
"IMPROBABLE, AND MASTERLY!"
Terry Theise - Tasting Notes Collection 2023

While tasting the three red wines, I learned something about myself. I'm not sure it's anything attractive, but decide for yourself. Had I tasted the last wine alone, knowing only that it was "modern German pinot noir," I would have thought it confirmed Germany's rightful place as a wonderful source of (relatively) affordable PN, and that it delivered the experience we generally hope for from Old World examples. I would have recognized it, admired it, and praised it accordingly. The "problem" (which may just be mine) is that it followed a wine with such a wonderfully idiosyncratic personality that a "merely" excellent wine drifted too far into anonymity. This is, not to put too fine a point on it, absurd. No wine as good as this one can justifiably be described as anonymous. Except - it had the misfortune of following something wholly unusual, so it felt wholly ordinary, and I had been seduced by the unusual. I felt a kind of disappointment because I realized what kind of wine this last one was, and because the unique experience of its predecessor had astonished me.

- Terry Theise, July 16, 2024

2021 Haardt Pinot Noir +++

This local wine has the intriguingly original aromas I remember from last year - this is Pinot Noir with conifer, graphite, artichoke; I mean, Martin Franzen is like a snake charmer with this varietal, coaxing a shimmering exotic head over the basket. There is a smoky note of burning leaves (or campfire) on the palate. The texture is soft and detailed. Some barrel charcoal can be detected. It is indeed a declaration of Pinot Noir that is strangely seductive without being seductive at all. I mean, it's really silky, but its flavors are dark and mineral. It has a neurosurgical focus. It doesn't draw you in with beautiful aromas, but rather with its sophisticated, clear diction.

I'm trying to remember a Pinot Noir that is so distinctive and at the same time so easy to drink. It becomes "sweeter" the longer it sits in the glass. It's gentle yet forceful, the opposite of incendiary, but you can't stop thinking about it. I left the bottle for several days and tasted it again when it was still 80% full. If anything, it had improved. I've never tasted anything like it, and certainly not a Pinot Noir that is so salty and massively graphitic. It was tremendously good with lamb (rib) chops and aniseed hyssop.

2021 Spätburgunder Neustadt "V" ++

The site was reclaimed recently and will eventually be named I assume as an Erste Lage (if not higher), but meanwhile it's identified by its inscrutable initial.

Fossil-bearing limestone, and I mean no disrespect if I say the flavors are "more expensive." Some of this is the small-cask vinification and some of it's the specifics of the site, but we have an overlay of enticing dark-berry juice that rests upon that graphite spine.

It is significantly more delightful and a tiny bit less absorbing. That's just me; I like being absorbed. And I love being delighted, yet the delights here are relatively fleeting – yet the absorptions are more abiding. You'll see it in the finish, where the "gorgeous" fruits and berries dissolve before very long, leaving that core of fir and even pepper.

Yet while the wine's actually on your palate it is remarkably complex, showing a dialogue of mineral, berry, smoke and Pinot's ineffable sweetness. All that, and it creeps across the palate like a praying mantis. It even shows the "Mourvedre-echo" by which I identify the "dark" animality of St Laurent.

The truth is, I want to like it less because it's easier to love, but I honestly just can't. The wine is actually pretty amazing. (If you don't know Akkesson's lineup of pepper and chocolate, this is like his dark chocolate bar made with the voatsiperifery pepper, which is as startling as it sounds...)

Hat's off to a dancing and luscious and beguiling Pinot Noir!

2021 Herzog Spätburgunder ++

Now the single-site wine, from sandstone. It's the first of these to smell "Burgundian."

It is an excellent example of a wine that speaks a language we know well. It is finely textured, dusty tannin, ample extract, lots of dark chocolate to create symmetry with the sweet fruit. That it is less particular than its siblings is neither here nor there. The "argument" this wine makes suffices to banish my geeky concerns.

If you insisted it was Burgundy while I tasted it blind, I'd say it's Morey St Denis. Considering its graceful density, it's the crush of mineral dispersion that's most impressive. I recognize that some of the smokiness on the finish is due to small-cask, yet nothing in this wine is forced or graceless.

As you see, I'm trying to limn a paradox. I admire and appreciate this wine. I'd be glad to drink it.

And at the same time, as we've climbed from the first wine to this one, each has been more plausible than the last. That wouldn't matter had the first wine not been so sui-generis. It would be foolish to say it's the best wine of the trio, when the other two are significantly more delicious – and deliciousness is important – but that Haardt seems like a citizen in a nation of one.

In the end, what does it even mean? I lay perhaps too much emphasis on singularity and too little emphasis on sheer sensual joy. I ought to shove my odd proclivities to the side, and join the ecstatic dance this wine delivers. Others might have made it, but others didn't. As Frank Zappa said, it's time to "get up on your feet and do the funky Alphonso!"

2022 Herrenletten Riesling ++

With 13% alc it's the first one to cross the 12.5% barrier. And it's no secret I love this vineyard. And if you taste it, there will be no secret why I love this vineyard, which really ought to be a GG, considering it is superior to several other GGs.....

The wines can be (and is here) first cousins to old-vines Champagnes from Avize – some of the Agraparts or Varnier's Cuvée St. Denis. The virtues are eerily similar – those keen white flavors, the precision of nuance and allusion, the amazingly expressive greeting, and the intricate dissolve of mineral at the end.

I'll go way out on a limb. Considering the last 10-15 vintages I've tasted from this estate, I'd make a case that Herrenletten is every bit as good as the GG Breumel, and ought to be its companion. (In fact I like these even more, but that's just my preference.)

The wine seems to have it all – a wonderful opening aroma, a perfect integration of texture, length and flavor, a searchingly complex finish, and apart from that it tastes good. Truly an unsung hero of Pfalz Riesling.

In some ways it reminds me of the Kamptal's Gaisberg, perhaps without the latter's tropical fruit profile. It oscillates between an otherworldly flashing of flavor and a determined firmness of structure. The result is a kind of subliminal "sweetness" of the physiological kind.

2022 Bürgergarten Muskateller ++

A unicorn-wine – I think it's only been made two or three times. For all of its manifold virtues, it is a shy yielder, and to make a single-site wine requires a generous harvest.

I am blasted into orbit by this wine; thus it seems churlish to kvetch yet again about the STUPID HEAVY BOTTLE – yet I must. This is like a spawn of Muscat with the Breumel Riesling GG; it has that wine's rich earth-and-stone solidity along with its para-fruit complexity. It is in effect a Cru that happens to have been made with Muscat, and which shows the Cru regardless. This gives rise to all kinds of speculations on the nature of a Cru and whether it requires a given variety to "show" itself.

In this case the answer is no, but the next question is – what about ten years from now?

I don't know whether this was made available in the U.S. but, really, wherever you may be in the world, my advice is to lunge at this wine and score all you can of it. Will it be hedonic? That depends!

What you will get above the zealous minerality is a thing that isn't really "fruit" as we normally perceive it. It isn't really grapey (which is the thing they lob at Muscat; "It's just grapey, what's the big deal?") but it seems to refer to every single leaf in the mint family (especially tarragon and lemon grass) along with ginger and shisho and even rhubarb, and everything sung with all the wild abandon of a well-trained voice.

It has the sober magnificence of that which isn't easy. Yet it is far from inscrutable. Just an amazing wine....

2022 Bürgergarten “Im Breumel” GG +

Between the heavy bottle and the eschewing of “Riesling” on the label, this is all getting too adorably affected, I often feel. I know this wine well. I remember when the estate obtained the Clos, and how proud they were, and I remember the 2001 Spätlese (#2134) that catapulted me into the outer orbits, in the days before the site could be identified. It definitely has all the elements of a GG – among which it is among the more inscrutable.

If you’re looking for a blast of torque, it isn’t here, and is never here. This isn’t Kalkofen or Pechstein. It offers an interior complexity for which you have to dig below its “entertainment value.” And that business of digging below is part of why I admire Franzen (and Catoir) so much, because I know how easy it would be to make a blockbuster GG from this site. You’d get invited to the VIP-room, where all the starlets would offer their “esoteric skills” for your delectation – or you could make a wine like this, that requests that you think about it....

The subterranean layers are obscurely earthy here. It’s a concatenation of spices and mycelium and ancient rocks, hard to make into a “tasting note” with its sequence of associations. There’s a kind of eternal dignity here that is simply more than the regular Bürgergarten, but I’m not sure the “more” makes it more pleasurable. It’s just another key signature of complexity.

Put it this way: you don’t want to be distracted when you taste or drink this. It asks that of you, and you give it. With the previous two wines, their particular expressiveness simply joins the party.

At the end of this dry-Riesling flight, I have to respect the integrity of maintaining a cool un-showy style even in a vintage that maybe didn’t suit it. I say that because of the pair of superb Spätleses coming up shortly. As I write these words, I’ve tasted everything, and if you predicted my favorite wines would be the Muscats I wouldn’t be surprised, and if you added the Spätburgunders to your forecast I’d be very surprised. But so it was.

Martin writes that Scheurebe was the variety crankiest about the severe drought. “They’re good,” he says, “but they miss a little of the vibration they might have shown.” This may be true, but I liked them!

2022 Haardt Muskateller +

I’m flipping my often-uttered statement onto its head. I think these are the great Muscats of the world, only equaled by the best of Zind-Humbrecht.

Considering the ravishing aromas, the palate entry might feel diffident. Might! Because the wine billows and swells into a rich, gripping and marvelous end palate that leads to a superb finish.

Look, we don’t go to dry Muscat looking for subtlety nor for the Nth degree of complexity. Yet we draw very close to finding both of these things now. These aromas could be described as lurid, yet they express with such poignant tact, I dissolve with happiness. I can’t fathom how a wine that arrives so gracefully can also be so determinedly expressive, and so careful about expressing with the utmost definition.

We have the usual – “the usual” – spices and minerality and that basil-oil thing I’ve seen no other Muscat display. It leads me to wonder....are these not only the world’s great Muscats, but are they also some of the world’s great wines?

I think that they are.

2022 Haardt Scheurebe +

I surmise this includes the single-site (Mandelring) bottling they’ve sometimes made when the harvest volume (and quality) made it possible. It smells marvelous – classic fine Scheurebe. The variety has a vulgar side, which I like for its erotic vitality, but I also like Scheu when it’s “dressed-up” and urbane.

When it shows its cassis and sage profiles, it can also show a bitterness one likes or doesn’t. I like it for this variety, exceptionally, and I like it here. It makes me want to roast a piece of Sea Bass coated with olive oil and fennel-pollen.

Considering this is a Scheu that “plays well with others” I do admire it and like it quite a bit. I accept its bitterness as a price worth paying for something so detailed and articulate. It’s a wine that makes the case for appreciating the variety (as opposed to my slobbery crush on it), which some tasters reject as being overly gaudy.

There was, again, quite an awakening over 24 hours.

But it helps if you arrived already liking Scheurebe. I don’t see it making converts. The poise between introversion and vehemence is rather tenuous. I’ll be very happy to drink it, but I’d describe it as an excellent wine that isn’t really beautiful. It also overlaps

somewhat with the creature I am about to encounter....

“The Muscat was just the opposite; it loved the weather conditions, and I must say the vintages between ’19 and ’22 are unmatched for this variety,” Martin tells me.

I’ll say!

2022 Bürgergarten Riesling +

Back to 12.5% alc. It has (what I call) the Muschelkalk aroma, an earthy smell that comes from fossil-bearing limestone, and which can be seen wherever this soil is found. Taste the Boxler Grand Cru Sommerberg (except for the granitic “Eckberg” bottling) and you’ll see what I mean.

It can be an earthy aroma or a fine one, as it is here. As a rule it’s adamant, Romanesque, thick, but the genius of Martin Franzen is to give this wine wings. The balance here is impeccable. Nothing, not even the tiniest thing, is out of place. Earth, spice(s), allusions to citric fruits, minerality, all are united in the most seamless synergy.

It isn’t more melodic than the Herrenletten, but it’s a different sort of melody, more lyric, even (if the word weren’t so twee) daintier. However you describe it, the wine is beautiful, with the fervent aromas of flowering Springtime trees (plums and cherries!). It’s a smaller wine than the Herrenletten but it is also more charming. Still, like all of these, it will “show” best if you’re not studying the (rather brusque) finish, or in other words – food.

2022 Neustadt “V” Riesling

As with the Spätburgunder, this is the initial of a vineyard pending legal approval to identify. They are stoked about it, with ample reason, as far as I have tasted. At some point it will become a GG.

This is way juicier than the previous wine, and it is also somewhat less detailed in the mineral sense. It’s the first wine to really allude to “fruit.” Sensually it is richly satisfying. It has the torque of significant wine. It’s earthy and fills the gob. It’s incipiently peachy. It is also the first among these to be both fine and tasty.

You could say it’s very Pfalz. It reads that way. With air it spreads out and grows saltier. The cooler you serve it the more mineral it shows. It’s a lovely glass of wine, and whether it shows a Grand Cru Riesling in the making, I think is too soon to say.

We did drink a glass in the kitchen while we made supper. The juiciness leads to thoughts of grub. Thus the bottle is even more developed, and tasting it again now it’s revealing a mineral edge that was only inferential before. There’s also a phenolic scratch on the finish. What’s noteworthy is the mixing of a stern graphite-y mineral with an almost fleshy texture.

It resembles, but does not attain, the splendid quality of the Spätburgunder, but it is very good, and makes a plausible case for eventual GG status.

2022 Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese +

I cheated and peeked at the deets. This is sweeter than the previous wine on paper, yet it tastes drier and firmer, and has a half percent more alcohol.

Typically for this terroir, it shows more herbs and earth than the more delicately floral Bürgergarten. The influence of loess is apparent; you could be forgiven for guessing Grüner Veltliner on a first blind sniff.

You know, there is a wisdom here. Such a perfectly balanced wine doesn’t just appear. Not every cellar master knows how to appreciate sweetness without being ruled by it. This wine is as much savory as it is sweet, and the lovely firm undergirding of solidity hates “sugar” as much as you do.

Yet it also suggests a truly subversive question – why, if you can fashion wines with RS that are this perfect, would you keep insisting on those brutalist Trocken wines? And I say this as a lover of dry German Rieslings, and as someone who drinks 90% dry wine in my private life.

Even worse than wines drier than they need to be are the many wines that are way sweeter than they need to be. I suspect the sugar-haters have had too many of those treacherous abominations. Finally, there is more than just a wisdom here – there is the antidote to a tsunami of wrong thinking about the role of sweetness in a Riesling wine.

It’s been a long time since I had a Spätlese and felt, yes, exactly this.

2022 Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese +

The aromas are higher-toned now, typical for this vineyard. The wine “acts” drier than the Kabinett – though it isn’t – and the entire impression does what the best “sweet” Rieslings do, seeming to default to an underlying and fundamental dryness. That yin-yang is infinitely more delicious and interesting than mere fruit or that ingratiating business that passes for “charm.”

We have a slinky angular profile here, more floral than fruity, and seriously drinky. If I were one of those ghouls pathologically averse to sweetness, I’d enjoy this wine more than the ostensibly “drier” Kabinett. It’s a wine with high cheekbones and penetrating blue eyes. I hope the language police will forgive me if I see this wine, not as “feminine” but as ladylike, that is, like a particular kind of woman whom we all have encountered (and who, in my case, probably scolded me....).