

Alsace

Tom Stevenson

It's official: Alsace wines are sweet! The hot debate in *Wine Report 2004* was the sweetness of Alsace wines and the difficulty that consumers face when trying to discern whether a wine is dry, particularly a *grand cru*.



TOM STEVENSON

The simple solution was to introduce an obligatory dry wine designation. The very worst thing that could have been done was to emphasize the sweetness factor, yet that is precisely what has been done. All wines with a minimum residual sugar of 12 grams per litre (9 g/l for Riesling) must now be labelled *moelleux*. If a wine has more than 6 g/l of total acidity, the minimum residual sugar rises to 18 g/l. The Sec designation is permitted but not

obligatory. What difference does it make? Defining minimum residual sugar content for a sweet designation does not mean that all those not qualifying are in fact dry, so the introduction of *moelleux* has reduced, not solved, the problem. From a global perspective, emphasizing which wines are sweet, rather than dry, further erodes the traditional reputation of Alsace wine.

Côte de Rouffach rules, okay!

Clause 10 of the new French labelling laws requires all village and other local designations to be included in the original AOC edict and to adhere to restrictive criteria agreed with INAO (Institut National des Appellations d'Origine). For the Côte de Rouffach, which was established by Jean-Claude Rieflé in 1988, this will mean:

TOM STEVENSON specializes in champagne but he is equally passionate about Alsace. In 1987 he was elected a *confrère oenophile* of the Confrérie Saint Etienne, when he was the sole person to correctly identify a 50-year-old wine made from Sylvaner. In 1994, his 600-page tome *The Wines of Alsace* (Faber & Faber, 1993) won the Veuve Clicquot Book of the Year award in the United States.

- Located on 430 hectares (ha) in the villages of Pfaffenheim, Rouffach, and Westhalten (this represents 40 per cent of the total AOC Alsace land within these three villages, and encompasses the *grands crus* of Vorbourg and Steinert);
 - Delimited on *lieux-dits* single vineyards;
 - Only Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, or Muscat allowed;
 - Maximum yield of 72 hectolitres per hectare (whites), 65 hl/ha (reds);
 - Higher natural potential alcohol;
 - No Vendange Tardive (VT) or Sélection de Grains Nobles (SGN) allowed.
- A few years ago, there were proposals for more than 70 village or local appellations, but this had dropped to just 34 by the deadline in February 2004. Just one-third of these had prepared dossiers good enough to show to INAO. It is expected that the appellations should know by the summer of 2004 whether they are accepted, but at the time of writing the favourites were Rouge d'Ottrott, Riesling de Wolxheim, Vallée Noble, and, of course, Côte de Rouffach.

Grapevine

• **Over 10,000 *lieux-dits*** could be allowed under new labelling regulations that allow all individually named vineyards registered in each village *cadastre* to be indicated an AOC wine, without any superior production criteria. This has caused problems in Alsace because such wines would cohabit with *lieux-dits* adhering to stricter rules under the so-called *appellation intermédiaire* between AOC Alsace and AOC Alsace Grand Cru. All clouds have silver linings, and this one is the threat of 10,000 *lieux-dits*, which has kick-started renewed interest in resolving the *appellation intermédiaire* (the Alsace Hierarchy project), an issue that had effectively been put on the back burner. At least the matter will now be resolved once and for all.

• **Sylvaner is now allowed** full *grand cru* status if grown on the Grand Cru Zotzenberg in Mittelbergheim.

• **An assemblage of different varieties** has been granted *grand cru* status for the Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim, although Jean-Michel Deiss of Domaine Marcel Deiss had already

been selling such wine in anticipation of it becoming legal.

• **At long last**, the growers of Ammerschwihr's Kaefferkopf have been given the go-ahead for *grand cru* application, providing they restrict the vineyards to be classified to a much smaller area than that delimited by tribunal in 1932. The sticking point has always been that the tribunal had recognized the historical tradition of many growers using two or more of the officially designated varieties (Gewurztraminer, Riesling, Muscat, Pinot Gris, and Pinot Blanc) and the AOC Alsace Grand Cru regulations stipulated pure varietal wines only (not including Pinot Blanc). However, Deiss proved to be an irresistible force in the fight for allowing a blend of varieties for Altenberg de Bergheim, and when INAO caved in, they could no longer say no to Kaefferkopf.

• **Diminishing importance** of the grape variety was officially confirmed by its reduction in size on the label to half that of the appellation text as from the 2004 harvest.

Opinion:

Understanding the *grands crus*

If the trade and media are to understand the *grands crus*, then CIVA (Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace) must initiate the process. At annual tastings in major export markets, the *grand cru* wines are to be found, higgledy-piggledy, by this variety and that on a producer-by-producer basis. The result is pandemonium. The only way to discern the differences between *grands crus* is to focus on one grape variety at a time, and since Riesling is the most sensitive to *terroir*, CIVA should start with that. Sugar masks the finer differences, so no SGN, no VT, and none of the sweeter *grands crus*. Just dry and off-dry styles, set up as a stand-alone tasting, *grand cru* by *grand cru*, with the wines lined up in order of residual sweetness, even though there should not be any that are actually sweet. The next year, Muscat, followed by Tokay-Pinot Gris, and finally Gewurztraminer, then back to Riesling and so on. This should have started long ago, but better late than never.

Ban residual sugar in chaptalized wine

If a wine has to be chaptalized, it should be dry (residual sugar of less than 5 g/l would be a generous limit). This would not prevent anyone from selling wine with residual sweetness, but any such sweetness should be the natural product of the grapes harvested. If this is not acted on, it will not be because the producers do not want it. Everyone I spoke to about this proposal told me it was both necessary and workable.

Grapevine

• **The 7th World Riesling Competition** was held in Strasbourg on 9 February 2004. Only two Premier Gold Medals were presented (Grand Cru Pfersigberg 2002 Emile Beyer and Grand Cru Steinert 2002 Pierre Zink).

• **Rumours that Kuentz-Bas** was up for sale were correct, sadly, but it was JB Adam that took over, rather than a cooperative or Pierre Sparr. The wines have been going downhill for a while, but those Kuentz-Bas presented at the Journées 2003 des Grands Crus d'Alsace in November 2003 were so bad that they can only get better:

• **Who's who?** With so many producers bearing the same surname, it is important to note when some change, since even a knowledgeable consumer could easily confuse them for a new or different producer. These changes include Robert Baltzinger of Gertwiller, which is now Samuel Baltzinger; François Uhl of Epfig, which is now EARL Du Hertenstein; François Kieffer et Fils of Itterswiller, which is now François et Vincent Kieffer; GAEC Maetz of Rosheim, which is now Carine et Materne Maetz; and Martine et Jean Rapp of Dorlisheim, which is now Jean et Guillaume Rapp.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2003

The Vosges are usually Alsace's blessing, bleeding off the rain and rendering its sheltered vineyards drier and sunnier than almost anywhere else in France. In 2003, however, the Vosges merely exacerbated the heat wave and drought experienced elsewhere. According to CIVA, it was the hottest summer since 1540, and they really do have records going back that far. Rainfall was virtually nonexistent (11.4 cm between May and September) and temperatures were relentlessly hot – at one point exceeding 40°C for almost two weeks continuously. There is no doubt, therefore, that 2003 was an exceptional and extraordinary vintage, but apart from Pinot Noir and a handful of anomalies, the quality will be neither exceptional nor extraordinary. Picking started on 25 August for Crémant d'Alsace, 8 September for AOC Alsace and AOC Grand Cru, and 15 September for VT and SGN. Generally, older vines fared better than younger ones. Vineyards on lighter soils suffered the most. North-facing vines excelled, with a number of growers contemplating extending these plantations, especially if 2003 is a wake-up call for global warming (average temperatures in Alsace have increased by 0.6°C in the past 10 years), rather than an anomaly. The heat and drought stress caused many vines to shut down their metabolic systems during *véraison*, especially Riesling, which does not like hot weather and stopped for 10 days or more. Remarkable as it might seem for a hot year, some Riesling even failed to ripen fruit beyond the 8 per cent achieved prior to shutting down. This will be a benchmark vintage for Pinot Noir, while the most affected category of wine will be Crémant d'Alsace, because its primary grape variety, Pinot Blanc, was too concentrated, too alcoholic, and much too low in acidity for anything other than a still wine. Some atypically superb Muscats have been made, but much of the Gewurztraminer curiously ripened without changing colour and had exceptionally thick skins. According to Olivier Humbrecht, such Gewurztraminer grapes were sugar ripe but not physiologically ripe. "In a year like 2003," Olivier told me, "it was more like a New World red-wine harvest than Old World white. Although most growers had picked the greater part of their crop by mid-September, the grapes were not physiologically ripe until mid-October. We had a little rain in late September, after which the vine's metabolism started to recover, adjusting the balance of its fruit, even producing very tiny amounts of malic acid."

Updates on the previous five vintages

2002

Vintage rating: 88 (Red: 85, White: 89)

Although there is some variability in quality, the best 2002s have the weight of the 2000s, but with far more focus and finesse. Riesling definitely fared best and will benefit from several years' bottle-age, but Gewurztraminer and Muscat also performed well. The Gewurztraminers are very aromatic with broad spice notes, whereas the Muscats are exceptionally fresh and floral. Pinot Gris was less successful. Some extraordinary SGNs have been produced.

2001

Vintage rating: 90 (Red: 88, White: 90)

Most growers rate 2000 over 2001, but size is not everything, and this vintage has the finesse and freshness of fruit that is missing from most of the 2000 bruisers. The hallmark of the 2001 vintage is a spontaneous malolactic that endowed so many of the wines with a special balance. You hardly notice the malolactic in the wines – it is just a creaminess on the finish, more textural than taste, and certainly nothing that can be picked up on the nose. Although I'm an avid fan of non-malolactic Alsace wine, this particular phenomenon left the fruit crystal clear, with nice, crisp acidity.

2000

Vintage rating: 80 (Red: 90, White: 80)

A generally overrated, oversized vintage, but with a few stunning nuggets. Lesser varieties, such as Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc, made delicious drinking in their first flush of life but have since tired. The classic varieties lack finesse, although some exceptional VTs were made. Excellent reds should have been made, but many were either overextracted or heavily oaked.

1999

Vintage rating: 80 (Red: 80, White: 80)

An easy-drinking vintage that has started to tire.

1998

Vintage rating: 88 (Red: 80, White: 88)

Still drinking beautifully, particularly for Riesling. Not great longevity, but a very good medium-term developer.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 Domaine Zind-Humbrecht
- 2 Domaine Weinbach
- 3 Trimbach (Réserve and above)
- 4 Marcel Deiss
- 5 René Muré
- 6 André Kientzler
- 7 Ostertag
- 8 Hugel (Jubilée and above)
- 9 Léon Beyer (Réserve and above)
- 10 JosMeyer

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Jean Becker
- 3 Hugel
- 4 Ostertag
- 5 Lucien Albrecht
- 6 Paul Blanck
- 7 Albert Boxler
- 8 André Rieffel
- 9 Antoine Stoffel
- 10 Albert Mann

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Lucien Albrecht
- 2 André & Rémy Gresser
- 3 J-P & J-F Becker (Jean Becker's organic range)
- 4 Bruno Sorg
- 5 Albert Boxler
- 6 Albert Mann
- 7 Antoine Stoffel
- 8 Nicolas Simmler
- 9 Louis Freyburger
- 10 Cave Vinicole de Hunawihr

Grapevine

• **Pierre Frick** became the first person in Alsace – and, probably, the world – to give up using corks not for screwcaps or synthetic stoppers, but for stainless-steel crown caps (your humble beer-bottle caps). Frick has never been shy

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Jean Becker
- 3 Lucien Albrecht
- 4 René Muré
- 5 Rolly Gassmann
- 6 Schoffit
- 7 Meyer-Fonné
- 8 Jean-Luc Mader
- 9 Paul Blanck
- 10 Hugel

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Riesling Clos Ste-Hune 1998** Trimbach (€120)
- 2 **Riesling Grand Cru Hengst VT 1995** JosMeyer (€38)
- 3 **Pinot Noir Burlenberg 2000** Marcel Deiss (€28)
- 4 **Grand Cru Schoenenbourg 2000** Marcel Deiss (€59)
- 5 **Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg SGN 2001** André Kientzler (€90)
- 6 **Riesling Grand Cru Sommerberg Vieilles Vignes 2002** Albert Boxler (€18)
- 7 **Gewurztraminer Vieilles Vignes 2002** Claude et Georges Humbrecht (€6.70)
- 8 **Riesling Grand Cru Sonnenglanz VT 2002** Jean Becker (€15.30)
- 9 **Riesling Grand Cru Schlossberg 2002** Paul Blanck (€15.30)
- 10 **Gewurztraminer Wintzenheim 2002** Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€26)

of taking the lead. He has been an organic producer since 1970, became biodynamic in 1981, and has not chaptalized any of his wines since 1989. He even bottles one or two wines without any sulphur every year.

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 **Gewurztraminer Vieilles Vignes 2002** Claude et Georges Humbrecht (€6.70)
- 2 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Pflingstberg 2002** François Schmitt (€7.70)
- 3 **Tokay-Pinot Gris 2002** Antoine Stoffel (€6.10)
- 4 **Gewurztraminer 2002** Antoine Stoffel (€6.10)
- 5 **Riesling Schlossreben 2002** Nicolas Simmler (€6.90)
- 6 **Pinot Gris 2002** Alfred Meyer (€7.80)
- 7 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Pfersigberg 2002** Bruno Sorg (€12)
- 8 **Gewurztraminer 1997** Pierre Meyer (€9.10)
- 9 **Pinot Gris Grand Cru Rosacker 2002** Cave Vinicole de Hunawihr (€9.65)
- 10 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Zinnkoeplé 2002** Domaine Léon Boesch (€14.20)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 **Muscat VT 2001** Jean-Marc & Frédéric Bernhard (€18) *A late-harvest Muscat of exceptional finesse and beautiful botrytized complexity.*
- 2 **Riesling SGN 1989** Fernand Engel (€20) *An SGN for this price would be unusual enough, but it is also 15 years old and exquisitely matured!*
- 3 **Gewurztraminer VT 1990** Léon Beyer (€17) *Mature Gewurztraminer is rarely commercially available, particularly when it has aged so gracefully, with the potential to improve further over the next 5–10 years.*
- 4 **Grand Cru Schoenenbourg 2000** Marcel Deiss (€59) *A very*

sweet assemblage of varieties.

- 5 **Kaefferkopf 2002** Marcel Freyburger (€7.70) *A luscious, medium-sweet, budget version of Deiss's Schoenenbourg from the soon-to-be grand cru of Kaefferkopf.*
- 6 **Tokay-Pinot Gris Grand Cru Gloeckelberg SGN 2001** Koeberlé-Kreyer (€34) *The best Pinot Gris SGN I have tasted in many a year, and relatively inexpensive for the quality.*
- 7 **Tokay-Pinot Gris 2002** André Kientzler (€8) *A totally dry Pinot Gris that needs at least three years to build up spicy bottle aromas.*
- 8 **Riesling Grand Cru Moenchberg 1983** André & Rémy Gresser (€25) *An amazing 20-years-plus dry Riesling.*
- 9 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Eichberg 1990** Albert Hertz (€17) *This wine illustrates how low-acid, high-pH Gewurztraminer ages gracefully, with the alcohol and phenolics replacing acidity's role in providing length.*
- 10 **Sylvaner 2002** Agathe Bursin (€7.80) *Although not allowed to say so on the label, this was grown on the Grand Cru Zinnkoeplé. It is one of the freshest, most exciting, dry-tasting (despite residual sugar of 14g/l) Sylvaners I have ever come across, with its unusually ripe yet light and refreshing fruit.*

Grapevine

• Growers are now allowed to use a fatter bottle of almost burgundian proportions for Pinot Noir instead of the *flûte d'Alsace*, the use of which has been enshrined in law since 1959. This is a positive move, and although strictly confined to Pinot Noir, I hear rumours that it will be used for other Pinot varieties, which would also be good.