

Odds and Ends

Alois Kracher's Stunning 1995 Trockenbeerenauslesen

by Pierre-Antoine Rovani

A few years ago, Alois Kracher burst into my life like an air-raid siren during a peaceful nap. His 1991's shattered all my preconceptions about sweet wines. There are not one but two Alois Krachers. This father and son team (Austrian's do not use the "junior" or "senior" suffixes) have a range of varietals (including Welschriesling, Scheurebe, Chardonnay, Muskat-Ottonei, Traminer and Zweigelt) planted along the banks of the Neusiedlersee in eastern Austria near Hungary. The elder Kracher is responsible for the viticulture. In this region one of the most difficult aspects of vineyard work is devising ways to prevent birds from devouring the ripe grapes. The Krachers have each row of vines encased in netting, and Kracher-fils handles all the cellar work.

1995 is the finest vintage for sweet wines both Krachers have ever witnessed in the Neusiedlersee, permitting the younger Kracher to fashion an unprecedented number of trockenbeerenauslesen - the highest/sweetest level in the germanic ranking of wines with residual sugar. I was permitted to taste all fifteen of Kracher's mindboggling 1995 trockenbeerenauslesen not once but twice, before and after bottling. Each of these wines was fermented in wood, with Alois Kracher deciding on a wine by wine basis whether they should be placed in new barrels or traditional older casks, how much time each should spend on its lees, whether they should be racked into more new oak or stainless steel tanks, etc. - no recipe winemaking here!

Kracher divides his wines into three basic categories: 1) "Zwischen den Seen" (between the lakes), the more traditional cuvée vinified in previously used casks, 2) "Nouvelle Vague" (new wave), a modern, non-traditional approach using new oak barrels (the Zwischen den Seen and Nouvelle Vague wines are, with one exception, single varietal wines), and 3) "Grande Cuvée" a multi-varietal blend. Kracher said "In the best vintages, I try to make the Grande Cuvée a very individual wine with the greatest possible finesse by highest possible concentration and potential." These wines are only available in 375ml bottles (half-bottles) and carry the name of the varietals (except in the case of the "Grande Cuvée") and a number from 1 to 15 since Kracher wanted to indicate what he perceived to be their relative level of concentration (#15 is, in his opinion, the most concentrated). While each wine is distinctly different they are all opulent, luscious, unctuous, thick, highly concentrated, extracted, full-bodied, extremely botrytised, and amazingly long. Most importantly, each wine is outstanding in its own right.

Due to a lack of space, abbreviated notes follow. I have included the residual sugar (g/l), alcohol (alc.) and acidity (g/l) data to assist readers in their selection. Also, I have provided basic vinification information so that readers may see how Kracher adapts his vinification techniques and timetable to each wine. His goal is to get the most concentration, extraction and finesse while maintaining freshness and life, which is wine in Austria."

Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #1, Welschriesling "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$66.00)	93
	195 grams of residual sugar per liter (g/l), 11% alcohol (alc.), 8.5 grams acidity per liter (g/l), 5000 bottles. Fermented in used casks and then racked into stainless steel to preserve the wine's freshness and bottled after 10 months. Flower and spice aromas are found in this sweet, earthy, apricot-jammed and well-balanced nectar. It will be at its best between now and 2015+.		93
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #2, Welschriesling "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$79.00)	95
	236 g/l, 8.5% alc., 10 g/l, 600 bottles. Fermented and aged in used casks and bottled after 10 months. Aromatically revealing candied pineapples, this wine's super-thick core is packed with mineral, herbal, spicy, earthy, metallic, floral, apricot, peach, apple compote, and red berry flavors. Its striking, highly focused acidity perfectly balances the unctuous sweetness. A 40+ second finish! Drink it between 2005-2020+		95
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #3, Scheurebe "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$72.50)	94+
	174 g/l, 12% alc., 9 g/l, 2600 bottles. Fermented in used casks, then racked into stainless steel and bottled after 10 months. Mango, kiwi, and pink grapefruit aromas are followed by oily layers of lychee nut, minerals, steel, and crisp white grapes in a beguiling, superbly balanced and elegant character. Projected maturity: Now-2018+		94+
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #4, Scheurebe "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$90.00)	96
	197 g/l, 11.5% alc., 10.5 g/l, 1000 bottles. Fermented and aged in used casks and bottled after 10 months. Lychee, candied pink grapefruit, kiwi, and spicy smoke scents and a massive, powerful core of hugely rich floral, caramel covered apricots, flowers, candied apples, and fresh herbs characterize this wine. Drink it between 2003 and Armageddon (or when the cork disintegrates, whichever comes first).		96
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #5, Muskat-Ottonei "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$90.00)	92+
	171 g/l, 11% alc., 8.5 g/l, 1100 bottles. Fermented and aged in used casks and bottled after 12 months. Kracher feels this wine (like #2, 4, 8, 11, and 14) will be at its best after 15 years of cellaring. Aromatically displaying orange blossoms, candied tangerines, minerals and earth, this intensely rich wine is packed with sweet raspberry candy, lychee, sugar-coated oranges and papaya flavors. Anticipated maturity: 2005-2020.		92+
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #6, Scheurebe "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$79.00)	94-96
	130 g/l, 12.5% alc., 9.5 g/l, 2000 bottles. Fermented and aged in used casks and bottled after 18 months. (this note is from a barrel sample as the bottled sample I tasted was corked). Candied pink grapefruit, white pepper and spicy red berry (raspberries, cherries and strawberries) scents are found in the oily, mango, papaya, banana, apricot and sweet herbal tea-flavored wine. Drink it between 2003-2020+.		94-96
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #7, Chardonnay/Welschriesling "Nouvelle Vague"	(\$90.00)	94
	164 g/l, 12.5% alc., 9.5 g/l, 4200 bottles. (80% Chardonnay and 20% Welschriesling) Fermented and aged in new oak, then bottled after 16 months. Sweet oak, coconut, vanilla, cardamom, nutmeg, and smoky aromas are followed by a magnificently complex and focused core of candied cherries, tropical fruits and smoky/sweet oak flavors. Somewhat like a Helen Turley Chardonnay gone mad. Projected maturity: 2005-2025.		94
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #8, Traminer "Nouvelle Vague"	(\$90.00)	93
	167 g/l, 13% alc., 8.9 g/l, 1600 bottles. Fermented and aged in new oak, then bottled after 16 months. Aromatically, this wine exhibits coconut (from the new oak), roses, sweet Earl Gray tea, mango and kiwi. In the mouth its incredibly thick personality is jam-packed with concentrated vanilla, cardamom, tropical fruits, and perfumed red berries. Anticipated maturity: 2005-2020+		93
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #9, Zweigelt Rosé "Nouvelle Vague"	(\$90.00)	93
	189 g/l, 11.5% alc., 10 g/l, 3300 bottles. Fermented in new oak, then racked into more new oak (the Dominique Laurent 200% new oak treatment) and aged 16 months before bottling. Kracher says he used the 200% new oak because he lost most of the red wine color (it displays a pink/orange brick robe) and flavors due to the high levels of botrytis. He feels the oak has replaced much of the lost tannins and red wine character turning it into what he calls a "cigar wine." Violets, oak spice, red cherries and currants are found in the aromas, followed by a caramel, raspberry, pot pourri, rose petal-laced character. Drink it between 2005-2025+		93
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #10, Zweigelt Rosé "Nouvelle Vague"	(\$90.00)	95+
	245 g/l, 8.5% alc., 10 g/l, 1800 bottles. Fermented and aged in the oak used to ferment #9 and bottled after 15 months. Sporting a copper/hot pink/orange color and revealing a nose reminiscent of the fruit-flavored candies found on the check-out counters of every épicerie in France (cherry, raspberry, strawberry, red currant, etc.). This spectacular wine tastes like sugar-coated cherries intermingled with fresh raspberries and roses in a perfumed, refined, elegant, and focused syrup. Anticipated maturity: 2005-2025+		95+
Alois Kracher	1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #11, Muskat-Ottonei "Zwischen Den Seen"	(\$95.00)	98+
	230 g/l, 8% alc., 10 g/l, 400 bottles. Fermented and aged in used casks and bottled after 16 months. A floral, smoky, mineral-infused nose is followed by an amazingly elegant, yet thick as jello, wine crammed with candied citrus zests, orange blossoms, apricot, lavender, ginger, cherries, currants, peaches and apricots. A sublime wine, Kracher correctly describes it as "soft and feminine." Drink this gem between 2007-2025+.		98+

Alois Kracher 1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #12, Grande Cuvée
 210 g/rs, 12% alc., 10 g/a, 15,000 bottles. A blend of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Welschriesling, and 10% Traminer fermented in new oak barrels as well as 20% Scheurebe fermented in cask. (This note is based on a barrel sample as the bottled wine I was to receive broke in transit). Smoky, spicy,

(\$75.00) (98-99) 96-98
 mineral and tropical fruit-infused aromas are followed by stunning layers of lively, fresh red berry and mangoes in a focused, precise and subtly balanced core. Projected maturity: 2002-2025+.

Alois Kracher 1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #13, Chardonnay "Nouvelle Vague"
 250 g/rs, 8.5% alc., 11 g/a, 800 bottles. Fermented and aged in new oak barrels, then bottled after 16 months. (The bottled wine was markedly better than the barrel sample I tasted of this wine). The finest late harvest Chardonnay I have ever tasted! This wine has pink grapefruit, white pepper,

(\$101.00) 95+ 96+
 smoky scents and a divine personality filled with baked papaya, mango, apricots, and peaches so thick a knife and fork are almost required to consume this masterpiece. Awesome balancing acidity and length! Drink it between 2002 and 2030+.

Alois Kracher 1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #14, Scheurebe "Zwischen Den Seen"
 310 g/rs, 7% alc., 12 g/a, 2300 bottles. Fermented and aged in used casks and bottled after 18 months. Smoke, spice, thyme, rosemary, roasted herbs, candied apples, white pepper, and red currant aromas are followed by a massive silky core of sweet herbal teas, cherries, minerals and spicy red fruits (I find that highly concentrated white wines often exhibit red fruit

(\$100.00) 96 96
 aromas and flavors when they are young). Unbelievably unctuous yet exquisitely refined due to its perfectly balanced acidity. This wine will still be drinking spectacularly when the theory behind the The Planet of the Apes is unveiled.

Alois Kracher 1995 Trockenbeerenauslese #15, Welschriesling "Zwischen Den Seen"
 370 g/rs, 5.5% alc., 13 g/a, 800 bottles. Fermented (for 12 months) in used casks then racked into stainless steel and bottled after 16 months. If my math is correct, there is almost a third of a pound of pure sugar per half-bottle of this wine! Yet, amazingly, it is well balanced due to its humongous level of acidity. Of course, it's as thick as Jello and may be better suited to pancakes than a glass, but... Revealing intense cherry-flavored cough medicine, white pepper, thyme, chrysanthemum tea, and floral scents, this syrup is as concentrated, extracted and rich as any wine I have ever tasted

(\$112.50) 95+ 95+
 (its texture is reminiscent of some of the "sugar hunter" wines described in issue # 113 but it has significantly better equilibrium). Baked tropical fruits (bananas, mangoes, peapayas, etc.) and candied red berries can be discerned among the waves of oily viscosity that ooze across the palate. I recommend cellaring this wine for at least ten years before opening it, but readers may find it wise to invest in cryogenics if they intend to drink it at its apogee. Projected maturity: 2010-2030+. Imported by VinDivino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700.

DEATH KEEPS NO CALENDAR

It was a year that I thought would be particularly joyful, attaining 50 years of age and celebrating that hallmark as well as the upcoming 20th anniversary of The Wine Advocate. But over the last twelve months the wine world has lost an extraordinary number of individuals who made major contributions to the enjoyment of a beverage so many of us cherish. Some of the deaths were not unexpected in view of the fact that the deceased had lived long, productive lives. Others seemed particularly cruel in view of their victims' jeunesse. I knew all of those who died, some very well, but few I could call a close friend. With the death of Bruce Bassin on February 20th (from a massive heart attack) at what seems an unbearably young age of 40, I lost someone dear to my heart.

Most Wine Advocate readers are probably not aware of the fact that long before the first issue was written and published in 1975, much of my serious wine buying was from MacArthur Beverages in Washington, DC (as well as the Woodley Shop - now known as Caver/Woodley). During those days I did not know Bruce, but I did know his parents, Ruth and Addy Bassin. To this day, I do not think there has ever been a more astute and gutsy fine wine buyer than Addy Bassin. I learned more about Bordeaux from him than from any book I have ever read. While he made one buying coup after another, his most famous purchase had its origins in the fall of 1983. After a trip to Bordeaux, he announced in his fall catalogue that 1982 would be one of the greatest Bordeaux vintages ever. Why? Because he had "tasted the grapes." Most of us thought Addy was just setting the stage for another "futures" campaign. But Addy always put his money where his mouth was, and as most Washingtonians, as well as many of MacArthur's customers throughout the country have long known, MacArthur was one of the world's biggest sellers of the historic 1982s, and at bargain-basement prices.

At Bruce's funeral, I found out that Addy had had a very serious heart-attack at age 34, but it was cancer that proved his undoing 28 years later. During that period, MacArthur Beverages was built into one of our country's finest wine retail establishments.

In 1986, at age 26, Bruce inherited the job of replacing a legend. People used to dealing with his wise father were somewhat shocked by the exuberance and energy level exhibited by the young Bruce. However, he quickly grew into the job, and only God knows what he would have achieved had he lived a full life. While he continued to pursue the strengths of MacArthur Beverages, selling the renowned Bordeaux classified growths, and the finest premier and grand cru

Burgundies, he branched out in other directions, all of which were well ahead of the times, and have proved just how remarkable his insights were.

Bruce was responsible for the hiring of some extraordinarily talented wine consultants. The strength MacArthur Beverages has exhibited over recent years with its Italian wine selections is attributable to the hiring of Tom Hanna, an extremely knowledgeable consultant who had spent much of his career specializing in Italian wines at other Washington DC addresses. Jim Arseneault, a Washington DC (and wine world) legend, was brought in, at first to bolster the Rhône and Burgundy portfolios, but he also pioneered a brilliant California wine program. In addition to exploring the possibilities offered by the Pacific Northwest. Along with another top consultant, Roy Cloud, Bruce and Jim were the first to recognize the potential in California, and began building an extensive portfolio of California wheries, showcasing their selections in MacArthur's annual barrel tasting that was held for the benefit of a cancer research fund named after Addy. This tasting, which today pulls in 600 or more tasters from around the county, is the premier wine event in the mid-Atlantic, and has become a formidable event for many of California's top wineries, as well as the place for consumers to purchase California wine futures. Since then, "Diamond Jim," as he is known to his friends, has become an independent wholesaler, but while he was at MacArthur, Bruce and Jim provided as formidable a one-two punch as has ever been seen in the wine world. Even Pierre-Antoine Rovani, hand-selected by Bruce to assist in the French wine department, did his job so well that he became my full-time assistant. One of the many admirable characteristics Bruce possessed was that he was never worried about surrounding himself with exceptional talents. Today, MacArthur Beverages boasts a level of competence and expertise that remains the envy of the trade.

It is obvious that MacArthur Beverages will remain one of our country's premier wine shops. The staff (Mark Wessels, Joe Kluchinsky, Allen Murphy, Tom Hanna, et. al.) is superb, and Ruth Bassin will insure that the store continues its tradition of excellence - if only as a homage to her beloved Addy and Bruce. Can there be any doubt that the wine world has lost one of its most vibrant and energetic young talents? Most importantly, Bruce was, even more than a wine man, a dedicated family man. He leaves behind the woman of his dreams, Kris, and their three young children, Morgan, Alexis, and Aaron. While pragmatists may say that everything and everybody can be replaced, I tend to believe, at least in Bruce's case, that only sorrow will inhabit the void he has left.