

SUNDAY SCENE

WINE

Dream wine from the 'dream team'

By Sandra Shoji

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Willi Opitz is a modern-day Renaissance man. Primarily a winemaker, he is also an astute businessman, a marketing genius and a philosopher who loves positive thinking slogans like "Change it, love it or leave it." With his wife, Maria, Opitz has created some of the world's most unusual wines. Maria says they have been dubbed the perfect dream team. However, Maria sighs, "He is the dream and I am the team."

Their Opitz dream began in 1980 when Willi took over the family farm in the village of Illmitz, in southeastern Austria's Burgenland near Lake Neusiedl. Evaporation from the one-meter-deep lake creates the misty conditions needed to develop *Botrytis cinerea*, a velvety fungus, which helps give the grapes a honeyed richness.

The Opitzs soared to success with their Schilfmandl wine, or reed wine. Healthy grapes were dried for three months on mats made from local lake reeds. Next, using his grandfather's basket press, Willi pressed the sticky juices to make wickedly delicious dessert wines like no one had ever tasted before.

The wines were soon winning medals at the International Wine Challenge in London, where Willi Opitz was named Late Harvest Winemaker of the Year in 1996 and 1997. Next, he experimented with leaving the reed wine grapes to dry until the first frost to create the first Schilfmandl-Ice Wine. However, every time Opitz invented a new wine style, Austrian wine regulations had to be adjusted so he could continue to produce his weirdly wonderful wines.

The secret of success? "To be famous you have to be different. To be very famous you have to be very different," Opitz says. Creating a very late harvest red dessert wine, tongue-in-cheek he named it Opitz One. Mondavi, the producer of Opus One, California's premier red wine, was not pleased. However, a chance meeting between former U.S. President Bill Clinton and Willi Opitz led to Opitz One being sold under the label "Mr. President" in the United States.



Photo by Hiroshi Shoji

Willi and Maria Opitz

You won't find Opitz wine ads in glossy magazines. Instead, a large birdhouse stands at the end of the winery's driveway. Tourists are invited to drop their business cards into the birdhouse in exchange for receiving a newsletter.

When the winery needed a new tractor, Opitz raised money by selling thousands of CDs called "The Sound of Wine," the recorded bubbling and burping of his fermenting wines. My favorite track is from a Madame Rose wine which sounds like an Australian Aboriginal music instrument, the didgeridoo.

Two other members of the Opitz team are daughter Angela and her British partner, Iain Ashworth, both professionally trained, award-winning chefs. They run Catering by Iain and Angela, whose acronym is C.I.A. Their very Opitz-style motto is "Criminally Good Food." Angela and Iain whip up the innovative food and wine matches for the winery's wine dinners and wine weekends. They even pack the Opitz's carry-on suitcases with tasty tidbits for international wine marketing trips. Some of their recommendations are below. So drink up and eat up, because as Willi Opitz says, "Life is too short to waste on bad wine."

Star Picks:

Pink Kiss 2006, Willi Opitz (¥3,100)

The bottle's label features glossy magenta lips, and the rose wine inside is packed with crisp cherry, raspberry, strawberry and white pepper flavors. A blend of Austrian red grapes: Zweigelt, St. Laurent and Blaufrankisch grapes, it is perfect summer sipping with a plate of strawberries and Mascarpone cheese. Available through Izumiya Winery at <http://item.rakuten.co.jp/wine/720142/>

Silver Lake 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot/Zweigelt (¥8,295)

Opitz created this wine for the Formula One racing team, McLaren West Mercedes. A spicy cedar, tobacco and black cherry macho wine for big boys who play with big toys and eat juicy steaks.

Goldackerl Beerenauslese 2005, Willi Opitz (¥5,565)

A starbright golden blend of Welschriesling and Scheurebe grapes. Welschriesling gives intensely rich flavors of ripe apricots and mangos with a touch of smoky botrytis. Scheurebe balances the lushness with zesty ruby grapefruit acidity. Decadently delicious with plump slices of mango.

Schilfmandl Muskat Ottonel 2003, Willi Opitz (¥11,865)

The sensational wine style that made Opitz famous. Reed mat dried Muskat Ottonel grapes give this wine luscious flavors of honeyed muskmelon, fresh grapes, rose petal and hazelnut. Astonishingly delicious with panna cotta with a dollop of pumpkin oil or vanilla ice cream with herb-scented biscotti.

Silver Lake, Goldackerl and Schilfmandl are available by fax from Opitz's importer, Norbert Tesch of Austria World Association (www.awa-inc.com) at (0798) 72-5021.

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