

weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

These were the first great wines I tasted from 2008. We'd come from the Weinviertel and Wagram regions, and I'd formed a picture of the vintage that Hannes Hirsch calmly and promptly demolished. With the first sniff of even the wee little "Veltliner #1" it was as if the wine was saying "Look where we are!"

I happened to speak with Hirsch during the most gruesome days of last 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 "Hannes' 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 'Hannes 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



Johannes Hirsch

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 are so stellar and so singular – no other Austrian wines are quite like them – it feels like the whole thing is tuned and humming.

It helps that Hannes is fearless. His Grand Cru Rieslings were "sweet" in '07, so what? They're "sweet" again in '08. They are 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 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,

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Lamm, Gaisberg, Heiligenstein**
- **Soil types: Loess, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling, 5% Other**

they're not (eek) "German wines," and he barely seems to attend to whatever Critical-Opinion they may engender.

And me, I like a lone wolf, and I love a maverick, and I flat-out adore balanced Rieslings, and so I'm the happiest sum-bitch alive when I'm with Hannes Hirsch tasting and shooting the breeze.

We tend to like to party with Hannes, '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 bio-dynamic 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.

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. Frau Selbach would say they have CARAMBA! I, in an uninhibited moment, could imagine myself saying they HAVE BOOTIE AND CAN SHAKE IT.

- AWH-071 **2008 Grüner Veltliner “veltliner #1”**
 CORE-LIST WINE. When I first tasted this I liked it but thought the '07 had been better. “Really?” said ‘Hannes, “I like this one more.” So the '07 was presented, and he was right; the '08 is even better. Funny how memory works. This has super-pretty smoky aromas; it’s light and juicy, seems more *cool* than the '07; stylish, a little terse, but pretty and delicate. Like '07 but more feminine, with an almost Riesling-like pitted-fruit note.
- AWH-072 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein** +
 AWH-072H **2008 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**
 CORE LIST WINE. The first important Kamptal wine I tasted, and hey wow – here’s body and polish and a lovely beany-loessy ripeness; juicy and delicious with an embedded richness and smoke.
- AWH-067 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** ++
 AWH-074 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** ++
 The '07 was a hasty assemblage of various casks when I tasted it a year ago. I saw it again at the DI-tastings in January, but you don’t get a definitive impression at those events. This was the first time I sat with a glass, and had time. And I’d say of all the great 2007 GrüVes, this one’s by far the most *fun*; a magnificent, meaty, truffley thing, full of root-veggie sweetness, quinoa and sesame oil, and a texture like the collagen of a perfect veal stock.
- The '08 was more ready than the '07 had been a year ago. It’s bready and profound, yet clear and deft; it recalls the '02 but better; it’s thick yet bouncy, juicy, and addictively drinkable. It has a percent less alcohol than Bründlmayer’s or Gobelsburg’s.
- AWH-073 **2008 Riesling Zöbing** +
 A stunningly pretty aroma leads to a delicate leafy-herbal palate with some underlying rhubarb notes; tasty and satisfying.
- AWH-069 **2007 Riesling Gaisberg** ++(+)
 AWH-075 **2008 Riesling Gaisberg** ++
 CORE-LIST WINE. The '07 Crus, so astonishingly expressive in cask, are relatively constricted after bottling, and seem to need time to recover themselves. The '08 is about as good – +++ good – as '07 was at this time last year, but I’m being a little more cautious in my euphoria. The aroma is gorgeously flowery in the Gaisberg way; iris, wisteria, purple lilacs, and it’s replete with Gaisberg’s signature minerality; the wine almost works like a Nahe *feinherb*, absurdly detailed and complex. Gaisberg is what it means to be Riesling!

AWH-070 **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein** **++(+)**
 AWH-076 **2008 Riesling Heiligenstein** **++**

The '08 shows a ridiculous terroir, dance-of-the-seven-veils fruit, Turkish bazaar spices; again Nahe comes to mind (Dellchen, the lower slope of Hermannshöhle); it's a superb exotic Riesling from a great, great vineyard.

AWH-058 **Riesling Gaisberg "Library Vintages" (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004)**

Here you'll get three bottles each of Riesling Gaisberg 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004.

2004: *This is a devilishly complex thing; spicy-salty aromas, ferrous and showing some of the '04s charred smoky notes; a sizzling spicy palate, thickly juicily mineral—don't ever let anybody tell you "mineral" is a euphemism for "unripe," because this (and hundreds of wines like it) is about as lavish as wine gets, only its flavor dialect is mineral, not "fruit." There's a note of not-quite-fully-ripe blackberry; the palate really swells and billow and sweetens, reaching a crescendo of lavish iridescent intesnity. ++*

2003: *Always one the great Rieslings in this offering. The 2003, one of the top-few Riesling of the vintage, has a stunningly expressive nose; wisteria and blackberry and Gyokoru; the palate is just absurd, psychedelically vivid, phosphorescent shimmer, mint and wintergreen and fruit and some sort of stone you'd lick to restore eyesight to the blind; lavish fruit yields to pure ore and spice on the finish. ++*

2002: *The 2002 is just screaming with great sizzling depth of mirabelle and raspberry. High-toned minerally nose and the palate has the usual sizzling precision and wonderful saltiness. ++*

1999: *Greater swell than the 1998 and more undertow of power. Deep internal rich pikant ripeness and the potential for profundity in the muscle underlying the mineral.*

