

# howard g. goldberg *Austria's soul of honey*

**A**t 47, Alois Kracher, Jr. seems like a big kid, even an early-middle-aged *wunderkind*. Maybe it's because Alois, Jr. works with Alois, Sr., his quiet, retiring 77-year-old father, who faithfully tends vines twelve hours a day, treating them like favored cronies. The younger Alois, a friend-for-life type of person, grabs your hand enthusiastically. Hugging comes easily as he blankets others with spontaneous warmth. His cherubic, thoughtful face and dark hair remind you of the slightly portly Dylan Thomas. His open moods chase each other like a summer afternoon's rain squall and then sunbeams. When fun catches his always amused eye, he lights up like neon. And when you taste his Austrian dessert wines, he becomes a benign fox, watching keenly for your slightest wrinkle of judgment, which comes easily. What's not to like?

"Genius" and "Kracher" sometimes occupy the same sentence. In the small world of extraordinary dessert nectars, the name Kracher deserves to be geographic — to be synonymous with peer destinations like Sauternes, Tokaj, Madeira and Port (for Oporto, Portugal). Vintage after vintage, critics' scores suggest that Kracher has virtually patented every number in the 90 to 99 range.

In Illmitz, the Burgenland town that is home to his estate, Weinlaubenhof Kracher, they all call Alois "Luis." Maybe the municipality should change its name to Kracher, since Luis's winning international-celebrity status steadily draws visitors to the region, which abuts Hungary's western border. Besides, a third Kracher — Alois's courtly son, Gerhard, 24 — now owns 34 percent of the winery and helps run it and make the wine.

Alois Kracher's dessert wines rise to sublimity; in his native Burgenland, where red wine is queen, his *trockenbeerenauslesen*, all whites, are, untouchably, king.

How many Old World estates obsessively specialize in exquisite Chardonnay, Welschriesling, Muskat Ottonel, Traminer and Scheurebe elixirs in mostly 375-milliliter bottles? In small quantities, they reach Americans through Kracher's importer, Vin Divino in Chicago.

How did this stardom come about? "My father was one of the pioneers of the region," Kracher says. From the early 1960s, Alois, Sr. "sold 100 percent of his wines in bottles, mainly sweet wines." Alois, Jr. always dreamed of working "in the business I grew up with."

"I was first influenced by Sauternes winemakers in the early '80s," starting with one at Château d'Yquem, in Sauternes, he explains. Later, he "learned a lot from discussions with colleagues all over the world," especially Egon Müller, the owner of Weingut Egon Müller-Scharzhof, a legendary source of Riesling dessert wines in the Saar region of Germany; Istvan Szepsy, a celebrated producer of Tokaji-Aszú in Hungary; and Count Alexandre de Lur-Saluces, the former director of Yquem.

Kracher focuses mainly on dessert wines because in his region's history, he says, the best wines always have been botrytised. When he joined the business, the family owned nearly 14 acres; now it owns nearly 62 and rents 12.5 more. In the early 1990s, he made 20,000 bottles, 85 percent of them half-bottles; now he averages 100,000, still 85 percent in half-bottles.

Using high-density planting, the Krachers grow grapes between Illmitz and eastern shore of Neusiedlersee, a large, reed-belted lake that attracts vacationers.

On Lake Neusiedl's eastern bank, grazing pastures are dotted with lakes. This wetland region, called Seewinkel (lake corner), enjoys hot, summers bracketed by cold, rainy springs and autumns, then shivery winters. In autumn, dense evening fogs rolling inland from the six-foot-deep Neusiedlersee create the classic conditions that propagate botrytis cinerea (noble rot) fungus that, by shriveling grapes and concentrating their juices, yields *trockenbeerenauslesen*. The next midday sun burns the fog off. By moderating climate and temperature swings, Neusiedl promotes late harvesting.

Using natural yeasts, Kracher vinifies two ways: Wines labeled Zwischen den Seen (Between the Lakes) are fermented slowly in stainless steel and in wooden casks (his goal is "freshness, and primary grape flavors"); Nouveau (New Wave) wines are reared in oak *barrisques* for spiciness, depth and length.

Grapes, harvested sequentially, become wine in small lots; importantly, separate bottlings are numbered (1, 2, 3, etc.); higher numbers denote ascending levels of concentration. Both styles go into wood barrels holding the so-called Collection. T.B.A.s Kracher considers perfectly balanced between density and finesse are labeled Grand Cuvée.

Kracher compares his 2002s to the 1999s, both great. Exclaiming, swooning, grunting nonstop, I recently tasted 13 T.B.A.s

feeling as if I had raided a gilt-edged honeycomb. They are so viscous that thimbleful suffices; one-third of a glass feels hoggish.

The spectrum of colors in the transparent 375-ml bottles ranges from pale gold through antique-jewelry gold through mellowed pirate's gold. The recurring motifs of honey, apricot, vanilla, grapefruit, candied fruit, fig marmalade zesty acidity were sometimes accompanied by herbal grace notes.

Under Kracher's winegrowing circumstances, full-blown decadence must be a constant temptation. Maybe my reading is wrong, but Kracher, the extroverted, seems artistically modest and cautious, and tends to translate restraint into his wines, Mother Nature allowing.

In Kracher's 2002 T.B.A. collection, I gave No. 2, a perfectly round, velvety, \$67 Chardonnay, 95 points; No. 3, a lean, tart \$67 Welschriesling, 92 points; No. 4, a refined, gloriously confectionery \$72 Muskat Ottonel with brio, 96 points; No. 5, a grapefruity, palate-rousing \$72 Scheurebe with grip, 96 points; No. 8, a carefree \$83 Welschriesling with quicksilver acidity and bakery aromas, 94 points; No. 10, an oily, erotic \$90 Scheurebe tasting of distilled apricots, 97 points.

Kracher's No. 7, the \$77 Grand Cuvée — perfectly symmetrical, light puff of air, graceful as a ballerina, tangy as grapefruit — rated 99 points. So did No. 12, a \$110 welschriesling-scheurebe blend, the soul of honey, a ball perfect yin and yang of sweetness and acidity.

As for 2001, a youthfully zesty \$68 Traminer No. 1 rated 95 points. The \$73 Grand Cuvée, No. 6, svelte, spicy and long, got 92 points; 1999's No. 5, a curious \$57 welschriesling-chardonnay blend tasting breadly and of mead, 88 points; 1995's No. 1, an exquisitely lithe apricot-filled cream puff (that is almost a quaffer), 96 points.

Surprise. The No. 12 from 1995, a \$69 Grand Cuvée with an unusually high twelve percent of alcohol, felt almost painfully edgy, but I caved for 87 points. My predecessors seduced me. Or maybe in an earlier incarnation I was a bee. ☞

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