

Alsace

Tom Stevenson

The hottest topic of debate is the increasing sweetness of Alsace wines, hitherto known for their dry style.



TOM STEVENSON

This situation has arisen because all the best producers, including many of the names most commonly encountered on export shelves, have dramatically cut their yields, particularly in the *grand cru* vineyards. Reduced yields produce higher must weights, and in sun-blessed Alsace this soon leads to a choice between overalcoholic wines or significant amounts of residual sugar. However, the *grands crus* are not so much sun-blessed

as sun-traps, and lowering yields there has increased must weights to the point where, even at 15 per cent ABV, the wines have so much residual sugar that they are really quite sweet. Gewurztraminer and Tokay-Pinot Gris frequently contain residual sugar of 30–40 grams per litre (g/l), with 50 g/l or more not unusual. Zind-Humbrecht's Gewurztraminer 2001 Clos Windsbuhl, for example, weighs in at 35 g/l, while its Pinot Gris 2001 Heimbourog has 50 g/l and the Pinot Gris 2001 Clos Windsbuhl no less than 70 g/l, yet none of these wines is classified as a Vendange Tardive (VT). The pursuit of ever-richer late-harvest wines by lowering yields even further only exacerbates the problem, particularly as the best places to grow grapes for such wines are, of course, the *grands crus*. The sweetest style, Sélections de Grains Nobles (SGN), often has more sugar left after fermentation than some Sauternes have before fermentation! Furthermore, there are vast volumes of generic wine that are harvested with a potential alcohol of 11–12 per cent and chaptalized 1–2 per cent,

TOM STEVENSON specializes in Champagne, but he is equally passionate about Alsace. In 1987, he was elected a *confère oenophile* of the Confrérie St-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 USA.

yet end up with 10 grams of sugar per litre when Riesling, and considerably more for other varieties. In other words, they are sweetened by sugar, not the natural residual sweetness of the grapes. The producers of these wines are not only threatening the formerly dry-wine image of Alsace, but are abusing the spirit, if not the letter, of the law that allows chaptalization (see Opinion).

Fair play?

Between June and October (but mostly July and August), there are many traditional fêtes and fairs where you can cram in lots of tasting. These festivities celebrate particular grapes, specific styles, and new wines, mixed up with all sorts of local customs and cuisine. The big one is the regional Wine Fair in Colmar, a 10-day event during the week of 15 August (in 2003, for example, this was 10–19 August). Others you might like to coincide your visit with include the Winegrowers' Fair at Voegtlinshoffen (last weekend in June), the Wine Cellar Fair at Pfaffenheim (second weekend in July), the Pinot Noir Fair in Rodern (third weekend in July), the Grand Cru Wine Fair at Eguisheim (third Friday evening in July), the Gewurztraminer Fair at Bergheim (first weekend in August), the Art, Wine, Foie Gras, Folklore Fair at Epfig (first weekend in August), the Crazy Crémant Weekend at Cleebourg (first weekend in August), and the Klevener Wine Fair at Heiligenstein (second weekend in August).

Au Crocodile demoted

There are three Michelin three-star restaurants in Alsace, which is more than can be found in any other region of France with the singular exception of Paris. And three would seem to be its limit. Unless, of course, it was pure coincidence that Strasbourg's Au Crocodile got bumped down to two stars in 2002, the same year that L'Arnsbourg in Untermuhlthal received its third star. If it appears that the number of Michelin-starred restaurants has grown over the years, it has done so at a glacial rate. There is, no doubt, some notion that there should be only so many three-star restaurants, which is not such a bad idea if Michelin is to keep its elitist status. However, it must be hell for the likes of Au Crocodile's Emile Jung, who is still one of the best chefs in Alsace. As far as I am concerned, he definitely has not dropped his standards. In fact, his *Foie de Canard poêlé aux Pommes* is better than anything of a similar nature I have ever had in any three-star restaurant anywhere.

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 found, higgledy-piggledy, by this variety and that, on a producer-by-producer basis. The result is not so much confusion as 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 within each *grand cru* 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. Everyone I spoke to about this proposal told me it was both necessary and workable.

Dry cure

It should be obligatory to mention a dry-wine designation on all wines that contain less than 5 grams of sugar per litre. Wines with 5–10 g/l should also be obliged to use this designation if they contain a sufficient acidity to make them taste dry. However, it would be counterproductive to extend this concept to sweeter wines, whether through terms like *demi-sec*, numbered dry-sweetness scales, or the actual sugar and acidity reading on every bottle. This would only confuse the issue further, possibly 'banalizing' the great, naturally sweet wines of Alsace in the process. All the consumer needs is a simple solution to his/her dilemma: which Alsace wines are dry? The problem is not a complex one: consumers need to be confident that the wine purchased or ordered in a restaurant is going to be dry. With an obligatory dry-wine designation, the consumer would know that all wines not so designated will have some sweetness, after which VT will be truly sweet, while SGN will be intensely sweet.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2002

Flowering went smoothly and swiftly, with a large, early harvest expected, but the vines suffered from alternating periods of very hot and damp weather during the summer, giving rise to fears of rot. Those who green-harvested in July avoided excessive problems, but those who left it until September to thin out excess bunches did too little, too late to do any good. Furthermore, those who harvested their main crop in the first two weeks of October and held back until November before picking their late-harvest wines beat the weather and should be rewarded with good quality. Riesling probably fared best. Some extraordinary SGN has been produced.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2001

Vintage rating: 89 (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 am an avid fan of non-malolactic Alsace wine, this particular phenomenon left the fruit crystal clear, with nice, crisp acidity.

2000

Vintage rating: 85 (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 tired. The classic varieties lack finesse, although some exceptional VT was made. Excellent reds should have been made, but many were either overextracted or heavily oaked.

1999

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

Another easy-drinking vintage that has tired by now.

1998

Vintage rating: 84 (Red: 80, White: 88)

My favourite vintage for current drinking, particularly for Riesling. Not great longevity, but a very good medium-term developer.

1997

Vintage rating: 87 (Red: 80, White: 95)

Better than the foul-smelling 1996s and the delightful 1995s. However, this super-ripe vintage produced classic VT wines in such volume that many standard bottlings were of an equally sweet style. Those actually labelled VT are virtually SGN level, whereas the SGNs are simply stunning. Gewurztraminer and Tokay-Pinot Gris stand out.

Grapevine

• **When the authorities** finally made up their minds, deciding that Chardonnay should not be allowed in an AOC Alsace blend, Zind-Humbrecht was forced to sell the wine Z001 as *vin de table*. The funny thing is that the maximum permitted yield for *vin de table* is 90 hectolitres per hectare (hl/ha) as opposed to 100 hl/ha for the superior Alsace appellation, and chaptalization is banned. No wonder the French wine regime is in such a mess!

• **Rumours are rife** that Kuentz-Bas is up for sale, in name at least – there are conflicting reports about the stock, and the buildings are definitely not part of any proposed deal. Problems stem from a fallout between the two cousins, the French Christian Bas and German Jacques Weber. This culminated in Christian firing Jacques, who had been the winemaker for 20 years and owned one third of the firm's vineyards. Those vines are now

being cultivated by Paul Zinck, and the Kuentz-Bas brand could go to a cooperative. Sad.

• **The 50th anniversary** of the Alsace Wine Route took place in March 2003, when 438 wine cellars opened their doors to welcome visitors.

• **According to Christophe Ehrhart**, the vineyard manager at JosMeyer, most Alsace producers will be biodynamic by 2005. In February 2003, he estimated that 70 per cent would be members of the Biodivin certifying organization, while 30 per cent would belong to the stricter Demeter. Biodivin is working on an extension of its principles to fully embrace the wine-making process, which could pave the way for 'organic wine' as opposed to the current situation where winemakers can only claim 'wine made from organically grown grapes'.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

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

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Jean Becker
- 3 Hugel & Fils
- 4 Domaine Ostertag
- 5 Domaine Lucien Albrecht
- 6 Domaine Paul Blanck

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCER

- 1 J-P & J-F Becker
(Jean Becker's organic range)

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

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

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Riesling 1997** Clos Ste-Hune (€130)
- 2 **Riesling Herrenweg 2001**

Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€23.60)

- 3 **Jubilée Riesling 1990**
Hugel & Fils (€25)
- 4 **Riesling Cuvée Frédéric Emile 1999** Domaine Trimbach (€25.20)
- 5 **Muscat Goldert 2001**
Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€26.40)
- 6 **Riesling Brand 1998**
Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€47.10)
- 7 **Gewurztraminer Seigneurs de Ribeauvillé 1999**
Domaine Trimbach (€19.30)
- 8 **Gewurztraminer Clos Windsbuhl 1997**
Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€48)
- 9 **Tokay-Pinot Gris Comtes d'Eguisheim 1985**
Léon Beyer (€50)
- 10 **Riesling Grand Cru Pfingstberg Clos Schild 2001**
Domaine Lucien Albrecht (€28)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 **Riesling Gueberschwihr 2001**
Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€17.10)
- 2 **Riesling d'Epfig 2001**
Domaine Ostertag (€12.10)
- 3 **Riesling Grand Cru Pfingstberg 2001**
Domaine Lucien Albrecht (€12.50)
- 4 **Riesling Lerchenberg 2001**
J-P & J-F Becker (€8.85)
- 5 **Riesling Grand Cru Kirchberg de Barr 2001** Domaine Stoeffler (€8.90)
- 6 **Tokay-Pinot Gris 2001**
J-P & J-F Becker (€11.15)
- 7 **Tokay-Pinot Gris 2001**
Hugel Tradition (€12.84)
- 8 **Pinot Auxerrois Vieilles Vignes 2001**
Domaine Paul Blanck (€10.21)
- 9 **Gewurztraminer Folastric 2001** JosMeyer (€12.10)
- 10 **Riesling Grand Cru Vorbourg 2001** René Muré (€14.85)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 **Riesling Brand 1998** Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€47.10) *A wine of such elegance and purity of Riesling fruit that I defy anyone to guess its alcohol level under blind conditions (14.8 per cent!).*
 - 2 **Zind 2001** Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€16.09) *A luscious, effectively dry blend of 50 per cent Auxerrois, 35 per cent Chardonnay, and 15 per cent Pinot Blanc. Because this blend contains Chardonnay, it cannot claim AOC Alsace status and is thus sold as a vin de table, which does not allow a specific vintage on the label. However, it does not take a genius to figure out what Z001 stands for, or that the next NV will be numbered Z002, and so on.*
 - 3 **Pinot Noir Burlenberg 2000** Marcel Deiss (€25) *The best red Alsace wine currently available from the most eccentric winemaker in the region, who has used a heavy Burgundian-style bottle, following special dispensation – at long last – for Pinot Noir.*
 - 4 **Pinot Noir Réserve 2001** Domaine Weinbach (€13.50) *The second-best red Alsace wine currently available, and amazing value for a little Faller magic.*
 - 5 **Riesling Heissenberg** Domaine Ostertag (€19.10) *This opulent,*
- exotic, truly dry Riesling with its beautifully focused fruit proves that even this grape can be fermented successfully in barriques.*
- 6 **Riesling 2001** Hugel & Fils (€10.02) *This ripe, peachy Riesling with excellent acidity demonstrates a huge, relatively recent, improvement in Hugel's bottom-rung range.*
 - 7 **Sylvaner Rouge 2001** JosMeyer (€8.50) *Lip-smacking fruit from a red-skinned Sylvaner variant.*
 - 8 **Gewurztraminer Comtes d'Eguisheim 2000** Léon Beyer (€20.80) *Not my favourite vintage, but this demonstrates that power and elegance can be harmonious. Atypically off-dry for Beyer.*
 - 9 **Riesling Vin de Glace 1985** Domaine Lucien Albrecht (€53) *A glimpse of the recent past come back to haunt me. I was dismissive of this wine in The Wines of Alsace, but it has a classic honey Riesling and reflects an era when wines were fermented as far as possible.*
 - 10 **Riesling Rangen 1999** Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€57) *I am not even sure that I like this wine, but its specificity of terroir is so overwhelming that I could not ignore it. The powerful, peaty, brûlée character is so reminiscent of the hot, sun-baked, steep Rangen slope that you can almost taste its hard, unforgiving volcanic soil.*

Grapevine

- **Every September**, CIVA runs a two-day English-language course on the wines of Alsace – it is in French for the rest of the year. Contact Laurence Wipff at The School of Alsace Wines (phone +33 389 201 620, email: civa@civa.fr) for more information.

- **A new book on Alsace**, *Les Grands Crus d'Alsace* (Editions Serpenoise, 2002), written by Serge Dubs in association with Denis Ritzenthaler, who writes for *L'Alsace*, is a must for French-speaking Alsace enthusiasts.