqueness.



And believe me, there's serious danger these wines will grow extinct. If I can't guarantee Loewen (and dozens of others like him) I'll buy him out of the wine – which he has in effect made for *me* – he won't produce it any more. This is not a world I care to live in.

As you may know, Carl Loewen leased the Schmitt-

- **Vineyard area: 8.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay**
- **Soil types: Devonian & light weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau**

Wagner estate beginning with the 2008 vintage. Bruno Schmitt remains active – if you know Bruno you couldn't imagine him anything but active – but Loewen's making the wines.

One of my colleagues felt a bit of triste that Schmitt-Wagner's wines had changed. (Lucky for him old vintages Bruno made are still available.) I didn't share that opinion, though. Loewen's own wines are riper than Schmitt's were, but they are more similar than different, sponti-type wines made in Fuder, old-school Mosels, the way I adore them.

Carl Loewen knew full well the legacy he was carrying on. Not just in human terms, but in the monumental value of the 6,000 vines Schmitt possesses which were planted in 1896. This is possibly the largest-oldest stand of ancient ungrafted vines in Germany, perhaps in Europe. The vineyard – Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg – has various sub-sections and exposures, but it's all steep and there's a lot of red slate that gives the wines the sassafrassy garrigue we also find in Ürzig. As Carl is a terroir-iste of the first order, I can only imagine how it feels to have three equally great and entirely different Grand Crus to play with.

Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands "among the best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the flurbereinigung was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls." Another great site, he says, is the Thörnicher Ritsch.

Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prowl for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer's wisdom; Ritsch was a great site. Well we didn't find its champion then, but we know him now. Finally there's the awkwardly-named Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay, from which Loewen makes a "tribute to the old proprietor of this vineyard, the cloister of St Maximin in Trier."

Mercifully he calls this wine simply Maximiner, describing an "extreme terroir," a 65° mountain falling directly into the river, hard un-weathered blue slate, with an open west flank that catches every moment of afternoon and evening sun. Its position, right up against the river, moderates nighttime temperatures and the soil retains water so that "even in a Summer like 2003 we had enough moisture for the grapes."

loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! "Cool" chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

how the wines taste:

All that's stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a "northern" coolness without being explicitly slatey. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: "I don't like 'old-wine' flavor and I definitely don't like this petrol taste," he says.

- GCL-060 **2008 Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling Kabinett** +
 CORE-LIST WINE, because it offers an explosively generous and flavorful Mosel Kabinett experience at a fabulous price. Carl says: "Here one can find blue and gray slates but also soils where the gravel subsoil is covered with a layer of weathered slate brought down from the surrounding hills by erosion. The Kabinett is made from the slate soils at the foot of the slope."

So, it's slate but not steep slate, which gives these wines an extra fullness and supple texture. And it is back in form (and then some) after an atypical '07; a superfine old-school Mosel; the palate is overcome with a foamy swell of lime and mineral.

What joy!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-12 years)

- GCL-064 **2009 Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling Kabinett** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: More muscle than the '08; a mouthfilling globe of chewy slate and yellow fruits just osmosing aroma and juicy salt.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

- GCL-065 **2009 Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese** +
 A strong little guy here. Moonglow pear and white nectarine atop a big muscular power-chord of slate; darker, more "manly," more *alpha*, impressively commanding – and delicious!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-21 years)

- GSW-067 **2009 Schmitt-Wagner Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 Imposingly tangy red-slate fragrance, and the palate is swollen with spice, not to mention insane length; a slithery angular thing that hardly seems to end; almost eucalyptus high notes and black-forest cake low notes; cherry and dark chocolate and a cunning little overtone of papaya.
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

- GCL-066 **2009 Ritsch Riesling Auslese** ++
 This is by far the greatest Mosel vineyard almost none of you know. Its closest cognate is Zeltinger Schlossberg, though Ritsch is even more extremely *green* (herbs and verbena and key-lime), and this masterpiece is a moderate, un-showy food-friendly Auslese, with all the leafy balsam verbena and psychedelic slate of the site at an apex of expression; it reminds me of Selbach's *en-bloc* wines, a kind of *igniting* of terroir; more like a super-endowed Spät than a confectionary quasi-dessert wine. In fact...
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

- GCL-067H **2009 Ritsch Riesling Auslese Goldkapsel, 12/500ml** ++
 80-90% botrytis, and an almost sultry fragrance of cantaloupe and white chocolate; the palate shows lots of animation and dialectic, here stone and herb, there tropical-lychee fruit and chartreuse; yet it's fresh and bright, even as it invites meditation. "Every now and again you get a wine to be proud of," says Loewen, and he's rightly proud of this. It is a rare kind of wine, a rare combo of virtues. Whether it's 60% better than the regular Auslese, you will decide.
 SOS: 3 (9-28 years)

NOTE: there are three really outstanding dessert wines, an Eiswein, a BA and a TBA. None are especially expensive and all offer excellent purity and avoid tasting like every-other-botrytis-wine. If you're in the market, please ask us for an offer.

OLDER VINTAGES OF KARL SCHMITT-WAGNER WINES:

At insane prices!

- GSW-060 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett** +
CORE LIST WINE: High-toned and sleek, more overtly salty, lacier and precise; an articulate wine of elegant diction, girlish, a gamine of piquancy and mischief; spearminty and flinty—could almost be a Bernkasteler; in all another archetypal Mosel of the old school, the fine handsome old school; blessings on it. May it never die. Drinking like a dream right now.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-22 years)
- GSW-064 **1999 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese** +
 AP# 1/01, a different Fuder from last year's (and canny German wine insiders will note it was the first lot approved in 2001, i.e., the second year after the vintage) It's a less ripe but utterly *delicious* alternate to the first lot; lighter yet creamier and leesier with the best of 1999's beeswax along with fresh comice-pear; a standout for the vintage.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-24 years)



von othegraven

saar • kanzem

You will perhaps have heard this estate was sold last year, to a TV-star I gather is equivalent to Pat Zajak or Alex Trebek – a game-show host whose name every German knows. The gentleman is related to the Othegraven family, and he'll be installed this summer. He promises, of course, no changes. I say "of course" because they always promise no changes, until they start making changes.

It was keenly poignant sitting there tasting the celestially beautiful '09s. It was overcast, with a warm front coming in, and outside there fell the most delicate possible snow, tiny drizzle

flakes, floating straight down so infinitely slowly, like a curtain of tiny beads. It was a snow for the dreamers, as if to pull the blanket up so exquisitely tenderly that they wouldn't awaken. It started to coat the ground and then melted away, all in the same moment; a little March gauze of snow. They have a bird feeder they stuffed with peanuts, and the finches were busy, tiny little hungry birds chirruping to and fro in this tiny gentle snow.

The wines are spirit-kin of Dönnhoff's. In fact I am sure they are the wines Helmut would make on the Saar. I hope the cellar master, Andreas Barth, reads these words and is pleased, because the work he and the Kegels have done the past three vintages is miraculous.

I challenge myself constantly. How much of the spell of these wines has to do with sitting in their enclosed gazebo looking out on the magnificent landscaping and the incredible trees, that meditative retreat along the already quiet Saar? Last Summer when I first re-tasted the enthralling '08 Altenberg Kabinett – my wine of the vintage – it was in the throb and crash of a NY trade tasting. Mostly I was hoping I wouldn't have embarrassed myself with my fulsome praise for that wine. *Please please please let it be good, at least good!* And the wine filled me with its silvery-green silence, and I learned I could depend on that; it was real, and it would follow me whenever the wine was poured.

This is all well and good, but what are you supposed to understand when I talk about tasting "silence?" Is it just self-indulgent poetry? It could be, but I don't think so. For me it describes something palpable.

I am always aware of how a wine enters me. Some call it the "attack." For me it is "And who is this?" Like meeting a new person, before you "know" anything about them, and you're responding purely instinctively, chemically; there is something remarkably *alive* about us in that moment. It's how it is for me with each first sip of a new wine, or even a new bottle. "And who is this?"

Some wines announce themselves. They push themselves toward you. They really work the handshake. Some wines are riffing right away, full of *schtick*, one-liners; they want you to like them, and they work to amuse you. But you feel a melancholy suspicion it isn't at all about you; they do it with everyone – they need to be

- **Vineyard area: 11 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Altenberg, Bockstein, Kupp**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**
- **Soil types: weathered slate with quartzite, iron "Grauwacke" and loam**

liked and approved of. Hail-fellow-well-met. It's their *act*. And often it's fun to encounter, and sometimes there's a genuine and substantive person beneath the bluster.

In wine terms, that's "tasting the noise."

Sometimes you meet someone who seems genially indifferent to the impression (s)he makes on you. *It's just me*. I have nothing I need to "demonstrate." And sometimes that person directs a lovely beam of attention toward you, as if meeting you is a surprising delight. You may spend minutes talking with this oddly compelling new person, and come away realizing how *roused* and glad you feel, but she is still a blank. She didn't talk about herself. She seemed demure; she was curious about *you*.

I become very curious about such people. What is the source of their composure? How do they seem so sure and so stable? How graceful they are, and how effortless they make it appear! While the high-affect fellow seems to spring into action when he feels the spotlight hit him, the other kind of person seems lit from within.

In wine terms, that's "tasting the silence."

With extroverted wines, they rush at you with all their noise and jazz. Often this is amusing and delightful.

With introverted wines, they seem to draw some sheer curtain, and the world falls away. They banish pre-occupation. They deliver repose. They embody a calm, they channel the daydream time. And they do it with no seeming effort at all. The way they combine a serene diffidence with a numinous loveliness is remarkably

poignant and haunting.

And such wines are *full* of flavor. They are often the most searching complex wines we will ever know. But they hold you in their slow theta-dance, and something, some crust starts to dissolve in you, and you liquefy and trickle toward your core, a place hardly anyone ever sees, and the wine seems to know you, like some strange angel.

There can never be many wines like these. In my portfolio only Nikolaihof and Dönnhoff convey this cloister-sense, this breath of stillness. And now, at least with the last two vintages, the wines of Von Othegraven join the floating sway of this singular family.

Their virtues, though, aren't noisy. They won't reward superficial attention. The deeper you can go, the deeper the prize, for these aren't merely great German Rieslings, or great Rieslings, or great wines...they are great moments of life; they show that a certain thing is possible, a thing you hardly ever saw and may not have even suspected, something miraculous, and mysterious. Hedonism washes away, it won't adhere, it's why we chase it so desperately. *This*, though, this stays, this actually changes your life. It might not be a huge change; it's not, like, getting your degree or losing thirty pounds or having your first child...it's a small glimpse of unfathomable possibility, tiny and delicate. But you will not forget it.

Ever since I was a young wine-pup I knew there was something singular about Saar wines, but could never put it into words. Let me fail to do so again here.

The Mosel itself is of course a kind of fjord, a gorge. As such it is protected from wind to a large degree, and its microclimate is moderated by the proximity of the river itself, which also irradiates the vineyards with reflected sunlight on bright days. The Saar, though, is more open country, exposed to winds, and certainly a few degrees cooler than its big sister Mosel. Vineyards are interspersed with pasture land; the countryside is wonderfully calm and beautiful, less dramatic than the Mosel, more serene. Vineyards occupy every possible south-facing slope, but it's a more hardscrabble life for a vine here, having to do without the pampered protection of the Mosel-proper. I'm sure my Mosel growers will chuckle to hear their vines called "pampered," but I'm equally sure they'd be in no hurry to trade places with their Saar colleagues.

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's more so-called Grauwacke here intermixed with the slate. Almost every Mosel wine has an herbal profile and a citric profile, and it is these two things that are seemingly intensified in Saar wines. They are also rather more earthy than Mosel wines. They convey an even more

palpable solidity. When they show the expected apple-fruit they prompt you to imagine the apples were smaller and more dense, or had been picked later, when the fruit-sugars were concentrated by a light frost. Indeed one could say Saar wines taste like Mosel wines from grapes that slightly froze, not deep enough for Eiswein, but just enough for a tangy little jab of concentration. They are also shadier than Mosel wines, with more silvery flavors. Not bad for a guy who basically has no idea what he's talking about!

Egon Müller is, obviously, the standard-bearer for the Saar. He is, if not the very "best" grower there, indisputably the first among equals. In the same class are a few excellent growers making classically fruit-driven wines, and every German wine lover cherishes them, as do I although I do not sell them. Then our friend Mr. Niewodnicanski came on the scene at Van Volxem and really shook things up, opting to make extremely dense, concentrated old-school wines mostly chewy and dry (or dry-ish) which are consistently compelling.

Somewhere between these two poles is Von Othegraven, neither as *outré* as Volxem nor as keenly fruity as Müller et al., but instead hewing to a classical line, making scrupulously honest terroir-drenched Saar wines of admirable depth and form. If you like Josmeyer best of all Alsace producers you'll probably like Othegraven best of all Saar producers.

The estate is 11 hectares, with 7.5 in the great Kanzemer Altenberg which looms spectacularly above the manor. It's almost comical to open the front door and have this immense mountain of vines occupy your entire field of vision. It beats the view out my front door, in any case.

The wines are *spontis*, done in tank since the 2005 vintage, with very long aging on the fine lees, and only racked once *during* fermentation, and not again. Musts clarify by settling. There are three great sites: WILTINGER KUPP on highly weathered gray slate with lots of crumbled earth, making compact brilliant wines with a whole basket of heirloom apples. These are what you'd call *keen* or *penetrating* wines. OCKFENER BOCKSTEIN is famous of course, blue-ish silvery slate, a real Saar archetype. Finally the KANZEMER ALTENBERG on pure Devonian slate with rusty flecks from weathered iron oxide, making the most primordially concentrated wines, almost meaty, with such depth as to be almost inscrutable when young, as if they have so much to say they can only stutter.

I adore wines like these. If you look at a tree from the top down, first you see the thready little branches and then as the eye travels down it gets thicker and thicker until you come to the big round trunk. That's how the palate registers these wines, first the nuances and then the deep-grounded solidity. And they have the innate kindness of trees.

von othegraven at a glance:

Venerable estate on the Saar, making intense soil-imprinted wines which are true Saar-archetypes.

There exists a series of “GGs” all of which are done in new 1200-liter casks. These are controversial inside Germany (which lays far too much emphasis on a grower’s dry wines in any case), and I’d have to join the chorus of skeptics, unless the estate could hold the wines ten years before releasing them. The classic wines, though; there’s nothing better not only in the Saar, but anywhere in Germany.

how the wines taste

They fall between the fruit-oriented style typified by Egon Müller and the more *recherché* antique style practiced by Van Volxem; on the dry side but explosive with terroir and with ever-unfolding depth. Kupp is the keenest and most piquant; Bockstein the most extrovertedly fruity, Altenberg the most profound.

GOG-020 **2008 Estate Riesling Feinherb**

This is completely adorable, almost-dry Riesling, the kind everyone needs – and only some few know. Classy burning-leaf slatey fragrance, charming and complex; limpid, silvery, lunar, beautifully still as if windless, leading to a gentle salty finish. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

GOG-014 **2009 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett****++**

Dee-lish! High-toned fruit, lychee, plum, ripe quince, all atop a meringue of slate; green aloe-vera notes in the middle; has a kind of manic stillness (where I first started thinking of Dönnhoff) – the sense of tremendous activity inside an apparent repose, the sort of tantric-breathing, deliberate, in-the-moment absorption. The empty glass smells miraculous. Our world contains such a thing! Why why why do we waste so much time on inferior bogus garbage? SOS: 2 (5-17 years)

GOG-015 **2009 Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage****+**

Both stronger and less flattering than the Kupp, but equally compelling; more green in the forms of balsam and verbena, and more pure force; a blueberry note over a profound saltiness; juicier and lip-smackinger; an utterly classic Saar wine. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-18 years)

GOG-016 **2009 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett****++**

CORE-LIST WINE. The ‘08 was my wine of the vintage; how will this be? It has more pungent rotliedend aromas, almost like a Nahe wine; 5-spice, a cherry wood fire; juicy and masculine, a gorgeously tart complex clinging to the side-palate; a marvelous Riesling and a foodie’s dream. Long, juicy, delicate yet strong. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-22 years)

GOG-017 **2009 Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Spätlese Erste Lage** **+**

As pungent as the Kabinett but with a more fervent apple ripeness in the middle; a par-fait of empire apples, eucalyptus and lavender and vanilla bean; a remarkable, even incomparable being. A hopeful woodpecker is jabbing away at some tree in the garden outside. So diligent and responsible. You know, to me it is almost incomprehensible to imagine the sweat and strain of the growing season on the steep slopes, the frantic activity of the harvest, the busy-ness of the initial vinifications, and all in the service of these still and silvery beings, they sit like peace in the glass, and steal like grace over our hearts.

GOG-018 **2009 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben Erste Lage** **+++**

Hoo boy. This is a big mama, a thrill-ride of terroir concentrate as solid as a house; tremendously serious, almost brooding aromas; the slate-salt pushes out like primordial tortoises onto dry land; extraordinarily complex and dense; balsam fir and sea salt caramel – one doesn't grasp the whole of this until the last drops of the bottle.

SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

GOG-019 **2009 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Auslese Alte Reben Erste Lage** **++**

The same, even riper. It was sad to leapfrog over the regular Auslese, which was so charming and pretty. But the density of this was irresistible; exotic cinnamon-y spice, a firm masculine tread, a brilliant neon glow. It's so profound it hardly registers sweet. So clinging and obdurate you can't believe how light it is. All the flavor of all the napa-Cabs, *combined*, don't equal as much as a molecule of a wine like this.

SOS: 3 (12-36 years)

GOG-013H **2007 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Eiswein Erste Lage, 12/375ml** **++**

First offering. Melting yet explosive, more an Eiswein-BA hybrid than a glaringly spiky freeze-bomb; in fact amazing beauty of fruit, a swoon, a rapture of fruit. It's the taste of forgiveness, that strange moment when somehow you can't hold the anger any more, it seems to fall from you. It isn't even kindness and you don't know why it happens. The world brings a mercy to you, and this is how it tastes.

SOS: 4 (14-40 years)



core list wines

Hard Core List

| | | |
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| GDD-044 | 2009 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken | 37 |
| GEM-106 | 2009 Eugen Muller Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb | 39 |
| GEM-110 | 2009 Eugen Muller Gewürztraminer Spätlese | 40 |
| GMS-156 | 2009 Messmer Muskateller Kabinett Feinherb | 43 |
| GTM-127L | 2009 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter | 42 |
| GDR-191 | 2009 Darting Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Kabinett Trocken | 48 |
| GHX-062 | 2009 Hexamer Sauvignon Blanc | 77 |
| GJU-122 | 2009 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese | 117 |
| GAC-030 | 2009 Clusserath Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett | |

Core List

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|----------|---|----|
| GMS-157 | 2009 Messmer Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb | 43 |
| GTM-133 | 2009 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese | 45 |
| GDR-190L | 2009 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter | 48 |
| GDR-193 | 2009 Darting Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett | 48 |
| GST-152 | 2009 Strub Riesling "Soil to Soul" | 55 |
| GST-153 | 2009 Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett | 55 |
| GST-154 | 2009 Strub Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese | 55 |
| GGE-040 | 2009 Geil Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett | 61 |
| GGY-083L | 2009 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter | 63 |
| GGY-085 | 2009 Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett | 63 |
| GHX-060 | 2009 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" | 77 |
| GKF-147 | 2009 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett | 81 |
| GKF-153 | 2009 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Dautenpflanze Riesling Spätlese | 81 |

core list wines cont'd

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| GSD-097 | 2009 Schlossgut Diel Riesling Kabinett | .84 |
| GJL-164 | 2009 Leitz Eins Zwei Dry "3" | .90 |
| GJL-163 | 2009 Leitz Dragonstone Riesling | .91 |
| GJL-166 | 2009 Leitz Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese | .92 |
| GSP-065 | 2009 Spreitzer Riesling "101" | .94 |
| GSP-062 | 2009 Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett | .94 |
| GSO-332 | 2008 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett | .110 |
| GSO-346 | 2009 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett | .110 |
| GSO-307 | 2007 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese | .110 |
| GSO-350 | 2009 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese | .110 |
| GJM-073 | 2008 Jakoby-Mathy Riesling "Balance" | .114 |
| GJM-077 | 2009 Jakoby-Mathy Riesling "Balance" | .114 |
| GJU-117 | 2009 Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett | .116 |
| GJU-118 | 2009 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese | .116 |
| GME-166 | 2008 Merkelbach Ürziger Wurzgarten Riesling Spätlese | .120 |
| GME-169 | 2009 Merkelbach Ürziger Wurzgarten Riesling Spätlese #20 #21 | .120 |
| GJC-182 | 2009 Christoffel Ürziger Wurzgarten Riesling Kabinett | .122 |
| GJC-185 | 2009 Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese | .122 |
| GKE-128 | 2009 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett | .125 |
| GKE-130 | 2009 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* Artist Label | .125 |
| GAD-034 | 2009 A.J. Adam Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett | .131 |
| GCL-064 | 2009 Loewen Leiwener Klostersgarten Riesling Kabinett | .133 |
| GSW-067 | 2009 Schmitt-Wagner Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese | .139 |
| GOG-016 | 2009 von Othegraven Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett | .143 |

BACK COVER PHOTO: *Another Glimpse into the Terroir of Messmer's Vineyards*

