



**TERRY THEISE**

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**\* ESTATE SELECTIONS \***

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**AUSTRIA 2011**



# Theise Manifesto

*Beauty is more important than impact.*

*Harmony is more important than intensity.*

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

*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.*

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# Introduction



We just had the year we sold the most Austrian wine we ever sold. But it was only our 3rd highest year measured in Dollars, and this is because a significant share of our biz is in Liters of Grüner Veltliner and Zweigelt. I think it's great that in today's America there's a market for *Zweigelt* in large-format bottles (with crown caps no less), and I'm awfully glad to contemplate all the people reaching for GrüVe when they're looking for an audaciously good bottle of cheap hooch. But after seventeen years at this, it's past time to place Austrian wine where it truly belongs – among the best wines on earth.

After my book came out I did a lot of interviews, since I am a cooperative little lamb, and I was often asked, why Austria? This year I realized I'd been coming to Landhaus Bacher (my bivouac in the Wachau) for nineteen years, and it made me remember the very first time. I spent three days tasting some of the greatest white wines I'd ever tasted. I was convinced of two things. One was that people would flip out when they tasted these wines, and two, even if I was wrong about thing-one, the story still needed to be told. You can't taste wines like that and just walk away.

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

A thing like that can sound elitist. “Too good for the likes of *you*, Bucko.” So go ahead and tag me. But if you do, I'll allow myself to observe that there are hundreds of wines on retail shelves and restaurant wine lists that are *not as good* as these wines and cost as much or more. Why, if you don't mind my asking? I submit that it's because there's an unacknowledged contempt toward anything with German words on the label, an underlying assumption that such wines can never be more than trivial and certainly aren't worth anything north of fifty Dollars.

If I'm right, then I'm not an elitist; I'm just a sad and puzzled idealist.

Maybe I'm wrong and it isn't contempt, but rather fear. I find it odd that people who are serenely competent in all other walks of wine, who don't mind when they mangle the French, Italian or Spanish languages, are suddenly reduced to stammering helplessness as soon as an umlaut appears. What is it about German that makes a person feel so abruptly incapable? Certainly the language isn't as euphonious as the romance languages, but that didn't stop the somm-gloom from embracing "Txakolina," and God help me, if you can say "Sauvignon Blanc" you can say "Senftenberger Piri."

A person I know in the business has a tasting group that meets to grow their knowledge together, and so they arrange themed tastings. One of them was "neutral white wines," (which is a good idea for a tasting), but in this group they included *Grüner Veltliner*, which is many things but none of them is neutral. How could they have so misconstrued it? I'd say it was because a mere "Austrian" grape couldn't be important enough to get it right.

If you are not yet thirty, (and are actually reading something longer than a tweet – thanks!) you came of age when Austria was already a category, and you don't know why I'm seeming so combative. In fact you might think Austria's a little stale. Wasn't it trendy in the 90s? In fact the fullness of Austrian wine in all its facets, from the everyday to the middle-class to the very great, is a wave that has swollen but not yet broken. I promise you, if you approach these wines neutrally and expectantly, that you will be amazed how amazing they are, and that you could have ever thought otherwise.

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

Also changing is that restless spirit of envelope pushing, and this is a very good thing. It might be fun to gun the motor and watch the rpms climb but sooner or later you have to cruise and then you want the motor to hum, not yell. The community of Austrian vintners seems to be saying *We are no longer arriving; we are HERE*. It remains a youthful wine culture, and for every grower entering his thirties there's another 20-something coming along. All the Wachau "names" have grown-up sons working at their sides. A new wave of growers is invigorating the Weinviertel. In contrast to Germany, where many things still seem (charmingly,

delightfully) removed, Austria feels more connected to the international wine-fraternity. You drive through a town that's like an architectural diamond of the 17th century and arrive at a 21st-century tasting room; you meet a man who can tell you jokes in English and who just came from a tasting of twenty-three vintages of Grange- Hermitage. But when you taste his wines, you taste something quite specific and seemingly eternal. It's a little dysphasic.

If German wine is mystic, Austrian wine is corporeal, even sexual. That is perhaps because Austrian wine is more than "merely" Riesling (her Rieslings are about as celestially mystic as the variety can ever be), and it might also be that these are the most graceful high-alcohol wines on earth, hence you drink them *as if* they were medium-alcohol wines and pretty soon you get sorta dazed.

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

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

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

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

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

There's certainly plenty to choose from, with new importers coming along all the time. Most of their wines are quite good, because the base-line in Austria is remarkably competent. Yet I looked at a potential add-on from the Kremstal this year, an estate that came highly recommended, and the wines were perfectly good — or “perfectly good,” the kind of wine if you'd ordered blind in a restaurant you'd be relieved. O.K., *this isn't stellar but I can drink it.* Like that. Immediately thereafter we'd staged a blind tasting of wines I'd already selected, alongside a very famous estate who'd approached us. It makes no sense to add names just because they're names. The wines have to fit somewhere, and so I tasted them alongside wines we already had, divided into price categories, all Grüner Veltliner. And the very first thing my colleague and I noticed was the *quality level rose markedly.* The guy whose wines we'd begun by tasting was simply outclassed. Our wines had more character, more focus, more precision, *more interest and beauty,* in a nutshell.

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

In other news, there are developments sometimes positive and sometimes malign. I'll go into the whole DAC nonsense a few pages hence,

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

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

Speaking of sanity, since the *Traditionsweingüter's* classification is “unofficial,” it is up to them whether outsiders would get to use it, or under what conditions. After all, they are not the sole owners of these outstanding vineyards, and in fact there are peak sites which none of them own. To be exclusive under these circumstances could appear to be claiming a monopoly on Truth. (Are you listening, o wise overlords of the VDP?) And so, wonderfully, an experiment is being conducted whereby estates outside the group can also use the “*Erste Lage*” designation. This signals a generous inclusiveness that is exceedingly rare in the wine world, and I find it admirable and touching.

I'd be glad of a similar flexibility on the subject of residual sugar, but there is an historical aversion to it that has its roots in the '85 wine scandal — about which I needn't bore you just now. Nearly all Austrian white wine is either very dry or else Sauternes-sweet. The in-betweens of Germany or Alsace are all but unknown, even anathema here. But in some cases they go too far. Dry means *dry*. The operating principle is don't interfere with the wine, so in vintages when fermentations go all the way the wines are very dry. Other times a few slovenly grams of sugar remain. It's as it happens.

It needs to happen more often. A few years ago after tasting through a bunch of samples from prospective newbies, and wondering if I was having a sad-palate day because so many Rieslings tasted so austere, imagine my surprise when two Trocken Rieslings



from *Johannes LEITZ* just rang out with beauty and harmony and class. Many of the Germans are making their Trockens at the upward limit—9 g.l. residual sugar—and when it works (as it does in the hands of a master like Leitz) the wines have a shimmering dialectic that is simply *unavailable* in bone-dry versions.

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

After all, it stands to reason that if there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. There is soft-creamy dry and there's accommodating dry and there's very crisp dry and there's fierce austere dry and there's even

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

Of course these are matters of taste, or they ought to be, yet often I suspect there are several too many shoulds and gottas going on before the fact. Peter Schleimer is one of the few who comes by his conviction honestly; he simply prefers his Austrian wines dry. But for each guy like Peter there are dozens of people who cling to the *Idea* that sugar is evil, sugar is pabulum, sugar is how

bad wines are disguised; therefore sugar is to be avoided on principle *unless it can't be*, in which case you invoke the even more prevalent principle that wines shouldn't be manipulated. In other words, sugar's O.K. but only when you can't help it. Well, sigh. This is the kind of thing seductive to wine writers but somewhere oblique to the truth.

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

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

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

You know what I mean! When we're starting out

we often ask "How *much* flavor does this have; that way I'll know how much I like it (or how many *points* I'm supposed to give it)," but as we gain more experience we start asking "How beautiful does this taste, how fine, how haunting?" And when we finally learn to relax with wine we barely think abstractly about it at all; we just know when our bodies and senses transmit the joy-signal.

## \* THE 2010 VINTAGE \*

Just before starting to write, I looked at the official harvest report from the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, and was struck by its plucky mix of candor and positive spin. When I first read it several months ago I remember thinking "Uh Oh, a mediocre vintage at last," but having just come back from tasting these surprising '10s, I think the Board was maybe too demure.

It was, to be sure, an unusually cold vintage, all the way from flowering to harvest. But it was also a mostly clean vintage (at least for Riesling and GrüVe) and in common with Germany it's full of extract and fragrance. But while Germany contended with seriously freakwad acids, Austria's were merely higher than normal.

Often I'm forced to pause when deciding how to phrase something in my vintage report, which after all appears in a sales document designed to make you want to buy. Luckily I have the very best wine categories, and markedly over-achieving growers in those categories, so that I am often very happy with the wines and never have to spin, let alone deceive you with my emollient prose. But I also have to trust you. Will you really read this text, or merely scan it for headlines? So that if I write "Riesling wasn't as good as GrüVe" will you take that to mean you *shouldn't buy Riesling*?

Here's the truth of the matter. There are fewer great Rieslings than there are great GrüVes, but there are great Rieslings.

There's a bigger number of somewhat stingy Rieslings at the low end, whereas most "value" GrüVes were not just acceptable but actually very attractive.

The 2010 vintage shows fewer sun-derived exotic flavors than the '09s did, but '10's underlying dark mineral flavors are much more galvanic than anything in '09. The word "force" kept appearing in my notes. These wines have a gorgeous fierce mojo. And I know there are tasters for whom the genial '09s were too eager to please. These splendidly gravelly '10s will grab you and not let go.

For we are not talking about a thin year. We are definitely not rationalizing inadequate ripeness by citing "minerality." We're looking at a vintage whose (many) best wines are jammed with fragrance and which are seethingly powerful in an incisive attack that has little to do with



fruit per se, but which is nonetheless full of length and with its own kind of ripeness. You will taste them and think “These wines have a ton of flavor,” but if someone asks you what the flavors are, you may look to the usual fruits and flowers and start groping for an answer. Odd, isn’t it, that we don’t really have a vocabulary for these things. Yes, mineral, herbs, spices and all that, but there’s a numinous charge about these wines, as if you held warm pulsing rocks in your hands. The vintage is *strong*, it will beat you arm-wrestling, and its version of ripeness is valid: very long hang-time under cool conditions and plenty of alcohol, though blessedly almost no excess alcohol.

In fact it is one of the most successful GrüVe vintages of the last twenty years. But we’ve been spoiled by the over-endowed ‘09s and ‘06s, which made even the Liter wines “sweetly” fruity. If I say 2010 is a reality check, that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with reality! The best ‘10 GrüVes are tall and sinewy, less massive than the sexy-pie vintages and more like those insane muscular calves of cyclists or the vertical power of basketballers. And they are zero-nonsense; they mean business, they don’t give the slightest fuck what you think of them. They have command. And you notice it with your nose still a foot from the glass.

It’s again an unfinished vintage for Gelber Muskateller. As in ‘09, the choice was to pick it early and clean, or wait for more ripeness and risk botrytis, which you never want in dry Muscat. Picking at 11.5-12% potential alc will give the green catty side of the variety without its mitigating orange-blossom and elderflower side, but lucky for me I love the green catty side, so I’m still jiggy. It was an entirely superb vintage for the neutral grapes; you never tasted such Pinot Blancs and Chardonnays. You’ll be spoiled. They have flavor! They have structure and length.

The crop size is very small, smaller than the already small ‘09s, and the Spring frosts of early May 2011 came at the worst possible time. On the other hand, a normal size crop would not have been this good.

It seems better as one goes west. Most of the Weinviertel and Wagram can be described as “perfectly good with some high-spots,” but in the Kamptal and Wachau 2010 is a candidate for greatness. For each “top” Riesling that isn’t quite as complete as one hopes for, there’s a Federspiel that’s usually flaccid but that absolutely rocks in ‘10. It’s as if the entire category were standing at attention. Shoulders *back*, soldier. They are as taut as the bow when the arrow’s pulled all the way back. And they seem to whistle across the palate like the arrow does when it’s shot through the air. I’ve never tasted a vintage like it. And you won’t want to miss it.

Of course my friends at Nikolaihof report a “normal” vintage, nothing extraordinary, and just a 5-10% smaller crop than usual. Yet it bears repeating; this is very likely the legacy of almost 40 years of bio-dynamic farming: strong,

robustly healthy vines. Growers in transition, even growers through transition and able to certify, are often stricken by how daunting and labor-intensive it all is. But their children will bless them.

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

I wonder how some of you will feel. These aren’t garrulous wines. They are in the best sense demanding, because they are also rewarding. But they are not seductive, and they don’t compromise.

You’ll note I’m not discussing the reds. That’s not because they’re shameful – far from it – but because they’re usually a year behind, and it’s the round roasty ‘09s we’re seeing now. When I did taste ‘10s I liked them. They may not be juicy beasts of yumminess, but they’re pencilly and full of dark fruits and I liked them just fine.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

This is quite a lot harder than it might seem. And there are some surprises.

### THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE:

**NIGL:** for a nearly perfect collection across the board, and for being one of the few who aced both GrüVe *and* Riesling. And the very greatest wine of all is being held back until January 2012. I also saw this as something of a comeback-vintage for Martin, who seems to have

completed his return journey from the inconsistencies of the last several years.

To call **GOBELSBURG** a “runner-up” is unfair and inaccurate. They have as many great wines as Nigl does. In fact the two are close to equal, both stellar, but Nigl attained something he’d been having some trouble finding, and something that is his alone, and miraculous.

### WINE OF THE VINTAGE

It has to be the entirely quotidian, every-day **Grüner Veltliner** from the *second label* of **SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG**, because this perennial overachiever is dangerously excellent in 2010. No other wine in this (and I doubt in any) offering could possibly soar so vastly above its class. Without hyperbole, it is at least as good as 85% of the *estate-bottled wines* among this grouping. There should be some Nobel-like prize for the humanity of caring so much about the customer who doesn’t spend much on wine, who won’t post on internet bulletin boards, won’t give you 97 “points,” won’t put your name in lights – won’t feed your ego, in other words. And what does Michi Moosbrugger do for this person? Give him *three times* the quality he had any right to anticipate.

### GRÜVE OF THE VINTAGE

Hands down, the astonishing **GRUB** of **SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG**, which is even better than the normally supernal LAMM, and which shows the signal genius of 2010, to have wrestled this normally brutish wine into something a lot like splendor.

Others that were great include **HIRSCH’S LAMM**, the entirely out-of-this-world **MAXIMUM** from **HIEDLER**, his best since the all-time great 2002, and **SETZER’S** best-ever vintage of “**8000.**”

### GREATEST COLLECTION OF GRÜVE

That is, the highest sustained across-the-board quality of GV in the 2010 vintage. And the winner is....oh shit, it’s a TIE between **HIEDLER** and **GOBELSBURG**. Seriously, you can’t choose. What’s nice is they’re great in completely different ways. But neither of them missed a beat, and everything, even the least of the wines, are as good as they can be.

### RIESLING OF THE VINTAGE

**NIGL’S PELLINGEN “PRIVAT,”** which takes Riesling into almost unknown realms of detail and mystery.

### MUSCAT OF THE VINTAGE

Quite certainly (if also quite improbably) **NIKOLAIHOF**. It’s only improbable because we don’t associate them with Gelber Muskateller, and the last few vintages were uneven. But this baby is doing the Steiner jive.

### ROSÉ OF THE VINTAGE

I thought the best Rosé was **HOFER’S**, though for all I know you already bought all of it.

### VALUES OF THE COLLECTION

One of each color: the **GLATZER 2009 Blaufränkisch Riedencuvée**, and the **HIRSCH veltliner #1**.

### WHERE IS ALZINGER?

It was a wonderful vintage for them, and there’s so little wine all I’ll do is frustrate you if I draw attention to it here. I even offered to make them a schnitzel, anything to wrest away a few more cases of wine, but to no avail. I think I’ll just change my name to “Noah Vale” when I visit this estate. Send more wine to Noah Vale, why don’tcha?

### GREAT WINES WITHOUT CATEGORIES, AND OTHER SURPRISES

The surprises, once again, will often go onto a “hard-core” list, by which I seek to draw your attention to them so they don’t get lost in the big DI list. Even a jocund guy like me gets riled up if really good wine doesn’t sell too good.

**ECKER** Grüner Veltliner Stockstall, a bouncy little puppy at 12% alc, but a sterling example of the greatness of ’10, to give the everyday wines such verve, length and bite.

**SETZER** Grüner Veltliner “Vesper,” for similar reasons, because it shows every adorable facet of medium-bodied GrüVe and because it gets lost between the cheaper Liters and the drama of the top wines. These endlessly friendly wines deserve better.

**HIEDLER** Riesling Steinhaus “Süss.” What, him again? Well he done went and made one of the most singular and amazing Rieslings ever made in modern Austria, an “accident” that stopped fermenting with 30g RS (as opposed to the wonderful German-style Riesling Bernhard Ott makes deliberately, with Leitz consulting), and which he could have *forced* to ferment dry, but no, our hero actually acted on the oft-voiced principle of leaving the wine alone, and has a shimmering beauty as his (and our) reward.

**NIKOLAIHOF** Gelber Muskateller, for reasons already explained.

Here are two wines already on our regular core-list, but which are strikingly good in 2010: **NIGLs** Riesling Dornleiten, and **GOBELSBURG'S** GrüVe Steinsetz, which is not just good but absurdly good as well as out-of-character in 2010.

**HOFER** 2008 Grüner Veltliner “Von Den Rieden,” because it costs 20% less than the current vintages (anything less than infantile is DOA in the hyperactive Austrian domestic market) and because it is a perfect GV no longer in diapers and begging to be poured by the glass.

Both wines from the partnership of **SCHRÖCK AND KRACHER** are leagues ahead of their predecessors, and each embodies the goal of the collaborations, to create synergies unavailable to either estate alone.

**GLATZER** Sauvignon Blanc; all you sybarites who scored the lovely and wonderful 2009 Hexamer SB, start queuing up for this, and don't be too sad if you can't get it; there's only 42 cases available and I had to whimper and beg to get that many. You guys only *think* I'm proud and cocky; in Austria I'm as servile as a poodle and I still don't get no scraps.

## CORK

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

## FIRST AMONG EQUALS

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

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

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

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

Here's a baseball metaphor. Any wine in this offering gets a base-hit on a line drive. A one-plus wine does so with runners on base, who are driven in. A two-plus wine is a base-clearing double in the gap that misses being a dinger by inches. A three-plus wine is a 7th game- of-the-world-series walk-off grand slam home run.

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

## WHEN TO DRINK THE WINES

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

Riesling, amazingly, ages faster. In certain vintages it takes on the flavor-known-as “petrol,” which it later sheds. Great Austrian Riesling will certainly make old bones—30-40 years for the best wines—but all things being equal GrüVe tastes younger at every point along the way. So: young is always good. If you want mature overtones wait about ten years. If you want a completely mature wine, wait about twenty.

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

he has The Touch with this variety.

### A NOTE ON MY USE OF THE WORD "URGESTEIN"

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

### A NOTE ON MY USE OF THE PHRASE *SECRET SWEETNESS*

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

### THE QUESTIONS OF ORGANICS

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

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

The consensus among serious growers is to go as far as prudence will allow toward organic growing.

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

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

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

## AUSTRIAN WINE CULTURE

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



put it; the same wines from any other country would be demanded like Viagra), and I try and balance the obstacles of buying AND selling the wines, and believe me my legs weren't meant to bend that way.

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

It can be odd to deplane into this lovely country for the first time, climb into your car and head off to your first winery. Along the way you are deep within old Europe in all its stately handsome antiquity, yet when you ring that first bell you're entirely likely to be met by a dashing young person who speaks fluent English and knows more California winemakers than you do. His office is chock-a-

block with gizmos, he's using a rabbit corkscrew and fancy stemware and his cell phone is programmed to ring with Tarzan's voice. But as soon as you taste his wine you're immersed again into a kind of abiding Good. They are "wines as they've always been, only with better machines." They begin with soil, to which they are determinedly faithful, and they eschew confections at all cost. It is quite stirring, these slow, deep wines coming from such cosmopolitan creatures. It is even more encouraging to catch the occasional glimpse of the deeply anchored values which lie below the surface. It says, we don't have to give those up in order to be 21st-Century men and women; it says maybe we can figure out how a person should live.

There are other reasons to be encouraged. A few growers are taking principled stands against this silly faux-urgency whereby a vintage is kicked off the stage while the new one is

still fermenting. More of them are doing what Johannes Hirsch began three years ago, and holding (at least some of) their wines back until they're *ready* to taste and sell. This takes *huevo*s of brass my friend. There are risks. First you diminish your cashflow; you could easily have sold that wine between April and November, but you're waiting 9-12 months to release it. When you finally do, will customers still want it? After all, there's an even *newer* vintage already soiling its diapers. Last, how

much disappointment will your customers accept? Will they come back after you tell them "Sorry, that wine isn't for sale till January of next year?" That growers are willing to contemplate this at all is an immensely healthy sign. We should applaud the idealism that does what's best for the wines, and assumes one's customers have long attention spans.

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

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

### What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

At its best, it tastes like an ethereal essence of the seed. It is dark, intense, viscous; a little goes a long way. In Austria it is used as a condiment; you dunk bread in it, drizzle it over salads, potatoes, eggs, mushrooms, even soups; you can use it in salad dressings (in which case you may *cut* it with extra-virgin olive oil, lest it become *too* dominant!); there are doubtless many other uses which I am too big a food clod to have gleaned. If you develop any hip ideas and don't mind sharing them —attributed of course—I'd be glad to hear from you. **THE FACTS:** this oil is the product of a particular kind of pumpkin, smaller than ours, and green with yellow stripes rather than orange. The main factor in the quality of the oil is, not surprisingly, the **QUALITY OF THE SEEDS THEMSELVES**. Accordingly, they are hand-scooped out of the pumpkin at harvest time; it's quite picturesque to see the women sitting in the pumpkin patches at their work—though the work is said to be arduous.

### Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

5. Relative gentleness or roughness of mashing.

The seeds are mashed as they roast, and the more tender the mashing, the more polished the final flavor.

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

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

### Storing and Handling

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

### The Assortment

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

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

### Bottle sizes

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

**OAT-003** (12/250ml)

**OAT-007** (12/500ml)

**OAT-010** (6/1.0L)

# Familie Prieler

Neusiedlersee-Hügelland // Schützen



vineyard area // 20 hectares  
annual production // 8,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Goldberg** (slate); **Seeberg**,  
**Sinner** (limestone, mica schist); **Ungerbergen** (limestone with pebbles)  
grape varieties // 30% **Blaufränkisch**, 15% **Cabernet Sauvignon**,  
14% **Pinot Noir**, 10% **Chardonnay**, 10% **Merlot**, 10% **Pinot Blanc**,  
8% **St. Laurent**, 3% **Welschriesling**

**2010 is a perfect vintage for Prieler, and I wonder what will have been learned from its precedent. The wines have a structural sense of direction they rarely attain in the clement warmth from which they grow. Usually they excel by an amplitude of glowy fruit that's just focused enough, but these '10s are as lithe as sprinters.**

That's just the whites of course. Georg and Silvia's reds are also in motion and I like where they're heading. "We're quality junkies!" Silvia said with a merrie twinkle.

I know Prielers will never forget my visit in 2009, because I did something highly subversive even by my slovenly standards. We were all out to dinner in Eisenstadt, both Prielers, my colleague Leif and me, and Peter Schleimer. We ate food that was good. When the time came to place dessert orders I mumbled half-facetiously "Hmm. . . I actually could eat a *schnitzel* right about now. . ." whereupon Georg's eyes lit up: "So could I, a *schnitzel* sounds real good." Leif said "I'm game," and of course Schleimer's always game. Silvia looked at us as if we had taken leave of our senses, but they had Bründlmayer's *Sekt* on the list, so there wasn't only *schnitzel* but also the perfect wine to wash it down with.

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

We were out celebrating because Silvia's gorgeousness was ALL OVER the cover of the new "Falstaff" magazine. They were Vintners Of The Year. This is a big deal; Falstaff is sort of like Food And Wine but with lots more wine coverage. Oddly enough in three

out of five years it's been one of my guys on Falstaff's cover, first Heidi Schröck, then Michi Moosbrugger (from Gobelsburg) and now Prieler. I think I'll have to send Peter Moser a shiny new unicycle or something.

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

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

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

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

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

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



convinced him to leave to her diabolical intentions.

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

I’d like to do more with this estate, because here

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

### 2010 Pinot Blanc Seeberg +

AEP-075

One sniff of this and it was clear something was up; a serious fragrance like ambitious Maconnaise (or delicious mayonnaise, I get them confused); the palate shows grip and creaminess but without malo, and striking langoustine and tortillas; a lot of up-front vinosity and rocky impact, then mid-palate cream and a stony scallion-y finish. Playful, solid and bright; the best in many years.

### 2010 Chardonnay Ried Sinner +

AEP-076

Many of you didn’t know they make another Chard in the “international” idiom, with small oak and malo. It’s good of its type, but the last thing I need to do is add to the omnipresent thrum of oaky Chard, so I leave it behind.

This year there’s 5% of it in the above cuvée. It starts by making itself felt with a veil of “international” stuff over the customary stony skeleton, but with air this retreats dramatically and lets the spicy limestone loose to leave its almost Chablis note on the finish. Ends up all rockslide, with just a subtle allusion to oak. Honestly I think it’s wonderful.

### 2010 Leithaberg Pinot Blanc ++

6/750ml // AEP-077

This is by far the best vintage they’ve made. Wonderfully creamy, oyster and salty but with those solid bones of ’10; tapioca, basmati, superb grip and salty length; like really good oyster mushrooms, balsam and delicate ginger; sensationally good.



## 2010 Rosé vom Stein

AEP-073

Blaufränkisch and Merlot. This is not without substance, this guy and his 13% alc; it's the Rosé you drink in the Fall after the slighter Summer wines are gone. It has the same sweet stylish fruit of Diel's, and berries to eternity. Again elevated to a rare expressiveness by this wild-ass '10 vintage.

## 2008 Blaufränkisch Ried Johannishöhe +

AEP-066

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A later bottling than the wine from last year, and with a slightly different *assemblage*. It's really sappy and spicy, brickly and Chianti-like; much richer and more "serious" than the 1st cuvée, more chocolatey and even more polished and coffee-like. But as always, it's ur-Blaufränkisch and insanely fun to drink.

## 2009 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch + (+)

6/750ml // AEP-078

## 2009 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch

6/1.5L // AEP-078M

Immensely spicy fragrance, minty and Madagascar peppers, leads to a spicy palate that has panache and depth, resolving into an earthy bloody finish that isn't animal, and stays precise and focused. Sweet and garrigue-y, almost silky, quite primary yet but glossy. Tasted next to the splendid '08, this is considerably sweeter and juicier.

## 2009 Pinot Noir +

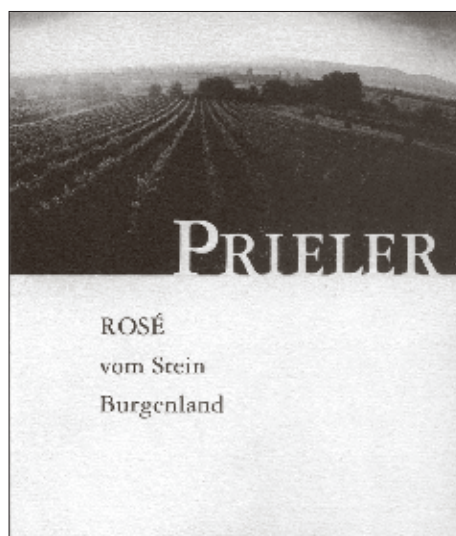
6/750ml // AEP-079

The wine grows in delicacy and refinement each year, just as it grows less oaky. Now we get almost Vosne aromas, deep sweet and meaty. Seriously good! The palate is almost painfully tight - to the point of constriction - but the finish goes all truffley. I'm curious to follow this. Silvia says that filtering will open it up, in fact. So much for the conventional wisdom, right?

## 2007 Blaufränkisch Goldberg + (+)

6/750ml // AEP-070

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



# Heidi Schröck

Neusiedlersee-Hügelland // Rüst

vineyard area // 10 hectares  
annual production // 3,300 cases  
top sites // Vogelsang, Turner  
soil types // eroded primary rock, mica slate, limestone and sandy loam  
grape varieties // 25% Weissburgunder, 25% Welschriesling, 10% Blaufränkisch,  
10% Furmint, 10% Grauburgunder, 10% Zweigelt, 5% Gelber Muskateller,  
5% Sauvignon Blanc,



***I went to see Heidi in the morning of a day when I had dreamed like crazy the night before. Since I moved to Boston I've been dreaming again. I'd forgotten how it was. Where I lived before was so brutally all-consuming that sleep was a kind of oblivion I needed just to cope with being conscious. Now it's like a 24-hour show, as if the throbbing noise dissipated and let loose the night furies. I love it, but you have to be willing to carry the echo of whatever you've dreamt into the day.***

When my son was about four, I saw him coming out of his room one morning, and asked him how was his sleep. *Good, Daddy.* And did he have any good dreams? *Yes Daddy, you were in one of my dreams.* Really? What was I doing? He looked puzzled and shook his head, and then answered *You know what you were doing, Daddy; you were there.* So that's it; a lifetime of Jungian study, compressed into one single sentence.

So it's good to have the dream world back. The screen isn't dark any more, and one of these nights I hope to join Steven Colbert and Keira Knightly as we tumble naked through the snow down Mt. Washington on our way to eating six dozen Nootka Sounds from the B&G Oyster Bar. But anyway, when I got to Heidi's house I was all buzzing from a chittery night's worth of visions, and I wanted to see a friend I could relax with.

A stork was scratching its head in its nest on top of a neighboring house. Rust is full of storks. They arrive in the Spring and gorge themselves from the Stork-smorgasbord also known as Lake Neusidl. Beautiful, magical birds, with their dreamy kite-like flight and their clackety mating calls and their silly yet beatific faces. I'd never seen one scratch its head before; he looked like he was stumped over a clue in the Times crossword puzzle. For an instant I thought I was still dreaming. And so I joined my friend Heidi, and her wines, and her life among the storks, for a few genial hours.

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

vintage of Halbtrocken wines, anathema in the domestic market (but delicious then as now).

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

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

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

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

Because all she has to do is offer it.

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

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

Being a wine-girl is a bigger deal in Europe than here, as I've said elsewhere, yet I don't think of Heidi as a "woman-vintner" but simply as a vintner. She belongs to two girl-vintner groups, one of which I think she founded.

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

### 2010 Gelber Muskateller

AHS-115

"This is a wine made to dance for one Summer," says Heidi. I share her triste and love for the brief dancing life, though I often find Muscat has enough dance in it to go several Summers, in fact. She made this the same as the evocative '09, but this is less evocative and more direct; really blatantly varietal aromas, and it's the first Muscat I'd tasted (coming quite near the end) that had elder and orange-blossom notes. It's also riper than many (12%), while the palate is vivid and undeflected, quite minty and dry...rather like her old "Muscat," in fact.

### 2010 Weissburgunder

AHS-118

Was there ever a vintage that gave such aromatic Pinot Blancs? This one's exceptionally bright and briny with notes of sweet corn; the palate is firm-boned, sweet-fruited and oyster-shelly; not as leesy as Prieler's, and seeming drier, but more pointed and brassy.

### 2010 Sauvignon Blanc +

AHS-119

This used to disappear into the "Muscat" blend, but Heidi's in a specificity phase, evidently, and this I must stand and applaud. The wine is wonderful, certainly varietal but by no means as blatant and crude as SB can be; in fact it's quite mineral, as if it had 30% Riesling; redcurranty and currant-leafy but actually subtle and classy, with an extract-soaked crushed-rock density that lingers into a finely detailed finish; in all poised and mouthfilling.

### 2010 Furmint +

AHS-117

After an '09 that's still holding its cards, the forthright greeting of this vintage is something of a relief. Furmint, bless it, is allusive in any case, which is why we love it – but we'd rather it weren't inscrutable.

I sometimes think if I had to select just one wine from my entire portfolio that would express *why I do this and what I believe in*, it would be this one. 8.82 hectares in all of Austria – Heidi has 10% of them – reintroduced after having vanished by a small coterie of loyal idealists, difficult to grow, late-ripening and high acidity, and a subtle searching flavor that so perfectly expresses the sad sweetness of late Autumn. The stubborn fragrant quince, the little divinity-crystals in the pear, the low honey-sun, all there in these wines.

The '10 has fetching aromas, not blatant but sweet as tilleuil; the palate is salty and rosewatery, and with air the fragrance comes on; it's allusive and subtly grassy, markedly long and mineral; a few nubby phenols, but the wine's not yet filtered. It's elliptical yet searching, sifting through the tree for the sweetest little moon-pears.

**2009 Grauburgunder +**

AHS-114

What a difference a year makes; what was mute and diffident last year is splendid and marvelous now. In fact, **THIS IS HOW TO DO OAKY WHITE WINES**. It's so smoky-sweet and braised, long-simmered stock; just get past the oak-dominated aroma and the palate is a creamy mélange of lees, caramel, surprising grip, carrotly sweetness and malt. It seems to firm up and get less oaky with air, and there's an almost-minerality buried in there somewhere.

**2010 Rosé "Biscaya"**

AHS-120

St. Laurent and Merlot; a rich and lovely dark-fruited Rosé; not berries and laughter but instead fruit and conversation, as among reasonably serious grownups. Long internal perfume, again circular and indirect but definitely present and expressing as rose hips and mulberry.

**2009 Ried Vogelsang**

AHS-113

A summit for Heidi's wines. 60% Welschriesling, 40% Pinot Blanc and Gelber Muskateller, it has a freaky Pfalz-like fragrance of lemon blossom honey and candied ginger, really an Auslese scent, though this wine is dry. Yet it's talc-y and malty, sweetleesy, spicy, ringent, vital and vigorous – and *delicious*, with a candied-spicy finish that suddenly introduces all this exotica and tonka bean. A beguiling, original wine. Be a crime to miss it. Really, I'll send the police to your apartment if you don't order it.

**2008 Welschriesling/Weissburgunder Beerenauslese "Selektion"**

6/375ml // AHS-121H

Same base wine as offered last year, but this one spent 30 months in cask, and has become markedly mealy and Jurançon-ish – though with 11.5% alc you can *schlurp* this wine. Still on the not-terribly sweet side, but the cask aging and the pretty '08 fruit are fetching.

**2008 Ausbruch "On The Wings Of Dawn"**

6/375ml // AHS-116H

Want a short simple tasting note? This is pancakes, bacon and maple syrup in a glass. C'est tu!

## The Duo of Schröck & Kracher Wines

These can now be released, though under sad circumstances, what with Alois Kracher's distressingly premature death. He and Heidi were friends, and "Luis" loved a new project, and he wondered what sort of wine he might help make on the "other" shore of the Neusiedlersee, where the soils were more complex than the sands of Illmitz. I spoke with him on Heidi's cell phone one day as she and I were driving home from dinner. She'd told me about the project, and I assured Luis I'd be glad to collaborate with Vin Divino on joint marketing and sales, assuming they felt the same. Luis said he was very relieved to hear it, and I wondered why. I didn't think it was extraordinarily gentlemanly of me... Now of course it's all changed. Alas. Luis is gone. As I write I'm not sure what's becoming of Vin Divino. Nor do I know how much wine Heidi wants to sell. I only know I want to be the only guy selling it. There are two wines, a dry one called Greiner (the name of the vineyard) and an Ausbruch. Both are now '07s.

**2007 Schröck & Kracher Greiner Welschriesling**

6/750ml // AHS-122

**2007 Schröck & Kracher Ruster Ausbruch**

6/375ml // AHS-123H

Whether it's the more elegant '07 vintage, or whether it's another level of know-how with the second vintage, these wines are in another league entirely from the somewhat ungainly maiden voyage, and for the first time you can taste the synergy that must have motivated the project at the beginning.

The dry wine shows lovely violet and lavender '07 aromas and an almost buttery flavor, like a croissant dipped in mirabelle jam; the palate is still rather throbbingly baroque (14% alc), but those sweet-straw puff pastry flavors are yum-may.

The sweet wine is warmer and more forceful than the hotter, more assertive predecessor. It's a classic example of the baroque power of the Ausbruch genre; quite bruléed and vanillin, but not really creamy. This has magma power.



vineyard area // 15 hectares  
annual production // 5,800 cases  
soil types // gravel with brown earth and sand  
grape varieties // 60% Zweigelt, 30% St. Laurent, 10% Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Weißburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Welschriesling

***My local distributor carries Sattler's basic St. Laurent, so I've been along while it's taken out to show to customers. Most don't know what it is, and suppose it might be all weird and umlaut-y. Until they taste it. Then I get to watch the gradual melting away of each successive layer of resistance, as the sumptuous prettiness of the wine completes its seduction. I don't even care if a customer insists on pronouncing it as if it were French – Sawhn Lawhrahn, instead of the much easier "Zonked Low (like "cow") Rent". In fact, here's the handy-dandy mnemonic – it's like "Zonked Cow-Rent" which is of course the stipend paid by a drunken Guernsey when he knocks over your fence.***

Everything about this estate is candid and getting more so all the time. There aren't many wines. He knows what he wants to do, and does it. The wines are getting less oaky as he trusts his fruit more. The Austrian wine press is also noticing, and the wines are prominent among the top performers.

When you start out you have certain wines against which you model your own. You reassure your customers (and yourself) that you can compete with viable wines in the familiar idioms. You are, in other words, guided by a certain timorousness and insecurity. If you can demonstrate your competence at the prevailing style, you comfort yourself, please your customers, and sell some wine.

A lot of growers stop there. They know the right things to say, and they can create a plausible facsimile of a serious wine estate, and the wines are often tasty. But in the end they are dull. Because they have no way to answer the crucial questions: why do you exist? What is yours to say?

Growers who are capable and curious, who actually want to develop, will often find after a few years that they can trust the essential taste of their fruit. And so they adjust their cellar work to favor things that are inherent and downplay that which is applied later. Oak goes from being a bad master to being a good servant. I think this is exactly what's happening at Erich Sattler's tidy little winery.

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

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

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

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

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

**2010 Zweigelt Rosé**

AST-034

By the time you read this we will have bought every drop we could and sold all of it. So if you have some, love it and be glad, because it's focused and insanely charming, 12 out of 10 on the wanna-kiss-it-on-the-lips scale.

**2010 St. Laurent**

AST-035

**2009 St. Laurent**

AST-030

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The final bottling of the '09 was late March '11, and not surprisingly it's sweeter than the '10, rounder, and even has a dusty tannin or two; very much in the braise and porcini style. The tank-sample I tasted of the '10 – and by the way, the “basic” wines here see *not a scrap of wood* – was still on its fine lees and not yet filtered; it's less meaty than '09 but more bacony, with promise of length and precision. Less ripe years are by no means negative for this variety. The '09 will be available until Fall.

I can't say it enough: a wine like this is like going on a date and absolutely *loving* your date's company. All you have is fun. And you think about the last person you went out with, who was better looking but who monopolized the conversation and wouldn't shut up. Lousy kisser too.

**2010 Zweigelt**

AST-036

**2009 Zweigelt +**

AST-031

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The final bottling of the superb '09 was last November; it feints in the direction of its parent-Blaufränkisch with its metallic tinge that makes you remember Cab Franc; but the palate is wonderfully rich and lush, spicy and charming, and quite detailed for its almost creamy feel; a perfect fruit-driven beauty. The 2010 (also an unfiltered tank-sample) has more vigor and spicy edges, pure blackberry, but is markedly rich in mid-palate density. They're like identical twins, one of whom is tanned and the other pale.

**2009 St. Laurent Reserve +**

AST-037

The '08 reds have evolved the sleekest, most beautiful fruit you ever saw. They don't have power, but they have all the beauty and deliciousness a wine can have. The wine is cool and smells like irises. The '09 of course is warmer, an exceptionally fine vintage, with so much fruit richness it overcomes the (30% new) oak, and is an enveloping fruity food-lovin' critter with a refined rusticity, fetching smokiness and rich but moderate body.

**2009 Zweigelt Reserve +**

AST-038

**2008 Zweigelt Reserve +**

AST-033

Same supplies as the St-L. The '08 now on the market is exotic, smoky and solid, almost *speck*-like; for me it has all the virtues of Ribera del Duero without the challenge (again, for me) of overripeness and mawkishness. This instead is addictively fruit-driven. But the '09 is another kind of wine; the palate is less oaky than the nose, and this guy is loaded with gorgeous fruit and smoky *salumeria*, part Lagrein and part Corvina, and more refined and drinkable than either. Seriously, line up for this! And be ready to remember how sheerly delicious yet *serious* a wine can be.



# Paul Lehrner

Mittelburgenland // Horitschon



vineyard area // 25 hectares  
annual production // 10,000 cases  
top sites // Dürrau, Gfanger, Hochäcker  
soil types // sandy loam and clay loam  
grape varieties // 77% Blaufränkisch 20% Zweigelt 3% Cabernet Sauvignon

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

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

Paul's a guy you want to encourage to talk, and this is easier than it might sound since he doesn't spit when he tastes. He has opinions. He has started to wonder whether his region is really suited to Pinot Noir and St. Laurent. He aligns himself more and more with the particular ornery angular Blaufränkisch, and is considering whether to lease a vineyard in Südburgenland where the soils are volcanic and the vineyards are steep. Paul is restless and passionate and full of beans.

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

Thank God for an honest man. And with Lehrner it seems less like a choice he makes than an imperative of his temperament. He makes wine of candid fruit without embellishment, and he talks to me about them candidly and without embellishment.

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

He's a vintner who wants, avowedly, to make "wines for drinking and not for winning awards." Makes good sense! "Light," red wine has a function and usefulness—and rarity—that make it precious. How often is red wine

both light and dense, with enough flavor and length to fill its frame? Lightness doesn't have to denote undernourishment. It is sometimes precisely appropriate.

Two final points. It's somewhat misleading to call these wines "light," as in fact they have considerable depth. What they are not is inky, tannic obsidian dragons which bellow 600% new oak at your schnoz. They have a sort of black-belt surety, a calm contained power that doesn't have to be *demonstrated* every five minutes. Second, Lehrner's wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from 2009.

I have to emphasize that these have become markedly tannic wines. I did what I could to taste through, including eating lots of bread dunked in (exceptional) grapeseed oil along with a perfect hard cheese like a 2-year Gouda. Nothing worked.

You will like them more than I do if your tastes run this way. I'm quite a fuss budget where tannin's concerned, and my palate seems to exaggerate it. But I first chose Lehrner because of the *fruit* in his wines, which I now find I often have to grope for beneath a gritty tannic veil.

He's also in the habit of showing the wines at cellar temp, which doesn't help. Bottling with screw cap is another factor, I think, and Paul's wondering whether a return to cork wouldn't be the lesser of two evils.

**2010 Zweigelt “Claus”**

APL-075

The '09 has lots of warmth and roasty char, with gravelly tannin and a grill-mark finish. The '10 (from a cask-samp) has a ton more pure fruit yet a tannic attack on the palate. I like its direct gurgle of fruit, so we'll see what bottling does to it.

**2009 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**

APL-076

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Just two weeks in bottle and hard to read. It has its rye-toast and lamb chop typicity, along with saltiness and a sunflowery touch, spicy and juicy, but still behind a veil.

**2009 Blaufränkisch “Steineiche” (+)**

APL-077

**2008 Blaufränkisch “Steineiche” +**

APL-073

The '09 becomes available in the Fall, and it's as expected, rounder and richer and sweeter, more marrowy, more the crowd-pleaser, falls-off-the-bone rich, a lovely rendering that somehow avoids tasting “international.”

**2007 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker “Reserve”**

APL-078

*First offering.* This is from a vineyard Paul bought during the growing season, with grapes on the vines. He opted to vinify it to see how it would be, so this is 1-of-a-kind and not to be repeated. It's an excellent rich Blaufränkisch, in the best sense countrified and open-aired; long, round and conservative, i.e., no new oak but long aging in 3rd-use wood, so it's admirably *Austrian*.

**2008 Blaufränkisch Dürrau +**

6/750ml // APL-079

Usually considered the top site in Mittelburgenland, and Paul only bottles it in the best vintages. Though it's 100% new wood, the fragrance is tremendous and all I smell is the grape; the palate is massively mineral and weedy but with a swollen inside-sweetness; still lots of evolution in store, but this is the argument for Blaufränkisch made without pandering; nothing but depth and as rich as a grass-fed lamb.





# Walter Glatzer

Carnuntum // Göttlesbrunn



vineyard area // 54 hectares    annual production // 25,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Rosenberg, Kräften (calcerous clay);  
Haidacker (gravel, loam and clay); Altenberg (gravel and clay, with high lime content);  
Schüttenberg (sandy loam and gravel); Bärenreise (sandy loam and clay)  
grape varieties // 37% Zweigelt, 17% Blaufränkisch, 12% Grüner Veltliner,  
10% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Weissburgunder, 3% Sauvignon Blanc,  
2% St. Laurent, 2% Pinot Noir, 2% Syrah, 2% other

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

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

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

I also want to sing a paen of praise to this man's red wines. He makes them to be drunk and loved, not admired and preened over. He could easily make each of the prevailing mistakes: too much extraction, too astringent, too tannic, too oaky, reaching beyond

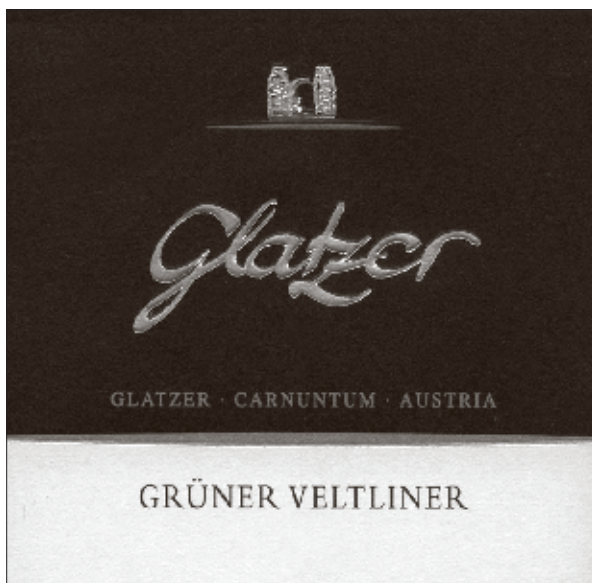
their grasp. But year-in and year-out these are absolutely *delicious* purring sex-kitten reds.

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

He's one of those people who wants to make *sure* you're content. “All the prices O.K.?” he kept asking. “Is everyone having a good time?” he asked me during a group's visit. “You bet,”

I assured him. “There's enough food, isn't there?” he persisted. “Oh, plenty!” I replied. “There isn't too **much**, is there?” he wanted to know. “No, there's just EXACTLY THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD, WALTER. *Relax*, man! Everybody's in the pink.”

There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tasting notes.



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

## 2010 Sauvignon Blanc

AGL-147

I'm putting this on the **HARD-CORE LIST** because it was so remarkable, another instance of 2010 conferring a palpable mid-palate mineral depth on what's normally a quotidian wine. This is unusually filigree and subtle, less gooseberry and more currant-leaf, and with a delicate flinty-ness and salt. It's a steal at this price.

## 2010 Grüner Veltliner

AGL-145

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Cool and sleek this year, showing all the top notes of GrüVe, crackery and starched, penetrating and peppery. Got some scrape, this guy. It's flavory and by NO means underripe, but it's verging on steely and is quite... precise. Cold-grilled zucchini, marinated cucumber, are the things I thought of.

## 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"

AGL-148

Walter's top reserve wines are named after a bird (thorn-bird) that eats the ripest grapes. As is always the case, this **IS A REMARKABLE VALUE**, equating to a basic-level Kamptaler while costing about 30% less. It's as ripe, round and olive-y as always, and unusually salty this year.

## 2009 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée" +

AGL-139

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

## 2009 Zweigelt "Dornenvogel" +

AGL-142

A nearly perfect medium-bodied fruit-driven red. *Can* it be tastier than this? It was the VINARIA #2 Zweigelt in all of Lower Austria, so apparently it can't be, or not by much. Wines like this show how gorgeous pure *fruit* can be. Wood only shows on the finish and in a nice way. Less burly than this has sometimes been, and more faithful to the berry. I love it to pieces.

## 2009 Blaufränkisch +

AGL-149

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Ah, again excellent after stumbling recently. Classy Glatzer Bf, with his rich "smoothie" fruit and yet varietal specificity, toast and herb oils and rosemary and Sarawak pepper; this has power and vigor and is **outstanding** in its echelon.

## 2009 Blaufränkisch "Reserve" +

AGL-150

This is more intense and chocolatey, easier to "get," more vinous and rich with non-fruit mojo. Even a little tannin. Carob, pepper and a meringue-like crunch.

There is a really outstanding 2009 Blaufränkisch "Vineyard Selection" to be released next year, which could well be the best red wine Glatzer has ever made. Certainly ++ quality.

## 2009 St. Laurent +

AGL-151

A wonderful basic SL, though far from "basic;" it's rich and dark-chocolatey and Burgundian, and even its typical note of Grenache is turned-out and well behaved; the wine is silky yet intense, with a markedly complex and long farewell. By far his best yet, and so good that I wasn't tempted by the ostensibly "sweeter" Reserve wine.

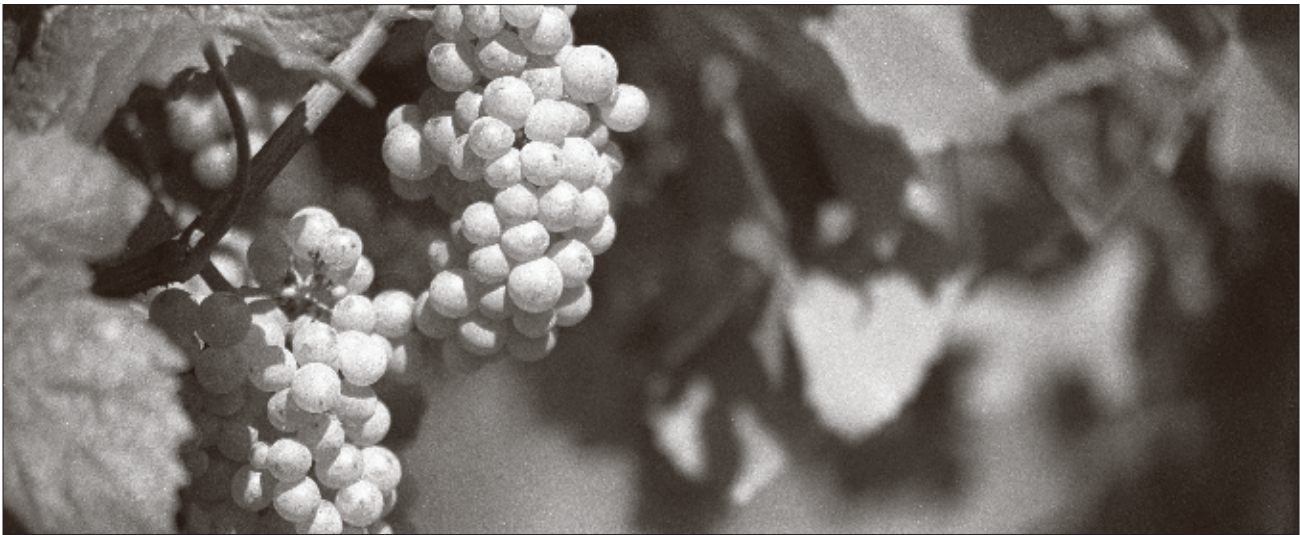
## 2009 "Gotinsprun" +

AGL-152

A cuvée of 60% Bf, 15% Merlot, 15% St-L and 10% Syrah. I'll say it again: if you must make an "international" wine, this is how. *Not* overripe, *not* over-alcoholic, *not* suffocated by oak, but packed full of sweet seductive fruit, iron and mint, and a power that expresses as mineral, of all things.

# WEINVIERTEL

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



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

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

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

This started maybe ten years ago, when the first wave of young growers applied modern methods and made far better wines than the innocuous plonk which came before. Attention was duly paid. But with repeated exposure

one began to want something the wines weren’t giving. They were certainly “contemporary” enough, all cold-fermented stainless-steel yada yada, but most of them were lacking animus and soul. With the entrance of another wave of young vintners, it began to change.

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

# Schwarzböck

Weinviertel // Hagenbrunn

vineyard area // 24 hectares  
annual production // 15,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Kirchberg, Sätzen (löss); Aichleiten (flyschgestein with löss); Hölle (flysch)  
grape varieties // 50% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Zweigelt, 10% Gelber Muskateller  
10% Riesling, 5% Merlot, 10% other



*This was the first estate I visited, and so I was forming impressions without any expectations. I wrote, after the first several wines, “A fast-moving parade of flavors that arrives loud and disappears promptly.” Yet by the end I found myself convinced that '10 was better than '09 here.*



It's easy for me or anyone else to come along and tut-tut over a couple wines that may have gotten away, but you try managing a 23-hectare property with more than 50 different parcels, tough guy.

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

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

Hagenbrunn is virtually at the city-line of Vienna – you'd expect the trams to run out there. Some of the vineyards are on not-insignificant slopes, and most soils are loamy löss, with Riesling being grown in

sandstone covered over with löss. They have a modern tasting room where you can buy – I swear I'm not making this up – bars of milk-chocolate filled with Riesling and dark chocolate filled with GrüVe. Now I know where my allocations are going. Rudi and Anita seem in every sense to be a typical young vintner-couple, but even on first acquaintance I sense something more. Rudi seems just a little bit shy, as if he's more at home in the world of the vines than in the tasting room. His seeming diffidence reminds me of Walter Strub's, in that it reflects less a hesitancy than a modesty built on knowing there's always more information and you're never done experiencing. I'm eager to know this guy better.

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

## 2010 Grüner Veltliner

1.0L // ASB-029L

Since we're in such short supply of Hofer's GV liter, I really *really* hope you'll be moved to explore both this beauty and also Setzer's. A super-expressive fragrance here, utterly classic; the palate is snappy, crunchy and lentilly, gravelly and mineral, with hints of flints and a mass of grass.

## 2010 Grüner Veltliner vom Bisamberg

ASB-031

A focused, charming, amazingly fragrant wine. (At this point I didn't know just what aromas these '10s would always show.) Lots of lightness and lift and snap. I don't miss the yellow fruits of '09, though one notices the finish, while clean and mineral, is a little clipped where fruit would normally be. But no worries; just slurp the next oyster.

## 2010 Grüner Veltliner Kirchberg +

ASB-032

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Subtle ripe vetiver aromas, classic flowering-fields; this is virtually perfect ripe GrüVe, with pepper and semolina cereal; some botrytis as a positive smoky nuance, and lots of ore and char; detailed and salty finish.

## 2010 Grüner Veltliner Hölle

ASB-033

This is his big-boy, sometimes too big in ripe vintages, but perfect in the girdled form of a year like '10. It's fragrant and creamy and long, but as yet unevolved; it needs to uncoil, its core isn't present, yet its finishing length is enticing and suggestive. Hard to resist at this price, and hardly a gamble at all.

## 2010 Gelber Muskateller

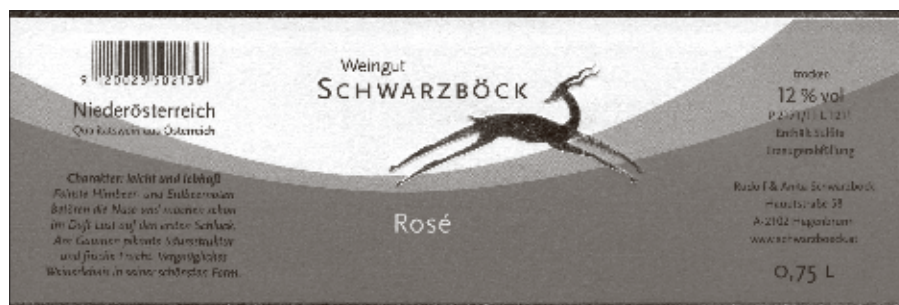
ASB-034

This one I knew of in advance, as it "scored" markedly high in a VINARIA tasting of '10 Muscats; indeed it stood out in a vintage not all that inspiring for Muscat. And with just 11.3% alc. Super-pretty varietal fragrance, with orange-blossom and cut and even a bit of richness; the palate is more allusive than the aroma announces; a polite charming wine, peony and white lilac; a fascinating delicious table wine, with a vaporous length.

## 2010 Zweigelt Rosé

ASB-030

Discreet yet finely berried fragrance; palate comes on extremely prettily, blackberry and wisteria; insanely fresh and charming with grip and even a whisper of tannin. This is gauzy yet convincing.



# H.u.M. Hofer

Weinviertel // Auersthal

vineyard area // 20 hectares  
annual production // 16,600 cases  
certification // Bio-Ernte Certified Organic  
top sites & soil types // Freiberg (löss with loam); Kirchlissen (löss with clay)  
grape varieties // 53% Grüner Veltliner, 13% Zweigelt, 9% Riesling,  
8% Welschriesling, 4% St. Laurent, 3% Weissburgunder,  
2% Gelber Muskateller, 8% other



*The laughing Gods are making cruel sport of the organic growers the past few years. Hofer's crop was down even more than the conventional guys' were, as you'll have noted if you attempted to order his GV liter in your accustomed amount.*



2010 was both typical and atypical here. The wines have the torque and grip of the vintage, but in many wineries that make both reds and whites it was decided not to block the malo for some of the whites, an expedient many growers preferred over chemical deacidification. A couple of Hofer's wines show a delicately oxidative nuance. When it was more than delicate, I didn't take the wine. He was also unusually apologetic about the entirely moderate and reasonable price increases he couldn't help but take. He's a very nice man.

Auersthal is just barely beyond Vienna's northern suburbs, in a dead-still little wine village. It's rather odd to drive there and see lots of wee little oil derricks, but such little oil as Austria produces comes from these parts, deep below the löss. I had either forgotten or had never known the estate was organic; they belong to a group called Bio-Ernte which has standards above the EU guidelines. In speech, by the

way, "bio" is pronounced to rhyme with "B.O." which can lead to some drollery as you hear references to "B.O. wine" unless, unlike me, you have left behind your adolescence.

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

The wines have a quality of moderation and intelligence; they are clear and reasonable. In "normal" vintages such as '02 and '04 they are exceptionally deft and even charming. In warm years they can flirt with extravagance. They have a kind of firm smoothness that's cool like marble. There are some lovely reds to show you.

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



### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg

AHF-044

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This one splits the difference between the lively crisp '08 and the meadow-rich '09; clear and spicy with a delicious interplay of sweet grilled veggies, subtle cress and white pepper.

### 2008 Grüner Veltliner Von den Rieden

AHF-046

**First offering,** and a **HARD-CORE LIST WINE.** There's no longer the baby-flavor of the barely-born wine – my wife calls this “circus peanuts” – and this still-childlike wine is a *perfect* by-the-glass candidate; direct and flavory, generously aromatic, full of lentils and maitakes and sorrel and lemon balm. It's also *lower in price* than the current wines. Why even hesitate?

### 2010 Riesling

AHF-045

The price reflects the melancholy scarcity. It's almost a mini Hollerin (see Alzinger), with a small touch of malo but almost luridly white-peachy and especially the purest apricot you ever tasted that wasn't an actual apricot; a slim stony note below a veritable gelée of fruit, and an apricot-y finish.

### 2010 Zweigelt Rosé (SOLD OUT)

AHF-041

Do we still have any? It's the best vintage yet; crazy watermelon! Has body, substance and charm, and also a malo touch that makes it like a strawberry cream pie.

### 2009 Zweigelt

1.0L // AHF-043L

A nice, warm and generous Burgundy-styled Zweigelt, maybe the most giving and meaty among the red Liters. Really lip-smacking, satisfying wine, ripe and savory – and 12.5% alc never tasted so round.

### 2007 St. Laurent +

AHF-040

A year later this beauty is only more beautiful, and it's criminal how we've failed to attract your attention. Yes this is a big offering, but still. Someone buy some! I'll give you a lawn-gnome.



vineyard area // 30 hectares  
annual production // 16,700 cases  
top sites & soil types // Laa, Eichholz (löss over alluvial gravel and limestone)  
grape varieties // 50% Grüner Veltliner, 30% Roter Veltliner, with 20% Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Zweigelt and Merlot



**Setzers were only too glad to let us take a new picture. Especially Uli, who said she “looked like a bug” in the old one.**

Every portfolio has a sleeper, and this is the sleeper in mine. It has to do with how busy we all are. For wines like these, you need to be able to slow down enough to notice how lovely they taste. Because their strengths aren't (often) overt; they're less about volume and more about tone, less about force and more about charm. They're often wistful and dreamy, like bossa nova, but you won't get them if you can't pause. Big tastings don't flatter them. And big tastings are all that most of us have, to form an impression.

But here is a place I am as happy as I can ever be.

Thirsty, delighted and happy. These are my kinda wines, and my kinda folks.

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

I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic virtues. In people it denotes an effort of behavior whereby you feel appreciated and cared for. In wine or music it creates a response of palpable delight. I find this feeling more pleasant than many other feelings which seem to have greater prestige. Don't get me wrong; there's a place in me for being knocked out, blown away, stunned, impressed, but I find none of these as exquisitely pleasurable as feeling delighted or charmed. Also, charm is a flexible virtue. Charm can exist in big wines or medium wines or little wines. I also appreciate this virtue because it seems less reducible to recipe: any grower of unexceptionable talent can make intense wine. It seems much more intuitive to craft wines of charm, less a matter of formula than of constant attending to tiny details. And knowing all the while that your wine won't be the biggest, boldest, loudest rock-em sock-em wine on the table. But it will insinuate, will crawl inside a certain temperament and sing its siren song, and this is the pleasure for which we live.

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15

minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the summit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure löss terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram. Yet I feel the wines are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his “competitor,” bless him) called Vinovative.

But I don't want to leave you with the impression this is a “modest” winery producing the kinds of wines that happen to charm me. Indeed, Setzer is serious and Important, having won many accolades (Vintner Of The Year in a major wine magazine, to cite a conspicuous example), and the GrüVe “8000” has been given VINARIA'S three stars. It's just that I've come to discern the difference between “appraising” a wine and “loving” a wine, and it's a huge blast when you can do both. These wines are good company; you could take a cross-country trip with them.

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

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



## Grüner Veltliner

1.0L // ASZ-044L

This year it's light, clean, honest and a little grassy, with a few gooseberry notes from the cold September, a light underripe-banana smoothness and a lot of charm.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Vesper"

ASZ-045

11.5% alc; you can swig it. I put it on the *HARD-CORE LIST* because it has the amazing 2010 grip and focus and the emphatic mineral, yet this is Setzer, which means it's classic and charming and shows every attractive facet of light-bodied adorable GrüVe.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Ausstich" DAC +

ASZ-046

This has substance and solidity below the loveliest sweetest fruit; wonderful thick substance – did I remember to say substance? Complex and herbal and apple-y and boxwoody and smoke and ore; a texture both solid and fluffy. Setzer at their basic best.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Die Lage" + (+)

ASZ-047

10 days in bottle, but what a wine! Enormously solid, complex bath of stones, grains, corn kernels; remarkable length of high spiciness and low notes of tortillas; chewy stony solidity and salty length; coiled and powerful – but the *right* power.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "8000" ++

ASZ-048

Named for the vine-density in a site called "Laa." More vines and fewer grapes per. Often I feel this wine breaks the reins and gallops off into incoherent overstatement. Not this year. 2010 works its crazy magic; the wine is absurdly salty, with a completely contained fervor of power that screams in a soundproofed room; the mineral constriction is very very good for this wine; it combines a deep oven-warmth with a megalith of stone. The best young wine I've tasted here.

### 2009 Zweigelt +

ASZ-049

I am fearfully tempted to *HARD-CORE LIST* this absolutely lovely wine also. Perfect cool fragrances, classic Zweigelt but with less cherry and more peony and tobacco and carob; the palate is loaded with sweet fruit – I don't remember a Zweigelt with *better* fruit – and the bacony finish also doesn't hurt. The formula of warm-vintage-cool-climate makes for an awfully seductive wine. I doubt you can resist it, if you taste it.



# WAGRAM

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



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

facing south, far enough from the river to avoid botrytis in most years.

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



vineyard area // 20 hectares  
annual production // 11,600 cases  
top sites & soil types // Steinberg (weathered primary rock);  
Schloßberg, Im Wasn, Mitterberg (löss); Mordthal (löss with high lime content)  
grape varieties // 50% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Zweigelt, 12% Roter Veltliner,  
5% Riesling, 5% St. Laurent, 5% Weißburgunder, 4% Sauvignon Blanc,  
4% Gelber Muskateller

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

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

This is “modern” wine at its very best. And I’m willing to understand feeling defensive about deploying a word like “modern,” because I agree we should be wary; too many times modern wines are simply denuded and clinical. Yet we should also be wary of being too precious about what we’d call “traditional” wines. It

takes a degree of discernment to distinguish their true virtues from the ones we ourselves *like* to make out of their flaws.

I like every single wine I taste here. I liked their exceptional clarity, their incisive detail, their high-definition obsessive nuance, their fresh vitality, and most of all I love their charm and deliciousness. It’s not the same sort of charm we see in Setzer, whose wines are more cashmere-textured, but it is something of great good humor that elevates the wines from mere correctness. I don’t want all wines to be modern as these are, but I want all *MODERN* wines to have the animation and soul I taste here.



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

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

**2010 Grüner Veltliner ( SOLD OUT )**

1.0L // AEC-041L

Though it appears here first, at the estate you actually taste it last, because Bernhard has cojones of steel and he knows how good even his “basic” wine is. It’s a gesture of pure honesty. This one is the light-bodied preview for what you’ll see coming up, but it has the almost bizarre mid-palate extract of ’10.

**2010 Roter Veltliner**

AEC-043

Cooler and saltier than last year’s, sleeker and more incisive and vertical, but *quite* fragrant, with a honey-mushroom touch, and meadow-flower. Spritzy and clear but not acid-driven; rather smooth and gentle given its freshness.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner von Stokstal**

AEC-044

**HARD-CORE LIST**, because I seem to be stupidly determined to draw attention to just this category of my beloved GrüVe: 12% alc and a wine you can drink any time all the time. There’s wonderful brilliant clarity here, a classic Ecker wine with just crazy charm of fruit and quintessential lentil and sorrel, remarkable length and saturated extract. A perfection of the ordinary.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Schloßberg +**

AEC-045

Was I ever as happy as the day I discovered how to find the “ß” on my keypad? Now we get to the wines-with-attitude, starting with this classic löss GV, the first *strong* wine in the lineup, yet still buoyant and as whippy as a kite on a windy day. He aces it every year, it seems; refined swet hay and dough and semolina; spice and length and grip and a sly charm all the way through.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Mordthal +**

AEC-046

No longer called “Prämium” as he wants to highlight this best-of-the-region vineyard. Old vines 50+, and this is a cool-vintage rendition of an extravagantly forceful being; baked and exotic aromas delineated and showing Grand Cru non-fruit flavors; swollen and rich yet also gravelly and ore-like; boxwood and white Sarawak pepper; a fine ripe *ample* GrüVe that’s not “Burgundian.”

**2010 Zweigelt**

1.0L // AEC-047L

’09 is on the market now, that round and yummy fellow. This ’10 is in the best way forthright and candidly simple; cherries and hyacinth, cool and walking a slim solid line; not at all “thin” but it has its business and does it, delivering honest fruit and tastiness in full faith that such things don’t need to be pimped.

**2009 Zweigelt “Brillant”**

AEC-037

Getting near the end of this. Very pretty! The apex of warm, round fruit-driven Zweigelt, until the dusty black cherry surprises you; spicy and compact and essentially you can’t resist it, and if somehow you can, you really shouldn’t. Just when you think the wine is *merely* fruity there’s all kinds of herbal nuances. Jon Bonné of the SF Chronicle said it was “ripe and almost gulpable” and I just know he’d have given it 318 points, if Jon used points.

**2009 Zweigelt “Tradition” +**

AEC-048

Now it’s more mellow and round, but still *absolute fruit!* Here with some sweeter tertiary elements; you see that St Laurent is a parent; it’s a little bloodier, but really this dialogue of warm and cool is soooooo sexy; the wine just delivers and it seems to *give* energy instead of sapping it.

# KREMSTAL & KAMPTAL

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



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

even more time than theirs do.

I had a rather subversive conversation with a Kremstal grower this year, as part of our mutual lamenting of the "DAC" silliness. He said "I'm not really all that sure why we need all these *regions* at all; Kremstal, Kamptal, Traisental, Wagram. . . are they really so different?" Well wow. I don't often hear growers speaking so blasphemously. It sort of made my mind reel. *You know*, I said, *even the Kremstal is senseless as a single region; the valley itself is one thing but it's very different from the löss terraces along the Danube in terms of exposure and microclimate*, to which he agreed. You can make a case for the Wachau between Dürnstein and Spitz, i.e., the gorge, because that area has singular characteristics. But I'm not entirely sure how the consumer benefits from having so many different regions whose wines aren't that different from one another. I rather think these things are done by bureaucrats and marketing folks, because they get a kick out of categorizing. Yet a *true* breakdown of these places based on soil, exposure and microclimate would look very different than the currently demarcated regions.

vineyard area // 18 hectares  
annual production // 20,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Gebling** (löss and gravelly löss); **Steingraben** (clay-marl-löss rock); **Leithen** (löss and rock); **Haid** (deep brown earth)  
grape varieties // 70% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Zweigelt, 9% Riesling, 5% Chardonnay, Malvasier, Cabernet Franc and Welschriesling, 1% Gelber Muskateller



***Berger's GrüVe liter is the wine we sell the most of, and at this point it could almost coast. Almost. But the crucial tiny membrane between almost and never is something I never need to worry about. Erich won't forget it. It isn't in his makeup. I can see each year how serious he is to ensure this wine is still performing for me. I mean, it's a modest wine he can't make more than pennies on, yet he cares about it because he's made of caring. I'm moved by the humble decency of taking care that this little wine is still good, is always still good. It takes just as much caring as it does to ensure a great wine is indeed great. But the difference is that everyone notices the great wines; you get trophies and awards and 'tout le monde' wants to buy you a beer. Here your caring goes un-remarked upon.***

I suddenly remembered a thing I hadn't thought of in years. Once I was at a carwash that did some detailing of the outsides and insides, and as I was waiting for my decidedly cheap-ass car, I observed all the very nice expensive cars the guys were working on. But they took the *same* care with my funky beat up Accord hatchback as they did with the Caddies and BMWs, and I was extremely impressed. "Thanks for respecting even *my* crappy car," I said. "Just doin' it right," they said.

That's it: just doin' it right.

So while I am very proud and happy to offer and sell this Liter wine, I have to wonder why so few of its customers are curious to see what else Erich can do. "If this wine is *this* good then how must the better wines be? They don't cost all that much more..."

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

Erich and his father always made charming tasty wines, cool, "sweet," feminine and alluring — never big or show-offy or obvious. Then Erich told me he wanted to make a small change, toward a more overt style, less inferential and aloof and more positive and definite.

I liked these new wines and told him so, but lamented the passing of another proponent of *charm*; there are never enough of these.

But the last few vintages have seemed to *compelled* Erich back to the old style. He couldn't help make creamy charming wines from that material. Look, I am a man with greying temples. I'm in the wine-biz and drink wine very often. For those reasons and possibly others of which I'm unaware, I'm starting to place my highest premium on *drinkability* and *beauty* when I select wines, not just for you but also for my personal sloppin' down. A few years ago I began to see the occasional dichotomy between what I offered to you as Great Wine and what I actually bought for the private stash; what I need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

And I would stake this claim; if you buy wine for **practical** reasons, not simply to have "nothing but **90+!!**" on your shelves or wine-list, you must pay attention to the *quality*, the *loveliness* of the flavors of the wines you choose. Any clod can buy and sell BIG-ASS wines. Showreserves, wines for the tasting room. I want to sell you wines for FOOD and LIFE. Berger's wines are delightful and affordable. 'Nuff said?

**2010 Grüner Veltliner**

1.0L // ABG-111L

**CORE-LIST WINE.** It's the silvery leafy side of GrüVe, snap and brassica, sorrel and boxwood, bright and salty. For sure less fruit than the overachieving '09, but there's more lift in these '10s.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Lösssterassen DAC**

ABG-114

Classic down-the-middle löss GrüVe – an ur GV to teach a class with – and in '10 you have a tatsoi and ore-like snap. These wines pinch and nibble in the nicest way.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Gebling DAC Reserve +**

ABG-115

Sometimes the higher peaks of '10 stay encased in their dark shrouds. Even when ripe – and this packs 13.5% alc – there's little swell of fruit, but instead an intensified gravelly iron focus, flint and mizuna. Needs a *lot* of oxygen. Mind you, it's 2 weeks in-bottle when I tasted it, which explains a lot. It's hugely mineral and salty, with notes of broad-leaf parsley.

**2010 Riesling Steingraben DAC Reserve +**

ABG-116

Well here's some fruit. Pure apricot and overripe plums and roasted red pepper and verbenas; the palate is loaded, fruit-packed, herbal and limey and shimmery. Almost like a Gaisberg with its shirt untucked.

**2010 Gelber Muskateller**

ABG-117

11% alc. Hey, guess what? I came back after being in Austria for two weeks, and there was a third of a leftover bottle of Berger's '09 Muscat still in the fridge. We don't own a vacu-vin or any other wine-preserving devices, and I was sure the bottle would be tired. Nothing doing! It was nearly as fresh as the day it was opened. So there, smart guy.

To this catty little '10; there's a dialogue of Madagascar pepper and char and, interestingly, apples. As always, the poise of creaminess and snap is so fresh and enticing. You may try to cavil the wine is slight, until you're forced to contemplate the 5-minute finish.

**2010 Zweigelt**

1.0L // ABG-112L

Attractive in every way, and fresher than the '09; more the Dolcetto gurgle, silky and tight and spicy.

**2009 Blauer Zweigelt Haid**

ABG-118

Boy that '08 as such a dead-ringer for an 80s Zin, back when you could drink them, back when they gave some odd archaic thing called "pleasure." He still has 40 cases of it, if you want it. This '09 is rounder and shows more mid-palate tobacco and stock, rounder contours and fewer angles, less briar than the '08; easier to "get" if you respond to warmth per se. But they're both happy-tongue puppies, with the '08 more mischievous and the '09 more sedate.

**2006 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen +**

ABG-095

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

# Familie Nigl

Kremstal // Priel

vineyard area // 25 hectares  
annual production // 25,000 - 30,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Senftenberger Pellingen, Hochäcker (*mica slate, slate*)  
grape varieties // 40% Grüner Veltliner, 40% Riesling, 5% Sauvignon Blanc,  
5% Gelber Muskateller, 10% other varieties



***By the time I got to Nigl I'd tasted enough to have formed an impression of how his wines would likely be. Martin's are sleek, fastidiously articulate and focused wines, and I assumed these facets would be exaggerated by the long-cool structured 2010s. Happily, I was thoroughly wrong.***

Being wrong is good. Expectations are meant to be confounded, at least where wine is in play. Being right may be efficient but it's boring. Helpful at times, and necessary – we need to be able to find our ways through the thickets – but as long as I'm not *always* wrong, my sporadic blunders are actually useful to me. In the current instance, I'd failed to consider that the small crop size would pack some jujy into these wines, and even if they were zingy they'd still be full of beans and seriously chewy. "Remember the whole picture," I told myself.

There was a period between 1993-1999 where Nigl seemed to have the Midas touch. This new vintage would fit neatly into that amazing string. In fact I'd say it belongs among Martin's all-time best three years (with '90 and '97), and when these wines are this good, they show us something few other wines can show.

You'd expect them to come from a bespeckled gentleman with finely chiseled features, who speaks deliberately and cultivates a side study of medieval jurisprudence. That, or some sort of monk-savant. But no, these almost eerily searching wines hail from a hearty unpretentious country fella. When you meet Ludwig Hiedler you feel a total unity between human and wine, but with Nigl all you can feel is perplexity.

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

But lately I have been making myself *drink* them just as though they were ordinary beverages, because I want to see what kinds of *lives* they live when they're not wine-specimens we examine delightedly. And I've discovered that what they need is time, ambience, and food. Not because they are imbalanced (the usual bromide for crummy wine is "Oh it needs food," to which the only proper response is "No, it needs to be better wine.") but because they exist in the sensual world, and they are more useful than we think.

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

Theirs is a penumbral or spectral sort of beauty, around the edges of which is something invisible, like radio waves, the vinous equivalent of molecular cuisine; you feel neural pathways firing as you taste them. But in his own establishment the food is what I'd call country-traditional with unusual respect for ingredients and everything from scratch. It was dysphasic drinking these keen ultraviolet wines with a big ol' plate of noodles with morels and sweetbreads, but it showed me something. As otherworldly as they sometimes can appear, with food

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



they snuggle right up as all good wines do.

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

The Krems valley has a climate rather like that of the western Wachau. "During the ripening season we get oxygen-rich, cool breezes in the valley," says the Nigl price list. "Therefore we have wide temperature spreads between day and night, as well as high humidity

and often morning fog. These give our wines their spiciness and finesse. Another secret for the locally typical bouquets and the elegant acids of our wines is the weathered urgestein soils, which warm quickly."

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

### 2008 Nigl Brut de Brut Rosé (Sekt)

6/750ml // AFN-194

This will now be the sole sparkling wine from Martin, 90-10 Zweigelt/Pinot Noir, and this maiden-voyage is like strawberries macerated in tomato water; cool, salty, refined, with hints of sweet Spring rhubarb.

### 2010 Zweigelt Rosé (SOLD OUT)

AFN-180

The first wine tasted, and I found it zippy and a wee bit unripe, with a grassy edge – what I thought I'd find in all the wines. But you don't approach Nigl's rosé for thick fruit, but for zip and freshness and a taut spiciness. Which then you get.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Freiheit

AFN-179

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Hints of gooseberry below the lentilly doughy fruit; racy and very crisp (11.5% alc); a big salty wave lunges into the crackery mid-palate; it's the ultraviolet *yin* to the infrared *yang* of ripe years like '09 or '06. I like it just as much.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri +

AFN-181

This is delicate and utterly beautiful; classic fligree Nigl. Digital and pixilated detail; herbal and smoky, with a long gauzy finish.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben ++

AFN-184

Marvelous billowing löss-GrüVe fragrances; the palate is forceful and salty and dramatically firm and spicy yet ample and muscular; extends the streak started by the astonishing '09 – but this is maybe even more *exciting* than that large-fruited wine. This one isn't exactly classic; it's fast and feline and incisive but with amazing length and substance.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Herzstück vom Kirchenberg" ++ (+)

6/750ml // AFN-185

**AVAILABLE JANUARY 2012. But place your pre-orders now, because believe me you WANT this wine.**

Normally this goes into the Piri, but it was so spectacular in 2010 that Martin vinified it separately. It's the lowest five terraces below the church. Compared to the "Privat" this is a shimmering powerhouse, seriously green, the morning sun shining on a balsam forest; gorgeous spreading rivulets of juiciness on the palate. This has it all; astounding complexity and irresistible deliciousness, into a massively fruity finish.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Privat, Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage +** 6/750ml // AFN-186  
**2010 Grüner Veltliner Privat, Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage** 12/375ml // AFN-186H  
**2010 Grüner Veltliner Privat, Senftenberger Pellingen 1er Lage** 3/1.5L // AFN-186M

Even with its jalapeño heat (over 14% alc) it works in a sizzling powerful way, because it isn't brutish, but instead *keen* and focused, even pepperminty.

**2010 Riesling Dornleiten +** AFN-187

**CORE LIST WINE.** This begins a beautiful collection of Rieslings, as good as exists in 2010. It's pretty, girlish, and with wonderful mid-palate extract, a wash of something *like* sweetness but that actually isn't sweet; apricot and fennel and a seductive saltiness. I never tasted a better vintage of this, and can't wait to buy cases for myself.

**2010 Riesling Senftenberger Piri +** AFN-188

Thick and dense, soaked with pulverized terroir and extract, and a greeny aloe-wintergreen sweetness that's just haunting; the best vintage ever of this wine. My note was shortened by the sudden appearance of the next wine...

**2010 Riesling Hochäcker 1er Lage +** 6/750ml // AFN-189

Excellent, if atypically herbal and without its usual exotic fruit, though oxygen brings low smoky notes and redcurrant; there's a bit of mint also, and a slight chile heat – *not* alcoholic – all in all a really dry and lovely Riesling.

**2010 Riesling "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen, 1er Lage + + +** 6/750ml // AFN-190  
**2010 Riesling "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen, 1er Lage** 12/375ml // AFN-190H  
**2010 Riesling "Privat" Senftenberger Pellingen, 1er Lage** 3/1.5L // AFN-190M

Six kinds of smoke. The palate is extraordinary, spectacular, ringent and swollen all at once; a mansion made of leaves and herbs held together by the collagen of a sous-vide veal loin with black truffles and the tiniest dab of eucalyptus honey. I'd live there! Endless long echo of finish, both vaporous and deep.

**2010 Gelber Muskateller (SOLD OUT)** AFN-192

Catty and gooseberried; the palate is surprisingly soft though oddly persistent; like an Alsace Muscat with its Ottonel piece. I like it, but it's not the stiffly mineral Riesling-y type he usually makes. Martin says it's a tick too ripe.

**2009 Zweigelt Eichberg** AFN-191

Warmer, rounder and more tannic than the '08; lovely black-cherry Bardolino/Lagrein aromas; neat as a pin and loaded with fruit.

**2008 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein +** 6/375ml // AFN-178H

It positively *reeks* of GrüVe, and the palate follows, taking GV fruit into an ice cream maker and drizzling the scoops with olive oil and sea salt.

**2008 Grüner Veltliner Trockenbeerenauslese +** 12/375ml // AFN-176H

This has washed its hands and tucked in its shirt since last year. It's focused and shapely with fine varietal definition, and it's great to drink now.

**2009 Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese +** 6/375ml // AFN-193H

*AVAILABLE SPRING 2012.* I'm almost shocked how good these are. This is actually the sorted-out botrytis grapes from the Pellingen; again it's amazingly clear and fresh, exactly the things I want (and seldom get) from TBAs; you could even call it lively, salty, and it's hardly honey-sweet; more a fine delicate sea-salt caramel, though it's 200° Oechsle, about 12g.l. acidity and an RS of 250-260 that just doesn't show.



vineyard area // 80 hectares    annual production // 33,000 cases  
certification // ISO 22000 Sustainable  
top sites & soil types // Berg Vogelsang, Loiser Berg, Steinmassel (primary rock); Käferberg (marine sediments on primary rock); Heiligenstein (Permian rock); Lamm (Loam on Permian rock)  
grape varieties // 38% Grüner Veltliner, 19% Riesling, 43% Pinot Noir, St. Laurent, Chardonnay and other varieties.

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

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

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a

button and very alert. He follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the "Wine Professor" because of his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are, come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

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

"All different wines are aged by the classical

**Bründlmayer at a glance** // Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range. Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 80 hectares) winery. I'll confess it's gotten harder, not easier, to sum this up over the 16 years I've been visiting here. In each of the last two vintages the texture of Willi's wines has changed. Lately they're showing the calm zen demeanor of Alzinger's wines. Perhaps less explicitly articulate, yet somehow more kind. I don't think it's on purpose, or at least, it may be a collateral effect of something else he set out to do. For an estate this large, Willi is remarkably willing to let the wines control their own destinies. In many vintages, one or another of them will escape, such as the insanely peppery '09 Vogelsang GrüVe. I can hear him say "We don't seek to shape it; the wine follows its own preferences." Willi refers to me as a "classicist," because he notices how I wince at certain extremes, of alcohol perhaps, or botrytis. He in turn is admirably willing to love a wine even if it's what I might call ornery. His sparkling wine is the nearest thing to Champagne of anything that isn't Champagne, yet it doesn't imitate Champagne and only tastes a little like it. His reds are strikingly fragrant, but he seems to prefer them cool, sometimes to a point I perceive as stiff. But this is how he wishes them, lean and stretchy and sinewy. It is very good of him to tolerate my being selective among them. Now and again there's a weird rogue crazy-ass amazing wine. It might be a Rosé one year and a Muscat another, but it is often something you never expected. I'd call Willi's wines sophisticated and civilized, as long as you know these aren't euphemisms for diffidence. They are rarely touchy-feely but often affectionate. The best ones taste as though they were fond of you.

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

method in oak and acacia casks in deep vaulted cellars. In the vineyards the family apply organic principles (no chemical fertilizers, herbicides and chemical sprays).” Bründlmayer neither crushes nor pumps 90% of his musts; the other 10% is macerated overnight and crushed to emphasize varietality. Nor is this formulaic; it adapts from year to year.

Bründlmayer is universally revered and respected. Partly it’s the wines, of course, their outstanding success in a variety of idioms over so many years, and from a winery of such size. It’s also because of Willi himself, who

combines a piercing intellect with such halcyon demeanor you can’t help but be fond of him.

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

### 2009 Zweigelt

1.0L // ABY-235L

The highest raspberry notes of the variety here. Tannin is present in a silky body; the wine is medium-light but with attitude, and the tertiary finish is bacony-smoky.

### 2008 Pinot Noir “Cécile”

ABY-241

It has the wonderful fruit of ’08, with a bit of “toasty oak” to absorb still, but lots of violets and blackberries in a cool, refined style, with a little pebbly tannin. Stylish in its way.

### 2003 Cabernet Franc

ABY-242

Classic tobacco-y hot-vintage Cab Franc; tannic as is his wont, but with food this will have a suave lamb-y richness.

### Sekt Extra Brut, N.V.

ABY-225

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

### 2007 Sekt Brut +

ABY-239

Disgorged 11/10, I like this even more than the ’06. It’s all the Pinots (including Chardonnay) and a teensy bit of GrüVe, and this is the closest Austrian sparkling wine has ever come to Champagne, not just in graciousness and class, but in actual flavor. It could almost – *almost* – be mistaken for Hébrart’s “Selection.” Mirabelles, sweet hay, scallops, cookie-dough, seductive stuff! More overt fruit than Champagne (which might be the GrüVe) and perfectly calibrated rs – his most elegant and gregarious yet.

### Brut Rosé, N.V.

ABY-179

Odd what people tell you. Last year this was “all 2008” and this year it’s “mostly ’07 with some ’08,” and I’m either mistaken or confused. In any case it’s still one-third each of Pinot Noir, Zweigelt and St. Laurent, and it has a coral salmon-y color, even salmon-caviar; lots of round fruit this time – the Pinot shows most – *groseille* aromas lead to a palate like orange cherry-tomatoes; a charming, long and tasty Rosé, less berried and angular than earlier renditions. This has some yummy love-handles.

## Grüner Veltliners

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner “Kamptaler Terrassen”

ABY-238

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Back to reality after that freaky-stellar '09. Not that “reality” is so shabby. Because this contains all the single-site *Loiser Berg* picked below 13% alcohol (too little of it to vinify alone, he said). As often in '10, a superb aroma accenting more smoke and ore and less flowering-field, but it's juicy and generous on the palate, and shows classic GrüVe pepper.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Berg-Vogelsang ++ 2010 Grüner Veltliner Berg-Vogelsang

ABY-243

12/375ml // ABY-243H

Superb in this vintage! Iridescent brilliance and high-toned aromas; brashly mineral, grey and green, apples and the skins of apples; super expressive and generous.

### 2009 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben ++ 2007 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben ++

ABY-237

ABY-195

Willi is keeping stocks back to be “re-released” at leisure – his and/or mine. He gave me several vintages to select among, the current one ('09) and an elder of my choice.

This '09 smells about as good as GrüVe knows how to smell. Amazing exhalation of sweet meadow and verbena; sweetness and roughness together, not “nice,” but kind. The palate is gracious yet with a lash of mint, a sort of harmless savagery, ringent peppery length, whipsawing all over the place. No two consecutive sips are the same.

The '07 is evolving into a salty, subtle, grainy quiet beauty. Almost meditative. Certainly the better choice for a restaurant as it's farther along.

### 2009 Grüner Veltliner Ried Käferberg 1er Lage ++ 2002 Grüner Veltliner Ried Käferberg ++

6/750ml // ABY-229

6/750ml // ABY-249

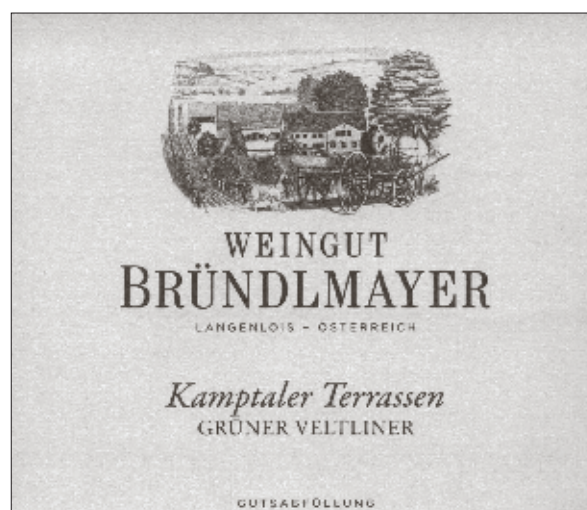
The 2002 is now a classic example of the way some GrüVes take on white Burgundy tones with age; this one's a serious taste-a-like for one of the less mealy Meursault 1er Crus.

### 2009 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm, 1er Lage ++ 2008 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm, 1er Lage +++

6/750ml // ABY-244

6/750ml // ABY-213

The '09 is both elegant and swollen with rich interior concentration; you have the suave smile of '09 fruit with the vast meadows and forests of Lamm, until a whomp of power lands on your back-palate. The external contours of the wine are still vague but the internal flavors are profound. All it needs is time.



## Rieslings

### 2010 Riesling “Kamptaler Terrassen”

ABY-245

CORE-LIST WINE. Limey and snappy, with balsam and the '10 char. Very classy and very good – but *dry*.

### 2009 Riesling Steinmassel

ABY-228

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

### 2010 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage

ABY-246

### 2010 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage

12/375ml // ABY-246H

A happy surprise; pure clean fruit in a limey and underripe banana dialogue; only a hint of (botrytis?) smoke; wonderful length, and a solid adamant finish.

### 2010 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage “Lyra” (+)

6/750ml // ABY-247

### 2010 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein 1er Lage Alte Reben (+ +)

6/750ml // ABY-248

One or both of these may not be available until January 2012, depending on their evolution in cask. As a rule I have found some of the Alte Reben bottlings somewhat heavy and dour lately, preferring the complexity of fruit and regal grace of the Lyra. This vintage was different, at least potentially. *Lyra* had a fervent aroma blending strong green elements and smoky botrytis in a solid firm line of silvery mossy structure, with fine herbal length. But *Alte Reben*, man that was like chewing geology. A little wisp of botrytis supports the vinosity. If this goes where I think, it'll become a dense, rocky Riesling with an overtone of sweet fruit.

## Notes on Gaisberg and Heiligenstein

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

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

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

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

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

# Schloss Gobelsburg

Kamptal // Gobelsburg



vineyard area // 49 hectares    annual production // 20,000 cases  
certification // ISO 22000 Sustainable  
top sites & soil types // Steinsetz (alpine gravel and löss);  
Gaisberg, Renner (primary rock with mica slate); Grub (löss); Lamm (calcareous loam);  
Heiligenstein (gneiss desert sandstone with volcanic particles)  
grape varieties // 55% Grüner Veltliner, 25% Riesling, 7% Pinot Noir, 7% St. Laurent,  
7% Zweigelt, 2% Merlot

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

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

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

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

"The purpose in those days was to "school" the wines,

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

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

It may have been the character of the 2008 vintage, it may have been Michi's increasing familiarity with this new/old mode of working, or it may just be and who knows why – but these two '08 *Tradition* bottlings are almost unbearably *beautiful* wines. Not just profound, and not just fascinating: beautiful wines. And it is now almost two weeks since I tasted them, yet they still haunt me. So I went and opened a bottle of the 2006 *GrüVe Tradition* this week, and realized that something in me is *converging* with something in these wines.

We flew a northern route back, to avoid the latest ash-cloud, and our path took us directly over Greenland. My god, what a sight; you've never seen such jagged mountains and then so much ice and desolation; it was like flying over the moon. "This is still the world, our world," I thought as I gaped out my window. And then sitting at my table a few nights later, drinking Michi's '06 *Tradition*, I had a similar feeling, like peering down and seeing something

you didn't know was there. It's quite different from drinking the normal GrüVe *Renner* – the Tradition comes from that vineyard. I adore the Renner; it's one of my favorite GrüVes, but in its modern way it seems to stride right at you, outstretched hand, big smile, saying "I'm having a great day; let me tell you why!"

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

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

Bründlmayer? Explain.

Schloss Gobelsburg has a centuries-old monastic tradition, during which, as Michi puts it, "There were periods when the wines were great and periods when they weren't; after all, not every generation of monks had the same passion or skill. But what was always true was



One year we're sitting in the tasting room and the windows are thrown open on the mild Spring day. The omnipresent birds are trolling for mates (thrushes and blackbirds all day and half the night; I got to the point I hoped to be awakened at dawn by them) and a brisk Spring wind is enchanted with flowers, all forming an aural backdrop to the verdant young wines in our glasses. But soon we heard a new sound, voices, little-kid voices to be precise, and we wandered over to the window and saw Michi's little daughter giggling away with her tiny friend. Remember, a Spring day, breezes and birds, and now this impossibly beautiful little girl in her cotton frock and bonnet, chirping and laughing and scolding. I watched Michi gaze at his girl. He was in the middle of serving me the greatest collection of Grüner Veltliner I'd ever experienced, and very much The Guy right now in Austria – FALSTAFF cover-portrait as vintner of the year, everyone saying his estate is top of the rock...but for a moment he was just a dad gazing on his tiny daughter trilling away to her friend in the enormous Spring.

the quality of the land." When Willi first told me the story he too pointed to the vineyards. "Terry, it is some of the absolute best land in the Kamptal," he said.

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

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

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

Michi's wines excel by precision and polish now. Their texture is truly silken, and their "temperament" is as pensive as that of their maker. Gobelsburg has entirely shed the



skin of the Michael-Willi association and has arrived at its own place in the firmament.

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

Michi is aware of the gravity of a Great Tradition, but rather than weigh him down it seems to prod him on. If

he is aware of occupying a place in history, I imagine it's to hope that, hundreds of years from now, someone will read a chronicle of Schloss Gobelsburg and cite his era as one of enlightenment. He is certainly an example of leaving the world better than you found it!

Feeling awed yet? That's not my intent. Michi's a rather quiet guy (as guys go) but he and Eva are actually Just Folks, and my visits here are warm and relaxed. In fact I've left a couple soul-prints at Schloss Gobelsburg. I was there with colleagues and customers on 9/11/01. And in a piece of eerie synchronicity, I was there this year on the very day we heard the news that Bin Laden had been killed.

It was rather a workmanlike visit. Michi needed to leave by a certain time, and I didn't see Eva or the kids. But that's all right; it's easy between us now. No need to lunge after "quality time." Still, the experience of tasting this almost achingly gorgeous series of wines without being able to expand into them actually did me a lot of good. Soul does well with a certain constraint. The time-pressure actually gave the wines a different clarity; not better, but worth having had.

**Brut Reserve, N.V. +**  
**Brut Reserve, N.V.**

AZZ-070  
6/1.5L // AZZ-070M

Now based on 2007 with reserve wine (the last assemblage, i.e., the quasi-solera system employed by Billiot and Peters among others), disgorged late 2010 – disgorgement dates "are coming," Michi assures me. The aromas are more sedate, less overtly fruity than before; the palate is silky and gracious, the mousse unusually delicate and the whole wine is refined, as befits a *couer de cuvée*, which in fact this is. I don't know when it's ever been better.

## Red Wines

*(Note: these have retreated from the woodyness they sometimes showed, as Michi is reassured his fruit is strong enough to stand on its own. If you have found them over-oaked in the past, try them again.)*

**2009 Zweigelt "Gobelsburger"**

AZZ-164

Modest reduction blows off in a minute or two. Michi doesn't seem to want to make this wine too "fruity," and in fact it feints toward its Blaufränkisch parent, as if it *were* Bf with a little Zweigelt to give perfume. Incisive and herbal. The fruit may be veiled by the reduction, but when it retreats licorice and blackberries advance.

**2009 St. Laurent Ried Haidegrund**

AZZ-166

Here the backing-off from oak was most conspicuous, and most welcome. Marvelous spice and fruit, all its own and not lacquered with wood; this is completely delicious, in fact! Smoky rich rural finish, and the empty glass reeks of plums.

**2009 Pinot Noir Alte Haide**

AZZ-167

A nice, sweetly genial elegant civilized PN, barely woody at all; consolidates into a complex aroma and a spicy soy-like palate; certainly the weight of an old-vines Beaune from among the more feminine 1er Crus (e.g., Cent Vignes) – a kindly and companionable being. By the way, lest you think that Michi is yet another vintner trying to "tame" PN because he loves Burgundy, in fact the grape has as long a tradition here as it does in Burgundy, having been introduced by the same

## An Astonishing Group-o-GrüVes

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner “Gobelsburger” +

AZZ-161

My *WINE OF THE VINTAGE* has rather a lot of color, and sweeter-than-usual aromas; mimosa and meadow and vetiver; it's the best-ever bottling of this wine, ripe and focused and complex, juicy and extract-dense. Absurd quality in its class.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz +

AZZ-168

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz

12/375ml // AZZ-168H

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Swollen aromas, less severely snappy than the rather strict '09; in fact it smells like Renner. The minty spice returns to the palate, even with a slight phenolic nip. But this is a birthday cake of Steinsetz, loaded with fruit so thick you barely notice the minerality – and the reverse is also true! Certainly the most *lavish* vintage of this wine since Michi took over.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Renner 1er Lage ++

AZZ-169

The site lies at the foot of the Gaisberg, and contains eroded gneiss with a high proportion of paragneiss, mica and amphibolite. A perfect recipe for wines of both minerality and generosity – just what this is. It is also, and always, the *best value in this portfolio*, because it costs about 25% less than its peers. The '10 has sensationally fierce aromas; the utter rock and the richest and zingiest green and the spurtingest juice of ripe fruit; the palate has force and torque and magnificent intensity – it's like those East German weight-lifters who can hold an SUV over their heads for ten seconds. Has it ever been better? Or more solid, or longer?

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Grub 1er Lage +++

6/750ml // AZZ-170

It's an unruly, sometimes oafish vineyard that needs the discipline of a cold vintage. But this wine is – no other word will do – magnificent. It's the apex of the stewy braised meatiness of the site with a spectacular mineral extract. You almost can't believe it's real.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage ++

6/750ml // AZZ-172

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage

12/375ml // AZZ-172H

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage

6/1.5L // AZZ-172M

This is more incisive than Grub, more concentratedly herbal; nettles, lovage and buckwheat, barley and veal stock, lamb, porcini. Endless stony finish. It is a great wine, and a more often great wine, but in 2010 it stands just barely in the shadow of the giant massif of GrüVe that is Grub.

### 2009 Grüner Veltliner “Tradition” ++ (+)

6/750ml // AZZ-171

### 2009 Grüner Veltliner “Tradition”

6/1.5L // AZZ-171M

Do please glance at the producer-intro to see what “Tradition” signifies. It's something worth knowing. In fact when I think of all the over six dozen growers whom I represent, the two things that stand out as most meaningful and most beautiful are Selbach's en-bloc wines, and these of Michi's.

This '09 is subtle, refined, allusive and searching. Warmer and leafier than the '08, though it's only two weeks in bottle. A eucalyptus spice detaches a little; the complexity here is more buttery, simmy, savory and analogue. You're walking past a house by an open window, and inside someone is playing the piano. You pause to hear the music, and then you realize you can't move, you are haunted, unaccountably moved, not just by the music but by the grace of having eavesdropped upon it; it wasn't played for you, but you were there, and now you are visited by a strange thing you haven't a name for. At last you resume your walk, altered, and this nameless thing walks with you as if it had always been there and had always been yours.

## Rieslings

### 2010 Riesling "Gobelsburger"

AZZ-163

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Absolutely euphoric fragrance; you can't help sighing. The palate is detailed, extract-rich, long, with balsam, apple and fennel; leafy and elegantly mineral.

### 2010 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage +

AZZ-173

Just bottled, but it shows a kind of peony-jasmine whiteness, honeysuckle under a full moon. A superb spicy vintage of this, sweet berried fruit and the texture of cold ivory.

### 2010 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage ++

6/750ml // AZZ-174

### 2010 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage

12/375ml // AZZ-174H

### 2010 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage

6/1.5L // AZZ-174M

This to me is a must-have Riesling, an icon one should secure in every vintage. An *important* wine. And this one's full of smoky incense-y complexity, with lots of intricate detail of herbs and grasses; racy and literally spicy – like Chinese 5-spice – and with tactile delineation into rivulets of herbal-spicy complexity which you have all the time in the world to appreciate, because the wine is ridiculously long.

### 2009 Riesling "Tradition" +

6/750ml // AZZ-175

### 2009 Riesling "Tradition" +

6/1.5L // AZZ-175

All Gaisberg, including some of the oldest vines that used to comprise a discontinued "Alte Reben" bottling. Thus in effect it's another dialect of Gaisberg, and this '09 smells just like good, open and generous Gaisberg. Markedly expressive, has the warmth (and even a little heat) of '09, with the particular peony and blackberry of the site mingling with the tertiary vinosity from the old-school cellar work. Though both of these '09 Traditions have such pithy primary fruit they taste less *apart* from their modern siblings than usual.

## A Final Little Something Pink

### 2010 Rosé "Gobelsburger"

AZZ-162

So I'm at the hostess stand at Slanted Door and it's late-lunch time. I'm on my way out, when a genial looking guy approaches me. "You're Terry Theise, right?" *Um, yeah, right*, I say, because I'm unnerved to be "recognized" in public (since I'm so delicate and demure, ha-ha-ha), and the gentleman continues, "We've been drinking the Gobelsburg Rosé and we wanted to know what was in it, but your website doesn't say." So there you have it: 500 wines in my portfolio, and the one time someone spots me out in public he's drinking the one wine for which I did not provide the acme of geeky detail.

Not that the guy was a geek, not at all. He just wanted to know, and so if this should happen again, ever, to him or to anyone, let me just say that the 2010 Gobelsburger Rosé is 85% Zweigelt and 15% "etcetera," a direct quote from Michi, by which I infer that it's a mosh of little bits of different red grapes and he himself hasn't memorized exactly what. The actual wine has wonderful silky fruit and is very cool and dewy, though not at all slight; it has *true* fruit, dry and sleek but vinous and tasty.

# Ludwig Hiedler

Kamptal // Langenlois

vineyard area // 28 hectares

annual production // 16,500 cases

top sites & soil types // Thal (sandy löss and loam); Kittmannsberg, Spiegel (löss);

Steinhaus (gneiss with amphibolite); Heiligenstein, Gaisberg (sandy weathered soils)

grape varieties // 63% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Riesling, 6% Chardonnay,

6% Weissburgunder / Pinot Blanc, 2% Sauvignon Blanc, 8% Zweigelt /

Blauburgunder / St. Laurent / Sangiovese



***My Karen Odessa is a traveling girl, and since I travel also and a lot, we're always coming and going. We've evolved a tradition for when we reunite of making "fish and rice" as a kind of homey homecoming supper. Last night we had some coho and brown basmati and an arugula salad, and we drank Hiedler's 2008 GrüVe Thal, which was both perfect and moderate (12.5%) in alcohol. Then I dreamt of Ludwig, though I don't recall the details. The man is haunting my very dreams.***

At some point with his wine in my glass I had a flickering thought that this was precisely the kind of wine I most loved to drink, and that most people ought to love to drink; vivid and forthright, frisky and yet with substance, solid and strong yet still drinkable. And not so digitally detailed that you feel you have to study its every nuance with each and every sip. There is something incredibly *hale* about Hiedler's wines. They seem to glow with health and vitality. And even in the gristly snarl of the craggy '10s, they beam and come right to you.

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

The first organic experiments are happening, in the sites Thal and Kittmannsberg. And for the past several years now Ludwig has done only spontaneous fermentations without enzymes or even SO<sub>2</sub>, and without temperature control. Part of this is Ludwig's innate restlessness, and another part is his desire to eschew the established orthodoxies. I'd like to hope it is also a signal that Austrian vintners in general are retreating from internationalism. When they arrived on the world stage they were, naturally, eager to join the prevailing currents; they spoke with colleagues from all over and returned home full of notions and ideas. This of course

is harmless, and has its good side. But not as good as stepping away from the prevailing norms from any-old-where in order to learn what is uniquely one's own.

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

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

"That's perfect! *Schmalz*," said Hiedler when I told him this story. "Yes, I *want* my wines to have this *schmalz*; that is the extract!" So, if you're looking for a more approachable kind of Austrian wine (one with *schmalz*!) with a big thick comforter of fruit and vinosity, you'll like these and they won't wreck your budget.

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

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



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

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

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "Löss" +**

AHL-163

**CORE-LIST WINE**, and amazingly good this year, because it's incredibly detailed and refined, super-clear and almost pixilated; a class löss-GrüVe with hints of caraway and fennel seed, leading to a brief but attractively grassy farewell. Please note; this isn't remarkable because it has more fruit or ripeness than usual, but because it has more strength and detail than usual. In any case it's the best vintage since the wine was created.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Thal 1er Lage +**

AHL-164

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Very deep löss covered with red sand give what I think is Ludwig's signature GrüVe, the one that is most crucially a *Hiedler* wine. And this is just excellent hi-def cool-vintage Thal, just the way I like them best; all its rich exotica in a firm binding of organized structured flavor; the iron and leaf-smoke are strong this year, and the finish is long and spicy.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Kittmannsberg "November" ++**

AHL-165

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Kittmannsberg "November"**

3/1.5L // AHL-165M

Stunningly good! I don't remember its equal, in fact. Sizzling mega-horny GrüVe, writhingly ripe and sweaty-salty, and solid and sinewy and crackery and spicy and stony; milled corn, grits baby! Then come the herbs, nettle and marjoram, and the finish mingles fennel frond and pulverized rocks. The wine is a pagan orgy they held in the Parthenon while the Gods were sleeping. As my Boston chums would say, it's off the ga-hinges.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum" +++**

6/750ml // AHL-166

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum"**

3/1.5L // AHL-166M

Is this the best since the all-time great '02? 100% malo, it's like butter-drizzled scallops with kafir leaves, and then balsam and resin and vetiver. The wine is a dialogue of dialogues, green and incense-y, iron and iris, cream and zing, power and *fever* yet also focus and determinedly precise articulation. Miraculous.

**2010 Riesling “Urgestein”**

AHL-167

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Starts with an odd oyster-mushroomy aroma, maybe botrytis? A screw-cap wine that even hints at TCA, but this blows off dramatically with air. It becomes the limey lioness we know and love, and it's fervently green and expressive, with its extract density and rock powder and enokis. So why even mention the dubious first impression? (That's not how to sell wine, ya know.) Because if it's also *your* first impression, you're not crazy and the wine gets way better.

**2010 Riesling Steinhaus 1er Lage**

AHL-168

Lots of melisse (a.k.a. lemon-balm) and a juicy clinging herbal sourness; darker than the '09 but also denser and longer. Drink it at room temperature to pull out its stony herbal depths. The site is on amphibolite and gneiss in its higher terraces, and löss on the lower ones; it often smells a little like Sauvignon.

**2010 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage**

AHL-169

Again markedly dark aromas, char and bilberries, botrytis; it flirts with severity but offers enormous (if currently inscrutable) minerality. Feels like it needs seven hours in a carafe. Superb potential but backward – in bottle 17 days, which must be why it seems a little cranky.

**2010 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage +**

6/750ml // AHL-170

**2010 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage**

3/1.5L // AHL-170M

Though Ludwig's are not considered the “filet” parcels in the Heiligenstein, there's no denying the consistently amazing wines he makes from his land there. Here we see wonderful exotic aromas, papaya, white chocolate, plantain; the palate zooms ahead, with extravagant peach and malty botrytis, and again that fascinating and even delicious sourness. Early days yet.

**2008 Riesling “Maximum” ++**

6/750ml // AHL-152

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

**2010 Riesling Steinhaus “Süss” ++**

AHL-171

An accident; stopped fermenting with 30g/l. rs (and with a Germany-like 8-9 grams of acidity), the wine will have 8-9% alc, and smells like a good Nahe Riesling! Guava, meyer-lemon, freesia; the palate is dense and playful, with lots of interplay between orange and green elements, and as it stays on the palate it gets more balsamy and herbal. Superbly delicious and complex! I put it on the **HARD-CORE LIST**, but there isn't a lot. And *kudos* to Hiedler for actually doing what others say they do, and letting this wine be, instead of forcing it to go dry.

**2009 Weissburgunder “Maximum”**

6/750ml // AHL-172

**2009 Weissburgunder “Maximum”**

3/1.5L // AHL-172M

Here I have a bone to pick. When I started with Austria in 1994, this wine was reliably splendid, very ripe and expressive, even powerful, but very rarely over 13.5% alc. These days, owing perhaps to climate change and lower yields and later picking et.al., the wines have struck me as overcooked. This '09 has 14.5% alc, swollen ripe aromas, mimosa and acacia and chestnut purée, and subtle wood tones also appear. The palate, for me, is bellicose and sore, though it's the kind of jet-blast assertiveness and vinosity a lot of people like. I find much to respect and admire here, but the amp is too loud and the treble too high.

I spoke with Ludwig about these things. He agrees at least in theory, that if there were a way to get the ripe flavor he wants and keep the alc below 14%, he himself might prefer it. We tasted two vintages from the early 90s and saw exactly the type of wine we've gotten too far away from. These new monsters may indeed be monuments but *I can't use them*. But see how you feel when you taste it.

# Josef Hirsch

Kamptal // Kammern



vineyard area // 31 hectares  
annual production // 12,500 cases  
top sites // Kammerner Lamm, Zöbinger Gaisberg, Zöbinger Heiligenstein  
soil types // löss, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles  
grape varieties // 65% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling

***Hirsch was the first grower I visited in the “top” regions (Kamptal/Kremstal/Wachau) and my impressions of the vintage were still coalescing. We talked about deacidifying, which many people performed though to nowhere near the extent they had to in Germany. Johannes said, “Some people I think over-deacidified, to last year’s level, and they found the wines were too smooth. And with the extracts of 2010, you need acid.” Well hmmm! And interesting, since his were among the most backward wines I tasted, the Rieslings especially, yet this isn’t at all a bad thing.***

But my offering will be based on the best wines currently available, with as many of the newest vintage as are *ready to be tasted*.

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

I happened to speak with Hirsch during the most gruesome days of 2008’s summer, when all it did was rain and the vineyards were struggling to stay healthy. “So Mister Bio-dynamic; great timing, dude!” I said – I’m such a sensitive guy – and Hannes replied “You know, if this had been the first year of transition I don’t think I’d have gone through with it, because it’s so difficult...” but when we had the bottles lined up nine months later he echoed something I’ve heard before: “Now when I taste the wines I really forget what we went through to make them. I know it was difficult but I don’t physically *remember* it, you know?”

I saw Johannes’ father this year for the first time in

a while. I’d forgotten how hale he looks, like someone who’d just come down from soloing Nanga Parbat without oxygen. “Boy, *I’m* not very healthy compared to him,” went through my mind. It was good to see the two men, good to remember Johannes is his father’s son.

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

You often hear how the wine “makes itself,” but here it actually does. The ’07 and ’08 Rieslings had RS, and the ’09s have either much less or nearly none. That’s how those grapes fermented. Johannes is fearless this way; he expects his customers will understand that wine isn’t identical each year. Those “sweet” Rieslings were so delicious they offer an implied rebuke to the Puritanism of other Rieslings in Austria, which seem to grasp at dryness as an absolute value. Hannes seems to *get* that there are few if any

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

***how the wines taste // For such great wines these are comparatively “easy” to understand: they’re juicy and spicy and their flavors are candid and animated. Specific nuances are, as always, determined by the vineyard.***

absolute values in flavor; he works his vines and sprays his valerian drops and nettle teas and picks his grapes when they're ripe and lets them be and if they stop fermenting with RS then so be it. It's not a lot of RS, they're not (eek) "German wines," and he barely seems to attend to whatever Critical-Opinion they may engender.

With regard to the bio-d thing, Johannes is there now, the transition is done, but typically for him, he had some issues with the politics of the matter, and now "wishes I hadn't said anything, and just done it." I have a principle of not identifying as organic or bio-d anyone who doesn't certify, because it prevents people from green-washing their way to the organic "Brand." I am contradicting myself here because it can't be helped – you already knew (because I already told you) that Hirsch was among a group who were all converting to bio-d together. So there's no point in being coy about it now. He's doing it but isn't willing to certify. No Demeter on

the label. Don't sell the wines as "organic." Just be glad they are. And this is how Johannes wants it.

We tend to like to party with Johannes, 'cause he's crazily witty and likes to have fun, but when the party's over he's a man with an active and probing mind. And he seems to have no fear. He was the first in Austria to go 100% Stelvin, the first to delay bottling and releasing his Grand Crus, and now that the politics of the biodynamic conversion are apparent, I have little doubt he'll find some novel way through.

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

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "veltliner #1" +**

AWH-085

**CORE-LIST WINE**, and for the second year running, absurdly good. Aromatically, palate, finish – palate especially, which has a complex herbal note on its lentil and fava-bean body. In its echelon this is as complex, solid and focused as it gets – and this with 11.5% alc! It was not deacidified, and acidity shows not as sharpness but as a chile note.

There's a fair amount of hack stuff on the market now, trying to cash in on the cheap-&-cheerful "GROO-VAY" thing, and I'm here to tell you there's *no reason to settle* when there's wines like this, like Hiedler's Löss, hell, like Fred Loimer's admirable "Lois," I don't care whether it's my wine or the other guy's wine as long as it's good.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "Heiligenstein" +**

AWH-086

**2010 Grüner Veltliner "Heiligenstein"**

12/375ml // AWH-086H

**CORE-LIST WINE**. Quite the big swollen aroma here, rich and primordial; the brightness and steely lift of this wine are remarkable and lovely. I'd trade triple the fruit this wine yields, in order to get this expressive structure in return. It reminds me of the '02, ringently alive, and with a kinetic dialogue of flowers and steel.

**2010 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage ++**

AWH-087

As fine as wine can smell. GrüVe at its regal noblest best. Amazing brightness and lift for such a rich wine. Stern, adamant finish, ferrous and strict and muscular. The palate is less "sweet" than the aromas, but this will have many more months on the fine lees, but – the most potential since the '04, I think.



**2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage + (+)**

AWH-081

**2009 Grüner Veltliner Lamm 1er Lage**

6/1.5L // AWH-081M

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

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

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

**2010 Riesling Zöbing**

AWH-088

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Pungent as opposed to "flowery," funky like irises can be. Only 11.6% alc but driven by extract; *riven* by extract, in fact; ultra-minerally and very dry; has a finishing fullness deriving from its extract but in essence this is strict almost formal dry Riesling.

*(NOTE: the two 1er-Lage Rieslings in 2010 were extremely unready; in fact the Heiligenstein wasn't quite done fermenting, so until they can be properly appraised, I'll offer you the beautiful '09s again.)*

**2009 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage ++**

AWH-082

**2009 Riesling Gaisberg 1er Lage**

6/1.5L // AWH-082M

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

**2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage ++**

AWH-083

**2009 Riesling Heiligenstein 1er Lage**

6/1.5L // AWH-083M

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

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



# WACHAU

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Leo Alzinger

Wachau // Unterloiben



vineyard area // 10 hectares  
annual production // 6,250 cases  
top sites & soil types // Mühlpoint (clay mixed with gneiss);  
Liebenberg (mica schist); Hollerin (gneiss mixed with löss and loam);  
Loibenberg, Steinertal (weathered gneiss)  
grape varieties // 55% Grüner Veltliner, 45% Riesling

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

Peter and I drank a bottle of F.X. Pichler's 2002 Steinertal Riesling one night, and it was as marvelous as we expected it to be. I've long admired the glossy power of those wines at their best. Yet when I looked at the words I was using to discuss it—it was showing well, it *performed* beautifully—I realize I felt like I was an *audience* for the wine, that I was separate from it in some crucial way. Perhaps this has everything to do with me, and it's by no means a slam on a highly laudable wine, but when I drink Alzinger's wine I have no such feeling. With them I feel included, roused, affectionate; I feel a thing akin to love.

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

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

recently published the results of a 10-year retrospective tasting of most of the Wachau's GrüVe monuments, FX Pichler Kellerberg, Knoll Schütt, Hirtzberger Honivogl – that crowd. You'll be interested to know Alzinger had the 2nd-highest composite score (90.7) which was .8 below the top.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was the only place I tasted where the Rieslings were (even) better than the GrüVes. I can't say why, and it took me by surprise. It's also growing painful to love these wines as much as I do, since we receive such pitiful quantities. But leaving the mercantile questions aside, it is a wonder and a privilege to be with wines like Alzinger's, to feel my feelings dilate and the calm arrive, and the glowing inner smile, to be in the world with such tender loving things as these.

#### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel (+)

ALA-103

This is the hillside below the Steinertal, where the slope moderates and you don't need terraces. The soil changes too, and we're into the lentil and green-bean side of GrüVe now. But where this wine is usually soft and elliptical, this '10 is remarkably forceful, almost like a corpulent Loibenberg; steel-spined, mizuna and maitakes; length and even minerality, unusual for the site. Almost craggy, and demands oxygen.

#### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd +

6/750ml // ALA-104

More belly-richness now but still with an iron backbone; great force of aroma, great force *period*, with secret-sweetness, classic vetiver and green bean but so focused and buzzing, like someone shot a taser at the extract.

#### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd +

6/750ml // ALA-105

More elegant and silky and lössy – you really taste it this year. Rye dough and caraway, less exotic than usual. But aristocratic elegance to go with its adamant force.

#### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd ++

6/750ml // ALA-106

Swollen green. Less crazy-lime and hyssop and mint, and more balsam and boxwood. But the palate is iridescent and charged, really spearminty and wonderfully juicily mineral; you feel the 14% alc but there's great mass to support it.

#### 2010 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel +

ALA-107

By far the best this wine has ever been; sleek and feline with complex multi-nuanced mid-palate interplay of sweet green herbs and citrus and aloe-vera, and a marvelous dialogue of delicacy and force, lime and creaminess. As good as “small” scale Riesling ever gets.

#### 2010 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd ++

6/750ml // ALA-108

And again, the best *this* wine has ever been! Just amazingly fine this vintage; radishy aromas, but wow, the *fruit*; pure apricot, and with air the fragrance is also steeped in it, but what's brilliant is the orange-green interplay between apricot and wintergreen, and of course the dynamism and focus. At its relatively moderate price, this endlessly long masterpiece is not to be missed. My highest praise? I couldn't spit it.

**2010 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd +**

6/750ml // ALA-109

Completely lavish peach and nectarine aromas are typical for the site, but this is actually slimmer and finer than the Liebenberg, in a kind of role-reversal. It isn't "better," just more finely structured and a little lighter-bodied, more vamping and feline. Call it more feminine, maybe.

**2010 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd ++**

6/750ml // ALA-111

Purest noblest Riesling aromas yield to a palate that is in no way yielding and yet still seems to melt into a creamy swoon, exquisite and mysterious, and seeming to get shadier and cooler as it lingers; begins by singing and ends by murmuring. Begins by kissing and ends by falling asleep in your arms, breathing blissful and soft and dozy.

**2010 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd +++ (+)**

6/750ml // ALA-112

At first only the highest notes of its classic aromas. The palate is firm, cool, sharply detailed. All silver, sun on rocks, *moon* on rocks, almost a shriek of mint. It bores into your palate with its precise attack. Only on the finish does an herbal juiciness emerge, and then with air it grows more prominent as the wine opens its arms. Right now it is nearly supernal, but in 1-2 years I'd approach it with awe.



# Nikolaihof-Wachau

Wachau // Mautern

vineyard area // 22 hectares    annual production // 8,300 cases  
certification // Demeter Certified Biodynamic  
top sites // Steiner Hund, Klausberg, Im Weingebirge, Vom Stein, Süßenberg  
soil types // primary rock topped with humus or gravel,  
and eroded primary rock  
grape varieties // 55% Riesling, 35% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Neuburger,  
Gelber Muskateller, Gewürztraminer, Frühroter Veltliner, Chardonnay



***In January a lot of us were in San Francisco for our DI tasting, and this time (and at long last) I had my own Schnooky with me, and so Karen Odessa and I played hooky one day and pretended to be tourists. We had a dinner rezzy at Ame, where she had never been, and where I am always happy. As we walked in we saw Christine Saahs all alone at a table, and our eyes lit up at the surprise of seeing one another. Two things happened then, both of them typical if not ineluctable; one, we invited her to join us, and two, she was exquisitely careful to ensure she wasn't intruding on our couple-time. So the three of us had dinner.***

The poor lady had her luggage lost and it took a couple days before it was delivered to her. The consolation prize was she went to the salon and got a spiffy San Francisco haircut. My “little sister” (as she likes to call herself) looking all foxy ‘n stuff. I enjoyed the time together almost greedily. Because Christine is rather the figurehead of a family themselves emblematic, and their winery is profound and meaningful, and so I gulp down those moments when we’re all just-folks.

Julie Dalton was with me this year, her first time in Austria. It was quiet at Nikolaihof as we arrived for our visit – unusually, in the morning. (We usually come in the afternoon and stay for dinner.) I know she was struck by the tree, or, The Tree. Some of you have seen the proud great linden that occupies the courtyard; it has become something of an emblem itself, that tree, yet at heart it’s also a kindly giver of shade and shelter from the rain, not to mention a home to a lot of birds.

Maybe it’s because we know one another longer now, but I find myself wanting to remind you, as much as Nikolaihof is a Bastion-Of-The-Biodynamic, and as meaningful and stirring as the people and their wines are to me, as I draw closer I enjoy that these are really just people leading a particularly fine life.

Christine’s book is out. It’s a cookbook with recipes and philosophies from Nikolaihof’s restaurant. It’s in German of course, but you’d suss it pretty well, and it helps if you want to understand this family in depth. I confess I find them wonderful. That’s partly because they are never solemn, just committed. Nikki gives every appearance of being a cosmopolitan fellow,

he speaks excellent English, knows the patter, and is certainly much better on the computer than I am. Yet we were sitting eating dinner when he appeared with a big *haunch* in his hand, its furry hoof still on, from a wild boar he’d shot the evening before. And if you harbored any expectation the young generation would somehow “modernize” Nikolaihof, it was Nikky who insisted on reviving the use of the ginormous 18th-century wooden press, which had become a museum piece.

Once we were seated one year, I asked Christine, “When are you happiest in your work?” I thought the question was straightforward. Others to whom I’ve posed it have said things like I like it best in the vineyards, or I really enjoy the blending, it fascinates me to taste so analytically, or things of that nature. Christine seemed quite undone by my innocuous-seeming query. “Oh I don’t know how to answer a question like that,” she said, and “No one has ever asked me that question.” She was so shy I was unbearably touched.

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

Since everything is unified within these walls (and outside them also) it is very clear to me that Nikolaihof’s wines also embody that enlightenment.

“Cheerful and useful” would be a perfect way to describe them. Even at their most profound, and they attain such profundity quite regularly, theirs is never an intimidating or haughty Greatness, but rather a sapid companionability that’s almost affectionate. The wines talk not only to your senses, they talk to your life.

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

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

Saahs’ preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn’t seem to hail from a concern we’d call “environmental” in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall approach to sharing life with other forms of life, and also from their sense of time. That enveloping patriarchal linden tree in their courtyard is a pretty nifty symbol of time; thick, slow, sturdy, gentle, ultimately patient.

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

Nikolaihof is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first Demeter-certified wine in the world. They have farmed and made wines organically for 40 years; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Saahs are believers in organic production as a guarantor of superior quality. I myself am often asked whether I believe organic or bio-d creates superior wines, which is both a loaded question and an irrelevant one. Frankly I don’t care if the wines are “better.” Organic or bio growers are seeking a certain relationship with their land. Very often these sensibilities conduce to the making of excellent wines, but not necessarily. They are, however, quite healthy for both land and the humans who work it. Do we need to ask for more?

A study has been published which appears to prove the salubriousness of Biodynamic wines in general and Nikolaihof’s wines in particular. Christine is very proud of this, and I’m happy for her. Yet somehow I’m less touched than she is, and I think I know why. I recall seeing a story in one of the magazines which said scientists had isolated the health-giving compounds in wine and could make them available in pill-form. At which point it became very clear to me; we don’t drink wine because it is (merely) “healthy;” we drink it because, in an holistic way, it is good for us. Not only for our discrete bodies, but for our whole lives and souls. That wine is in fact harmless and probably even healthful is something we already knew intuitively; it’s a bonus, but it ain’t why. I am sure Christine knows this too.

Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of 50 years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the secrets, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: “The secret of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology — which in any case barely exists — as in the special care of the vines.” He quotes Saahs as saying, “You shouldn’t shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself.” Fermentation (natural yeasts,) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time — up to 4 months — on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that wine is a foodstuff. “I like to drink wine, not study it,” he says. “We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don’t wait for overripeness.” His wife inserts; “There’s nothing charming about harvesting in November.”

It takes more people to farm organically; the Saahs employ 10 workers for 20 hectares. They claim a conventional winery could do the work with four or five. They are happy, they say, to give employment to more people; “We are not in this world just to make money,” says Christine Saahs. Among the 20 hectares of land are two meadows allowed to grow wild. “We learned if we didn’t control the vegetation in these meadows that the most predatory of the plants would eventually overcome the weaker plants, so each year we mow the meadow twice. It levels the playing field,” she added, looking thoughtfully into the distance. “We don’t drive a big car, we don’t take world cruises . . . but we do mow our meadows twice a year,” she said, as if to herself. “We simply occupy this little form of skin and bones for a few years, but we need to nourish our hearts and souls by finding a home in our parts of the world and caring for this home.”

It’s a little sad to subject these young wines to the rough waters of commerce. The truth of Nikolaihof wines emerges in the fullness of time, not before. Tasting them in their mature form is as profound an experience as one



can ever have with wine. Something in them seems to weave itself into the fabric of eternity.

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

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

Some of these wines are as still as silent ponds, and each nuance of flavor is like a small pebble dropped in the silvery water, and you watch the tiny silent ripples flow slowly toward shore. They seem utterly without affect, but instead serenely themselves. They are numinous in their very lack of thrusting and pushing. They are candid and modest. These wines don't so much meet you halfway as show you a third place that's neither You nor Them, but somewhere you meet in truth only

by dissolving your respective walls. The wines have done it; now it's your turn. I cannot tell you how these wines stir such a calmness of spirit. Other wines are perhaps more poignant, or more exciting. But I have never tasted wines more settling than these. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.

It's a shame that words like "sublime" can lose their music and force through squandering, and I know I'm part of the problem. But the quality of sublimity in Nikolaihof's wines has to do with their basic characters; hale, trustworthy, unaffected, substantive but never tiring, explicitly *connected* and charge with a gentle force. It isn't about making you love *them*; it's about what they can do to ease your way, by whispering their tender steady reminder of the sweet secrets of the world we share.

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



Christine is passionate. Some listeners find themselves feeling guilty for not emulating her principles, and the feeling makes them squirmy, and because of that they push it away and accuse her of being preachy. I've heard her speak and read interviews she's given, and I've never gleaned as much as a hint of moral smugness. She knows I myself admire her work and her principles but that I am not a biodynamic acolyte, and I work with many growers practicing "integrated" viticulture. Christine and I are friends, and if she wanted

to preach she could easily preach to me; it's a privilege of friendship not to have to be "polite." But she never has. And I also think there's a general reluctance to admit how singularly beautiful these wines are. Or maybe we just don't understand them. We have grown used to wines that put on a show for us, but these wines don't. They walk alongside you, and suddenly you feel how much you wanted the company.

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

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner "Hefeabzug"

ANK-102

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This vintage is especially detailed and snappy and you seem to taste every pebble and each leaf; it's the liquid version of their salad of seventeen edible flowers and plants. And by the way, we drank a Hefeabzug from **1987** so don't dare think this wine is some petite *Vin de l'Année* that won't age.

### 2010 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel

ANK-100

Unusually phenolic and gravelly this year; the dark almost brooding side of GrüVe, smoky and boxwoody; with air it releases a sappiness of peppery resin, but don't approach in search of charm – this is all about craggy dignity.

### 2009 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd +

6/750ml // ANK-099

**First offering.** And a classic Nikolaihof wine. Calm, sanguine, glowy, meadowy and full of vetiver; long but not assertive, spicy but not arch, clinging but not obdurate; a delicate mid-palate mineral, tremendously expressive but lapidary. As much a friend as it is a wine.

### 1993 Grüner Veltliner "Vinothek" + + +

6/750ml // ANK-074

By now you know this singular estate has been holding certain wines back, *in cask and without sulfur*, until they are deemed ready to bottle. There have been Rieslings (the supernal 1990) and GrüVes (the amazing '91), and now this.

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

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

### 2008 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd + +

6/750ml // ANK-093

But this, as all wines from here, is in constant motion, and with another year in the bottle is now a casky-scented Riesling drenched in peonies; its fruit is deepening and in the best sense simplifying, and the effect is like drinking an infusion from plum blossoms.

### 2007 Riesling Steiner Hund "Reserve" + + +

6/750ml // ANK-103

Of course this is a **first offering**. 5 weeks in bottle when I was there, so the muted aromas weren't surprising. But the palate was suddenly stunning, rather like the great '05, a cool creamy fruit over a molten core of mineral. You taste the gleam of the mica. The wine gets more forceful with air. An entire Royal Court of Riesling nuance, highlighted by wintergreen and glittering tiny stones. It penetrates every scilla of the soft palate, and it makes you want to leave the table, glass in hand, find some sweet Spring woods, and go walking.

**2006 Riesling Klausberg “Reserve” +**

6/750ml // ANK-104

Indeed this '06 is in every way meatier, more overt and sinewy than was the Steiner Hund; and it was in cask a year longer, and wears it well. It's like a veal braise with carrots and morels, really savory, with the sweetness of the long simmer.

The question of its high price needs asking. The production is tiny, about 80 cases, and they want to retard demand.

**2005 Riesling Im Weingebirge “Baumpresse” ++**

6/750ml // ANK-105

*First offering.* This is actually an Im Weingebirge Smaragd, pressed in the ancient (and gigantic) wooden press, the largest of its kind in the world. The wine is painfully expensive, but it does deliver: stunningly expressive aromas of tertiary Riesling and cask; extremely dry and powerful, unusually so for these wines. Compared to the more mysterious, searching Steiner Hund this wine is easy to “get,” it has so much impact, and you get at least a ton of unobtrusive mojo for your money.

**2010 Gelber Muskateller +**

ANK-106

The best Muscat I tasted in Austria from '10. Juicy and with enough floweriness to yin-yang with the herbs and the cats; it's also *long* and complete and juicy and shows a suave subtle caskiness and curranty spice.

*(PSSSST! Anyone want something really cool and recherché? Ask us about the superb Neuburger from here.)*



# Hans Reisetbauer

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

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

As we repeated the news to various growers they were all agape with disbelief. "You got Reisetbauer?" they all cried. "How'd you do that? You got the best." I'm going to quote liberally from an article in the Austrian magazine *A La carte*, in which Reisetbauer gave a detailed interview to Michael Pronay, the greatest narcoleptic journalist I've ever known. "With Reisetbauer we see a unity of man and occupation such as one seldom sees. The friendly bull lives schnapps, speaks schnapps, makes schnapps and loves it like nothing else."

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

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

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

It's a whole sub-culture, just like wine. The

same fanaticism, the same geekiness, the same obsessiveness over absolute quality. Reisetbauer wants to start vintage dating his eau de vie because "the fruit quality is far from identical from year to year." I seem to have a tiger by the tail here!

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

**Sparkling Apple Cider** // XHR-012

**Apple in Oak Barrel** // 6/375ml // XHR-024

**Plum Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-001

**Williams Pear Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-002

**Apricot Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-003

**Cherry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-004

**Elderberry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-005

**Rowanberry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-006

**Raspberry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-009

**Wild Cherry Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-011

**Carrot Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-013

**Ginger Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-014

**Mixed Case Eau de Vie** // 6/375ml // XHR-010

Pear, Apricot, Plum, Rowanberry, Raspberry, Wild Cherry

**Whisky** // 6/750ml // XHR-015

**Blue Gin** // XHR-023

*(all Eau de Vie and Blue Gin available in magnums, 3/1.5L)*



# Reference



## EARLIER VINTAGES

**2009:** I wonder if any vintage could have withstood the withering assault of vinous ordnance of 2010, because this was an instance where the yearling was not flattered by the new baby. And I *like* '09 and will continue to like it. Now it's showing itself as a fruity vintage, perhaps a little formless or maybe it just seems that way alongside '10. It's what we call a crowd-pleaser.

**2008:** The lithe silvery minerality and slender focused fruit of this vintage are and will always be delightful. And most of its reds are much better than the year's reputation for lightness would suggest. What they show is both fruit and substance.

**2007** continues to be a beaming sweetheart of a vintage. At first the light wines seemed slight after the muscular '06s. But the top wines in 2007 seem better than their '06 brethren. The vintage has shed some of its emphatic

minerality and grown more smoky and creamy, but overall I'd have to say 2007 is the single most attractive vintage of the decade so far.

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

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

*balanced now*; there are others that were awkward and even grotesque to begin with.

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

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

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

## GRAPE VARIETIES

### Grüner Veltliner

However "trendy" GrüVe may have been, its greatest value is it isn't merely trendy, but rather has a permanent place in the pantheon of important grapes, and a prominent place among food's best friends. Among the many wonderful things Grüner Veltliner is, it is above all THE wine that will partner all the foods you thought you'd *never* find a wine for.

One wishes to be indulgent of the caprices of attention in our ephemeral world. But at some point the last two weeks, tasting yet another absolutely supernal GrüVe, my blood commenced to simmerin'. Where dry white wine is concerned this variety should

have pride of place on wine lists. There is simply NO other variety more flexible and none offering better value especially at the high end.

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

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

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

### Riesling

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

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

Great Austrian Riesling is unique. Austrian growers won't plant it where it doesn't thrive. It's almost always grown in primary rock, a volcanic (metamorphic/igneous) derivative you rarely see in

similar form or concentration elsewhere in Europe. These soils contain schist (fractured granite), shirola (just checking you're actually paying attention), mica, silica, even weathered basalt and sandstone. Riesling's usually grown on terraces or other high ground.

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

### **Gelber Muskateller**

Only in Austria (and Germany) are they required to distinguish between this, a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains* or *Muscat Lunel* and its less refined but more perfumey cousin the Muscat Ottonel. Most Alsace "Muscat" blends the two, and usually Ottonel dominates.

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

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

### **Pinot Blanc**

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

### **RED VARIETIES**

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

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

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

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

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

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

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

Indeed it is gratifying to note a growing appreciation within Austria for reds with attributes of grace instead of mere brute power. Anyone can make such wines if you grow grapes in a hot enough climate, and they all have a pall about them, something withering and obtuse. Yet this singularly prevalent idiom is becoming less attractive to many Austrian vintners, who seem to have discovered what makes their wines unique and desirable, and who've set about to nurture it. Good for them! One symptom of this growing enlightenment appears among the Sattler offering. Erich is gradually discontinuing his "super-Tuscan" wine (which

he called Cronos) and using that fruit for single-varietal bottlings of stellar-class Zweigelt and St. Laurent. I'd like to see others follow suit.

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

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

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

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

The other of the hip red varieties is called **ZWEIGELT**.

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

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

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

Finally, I have one encouraging trend to report. *Less oak*. There were four wines or groups of wines that were much less woody than before. I don't know if the new wines had better fruit or if it was a simple relief to just taste *more* fruit, but no matter what it was it means that growers are listening, learning and developing.

## AUSTRIAN WINE LAWS

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

There's a discernable trend away from the

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

Austrian labels have to indicate the wine's residual sugar. They're actually a bit off-the-deep-end on this issue. There's a grower in my portfolio almost all of whose wines have a little RS. This is deliberate. The wines are fabulously successful, and nobody finds them "sweet." But another wise sage voiced a note of caution. Other growers (said the voice) notice this man's success, and they imitate his style so they too can be successful. But they do a facile imitation of the most *superficial* aspect of the style, i.e. the few grams of residual sugar, and the next thing you know our Austrian wines are once again headed in the wrong direction. Don't get me wrong (he continued), I like the wines; they're not my style but they're good wines. But everyone doesn't have this man's talent. And so in a sense his wines are dangerous.

Such are the terms of the debate!

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

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

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

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

## DAC

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

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

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



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# Notes



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