Chardonnay has long been the world’s dominant varietal white wine, thanks in large part to its popularity as both white Burgundy and California Chardonnay. But if you’re ready to venture outside the world of Chardonnay, you’d do well to consider the white wines of Germany and Austria. Both nations set the benchmark for world-class Riesling, while Austria also garners acclaim for its Grüner Veltliner. These wines are typically higher in acidity than most of the Chardonnay on the market, yet they also display unmatched structure and elegance—without the influence of new oak barrels. They pair well with myriad cuisines, and are refreshing to enjoy as we move into spring and then on to summer weather. It is also fun to taste the difference between Rieslings made in Germany versus those made in Austria. Traditionally, German Rieslings tend to have a sweeter bent (Kabinett, Auslese, Spätlese), while the Austrian versions are close to bone-dry. Both offer some of the most exciting wine experiences in the wine world. And there has never been a better time to buy these wines, thanks to two great recent vintages in 2018 and 2019. What’s even more exciting is that many of these producers are now farming organically, while some are biodynamic. For me, the truest test of a region is the quality of the value wines, and both Germany and Austria are flush with wines that are priced under $40. Here’s a list of my top three picks to get you started.

2019 Nigl “Freiheit” Grüner Veltliner Kremstal Niederösterreich ($17.99) One of our best sellers, this beautiful white displays vivid flavors of pears, citrus, and subtle spice notes, all against a backdrop of racy acidity. This wine is full-bodied and layered, and can pair with salads, cheeses, fish, and fowl. It’s easily one of the best white values company-wide. 90 WE

2019 Bründlmayer “Kamptaler Terrassen” Riesling Kamptal ($22.99) Austria also makes wonderful Riesling values, like this gorgeous wine with tropical fruit and citrus notes, a hint of petrol, and racy acidity. This classic, dry, crisp, and zesty wine is one of the best entry-level Rieslings I have ever tasted. Certified organic, Austria Bio Garantie. 95 JS, 91 WE

2019 Max Ferd. Richter “Estate” Riesling Mosel ($15.99) This is a great introduction to both the wonders of the 2019 vintage in Germany, and also the house style of Max Ferd. Richter. Richter is one of my favorite producers. Their entry-level offering is the perfect combination of fruit, acidity, and that tell-tale hint of sweetness that makes many German Rieslings so delicious.

By Alex Pross
2019 Dönnhoff: Great Vintage + Great Producer = Utterly Sublime

Weingut Dönnhoff is one of Germany’s greatest producers, and easily in the top two in the Nahe region where they reside. Tracing back their history in the region more than 250 years, the Dönnhoff family first began bottling under their name in the 1920s. This venerable winery is now under the direction of fourth-generation winemaker Cornelius Dönnhoff, who took the reins of the winery in 2007 from his father, Helmut. With enviable holdings and unwavering devotion to their craft, this estate is fashioning Rieslings of exceptional quality. Given what nature gave them to work with in 2019, they have possibly the greatest set of wines since 1971.

Dönnhoff primarily goes with a drier style of German Riesling than is typical, with even their Kabinett and Spätlese leaning toward a dry style. They are also known as a prominent producer of Grosses Gewächs, which is a relatively new designation for making bone-dry Riesling from top vineyard sites.

But let’s start with a duo of Dönnhoff’s entry-level estate wines: The 2019 Dönnhoff “Estate” Riesling Nahe ($19.99) is a classic offering, with citrus and tropical notes nicely framed by gorgeous minerality and acidity. 92 JS, 90 RP, 90 JG

If you want to go a tad drier (“trocken” translates to “dry”), the 2019 Dönnhoff “Estate” Riesling Trocken Nahe ($22.99) has more pronounced notes of petrol and almond skin, as well as razor-sharp acidity and zippy mineral notes. This is a wonderful Trocken. 91 JS, 90-91 RP, 90 JG

Loaded with notes of citrus, almond skin, petrol, beeswax, and spring flowers, the 2019 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Leistenberg Kabinett Riesling Nahe ($27.99) is a beautifully complex offering, and a top value. 94 JS, 93 JG, 90-91 RP

The 2019 Dönnhoff “Tonschiefer” Riesling Trocken Nahe ($29.99) shares many of the same characteristics with the Leistenberg, plus more pronounced peach and mint notes, and a strong laser beam of salty minerality. 93 JS, 91-92 RP, 91 JG

As we climb the price ladder, the 2019 Dönnhoff Kreuznacher Kahlenberg Riesling Trocken Nahe ($39.99) is at once rich, rounded and full-bodied, while also displaying intense minerality and racy acidity. There’s a wealth of complexity here, and copious amounts of fresh citrus and subtle orchard fruit notes. 93 JS, 92-93 RP, 92 JG

Our last dry Riesling, the 2019 Dönnhoff Felsenberg “Felsentürmchen” Riesling Grosses Gewächs Nahe ($79.99) is a great example of the style. This is a Riesling that competes stylistically and qualitatively with the top Alsatian Grand Cru Rieslings. With such intensity of white grapefruit, melon, and candied lime flavors it is almost painful, this wine abounds with flinty notes, a touch of petrol, and minerality throughout. 95 JS, 93-95 RP, 93 MFW

Dönnhoff also excels at slightly sweeter Spätlese and Auslese offerings. Their 2019 Dönnhoff Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese Nahe ($42.99) displays orchard fruit with a hint of citrus, flinty notes, and subtle aromas of lilacs and crushed stone. 95 JS, 93 JG, 92-93 RP

The 2019 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese Nahe ($54.99) is a stunning wine, loaded with notes of blood orange, passion fruit, bee pollen, and minerality. Gorgeous aromas and a richly textured mouthfeel make this a classic Spätlese. 97 JS, 94 JG, 93-94 RP

We finish strong with the 2019 Dönnhoff Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese Goldkapsel Nahe ($99.99). This quintessential Auslese just oozes amazing fruit flavors of orange, apple, and white cherry, which flow to a lush, seamless palate that feels incredibly deep and complex. A legend in the making, this is an Auslese to own. 99 JS, 97 RP, 94 JG
2019 Selbach-Oster: A Tradition of Excellence

The Selbach family has been in the wine business in Germany’s Mosel Valley for 400 years. Johannes Selbach and his wife, Barbara, along with their children, Hannah and Sebastian, manage the vineyards and the winery, with help from winemaker Christian Vogt, who came aboard in 2016 from Kartäuserhof. Between all the expertise assembled here, the wines of Selbach-Oster have never been better. The array of wines, from Feinherb to Halbtrocken, Kabinett, Spätlese, and Auslese, are a testament to their incredible holdings and the winemaking ability at Selbach-Oster. In 2019, the perfect blend of fantastic vinification and an amazing vintage has produced a set of wines that is one of the greatest of our lifetime.

Right out of the blocks, the 2019 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb Ur-Alte Reben Mosel ($39.99) is one of the top wines in the estate’s roster. Coming from vines over 100 years old, this displays aromas of fresh cut herbs, citrus, almond, and apricot blossom, with razor-like acidity and flashy mineral notes. This is easily one of the most intriguing Rieslings I have come across from the 2019 vintage. 96 MFW, 95 RP

Selbach-Oster Kabinett

Next we have a dynamic duo of Kabinett wines. First up, the 2019 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett Mosel ($23.99) is a lovely offering that shows precision, cut, and verve, with pretty citrus and cherry notes. Light on its feet and refreshing with zest and minerals, this is a beautiful offering. 94 RP, 94 JS, 92 JG, 91 MFW

The 2019 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett Mosel ($26.99) is the more powerful of the two, with an almost Spätlese-like feel. Notes of cherry, cranberry, peach, and wild yeast all make this a distinctive Kabinett. 93 RP, 93 JS, 92 JG, 91 WeS

Selbach-Oster Spätlese

A wonderful example of this vineyard, the 2019 Selbach-Oster Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* Mosel ($39.99) is loaded with peach, pear, and orange blossom flavors. This is a large-scaled beauty that displays great depth and power. 95 JS, 93 RP, 93 MFW

Selbach-Oster Auslese

The last three wines from Selbach-Oster are all Auslese, perhaps the category where this producer shines brightest. A super concentrated and rich wine with notes of pineapple, orange, candied ginger, and honey notes, the 2019 Selbach-Oster Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** Mosel ($54.99) is a sexy wine that just oozes personality and power. 97 RP, 96 JS, 96 WeS, 94 MFW

One of the most consistent performers in the Selbach-Oster stable, the 2019 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelsreih “Anrecht” Riesling Auslese Mosel ($59.99) is a sleeker wine than the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, with more acidity and verve. Mineral tones, pear, apple, and peach flavors echo throughout this beautifully structured and balanced offering. 97 WeS, 96 RP, 95 JS, 94 MFW

We finish this flight of wines with the 2019 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese* Mosel ($99.99). Wonderful acidity and creamy texture combine with gorgeous orchard fruit, subtle tropical fruit, honeycomb and saline notes to make an utterly amazing Auslese. Selbach-Oster has hit it out of the park here. 96 RP, 95 JS, 94 JG, 94 MFW

Get complete tasting notes at KLWines.com
Hirsch: An Austrian Legend in the Kamptal

The Hirsch family can trace their origins in the Kamptal region to 1878, when the family assumed ownership of the farmstead. But the real turning point was in 1999, when Johannes Hirsch and his father, Josef, decided to buck the red wine trend and devote themselves to exclusively growing Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. They believed these two grape varieties were best suited to cultivation on their land. In 2006 Hirsch switched over to biodynamic farming, and in 2010 they were certified by Respekt, the independent biodynamic certification movement which Josef helped to found. With great vineyards, organic farming, and a devotion to just two grapes, the Hirsch family is fashioning an incredible range of offerings, from nicely affordable regional varietals to reference-point vineyard designates.

Grüner Veltliner is the varietal wine most commonly associated with Austria, and those produced by Hirsch are outstanding and delicious exemplars of the heights this grape can achieve in the right hands.

The 2018 Hirsch “Hirschvergnugen” Grüner Veltliner Kamptal ($16.99) is a great entry-level offering that displays gorgeous stone fruit, grapefruit, and spice notes, with subtle flint and mineral accents. Perfectly balanced, with ample structure and complexity, this humble offering is the ideal springtime aperitif.

A step up, the 2019 Hirsch “Kammern” Grüner Veltliner Kamptal ($26.99) displays a ton of depth and precision. The 2019 vintage in Austria, much like Germany, is shaping up to be monumental, and the Kammern has all the hallmarks of a wine that drinks far above its price point. 92 JS

As we climb the price ladder a bit, we get into wines that can be enjoyed now or cellared to gain complexity. With a gorgeous, crystalline display of peach and melon flavors, along with fresh herbs and peppery notes, 2018 Hirsch Ried Renner Grüner Veltliner Erste Lage Kamptal ($42.99) is a stellar example. 93 JS, 92 RP

We wrap up the Grüners with the 2018 Hirsch Ried Lamm Grüner Veltliner Kamptal ($59.99). With a wonderful mix of stone and orchard fruits that play against an intense and refined palate, this wine has pretty fruit notes but also wonderful mineral flavors, plus great cut and verve. 94 JS, 94 WE, 93 RP

Riesling definitely should not be an afterthought in Austria, and those being fashioned at Hirsch are a testament to the ever-evolving quality of Riesling in Austria. The 2019 Hirsch Zobing Riesling Kamptal ($27.99) easily competes with the best of Alsace. With its citrus and almond skin notes, and pretty minerals on the palate, it feels like a classic Riesling with an Austrian twist. 91 JS, 91 DC

The 2018 Hirsch Gaisberg Riesling Kamptal ($59.99) is all peach, apple, and pear flavors, with a touch of funk and plenty of flinty notes. Full-bodied and complex, this beauty slowly unwinds to reveal layer after layer of complexity. 96 JS, 94 WE

Finishing this trio of Rieslings, the 2018 Hirsch Ried Zobinger Heiligenstein Riesling Erste Lage Kamptal ($59.99) is a beautiful and complex wine. Notes of green fruits mingle with hints of blood orange and stone fruits. Flint, spice, mineral, and hints of fresh herbs round out the complex play of flavors and aromas in this wonderfully complex Riesling. 95 JS, 95 WE, 90 RP