

# Alsace

**Tom Stevenson**

After more than 30 years, the saga of Kaefferkopf's *grand cru* classification has finally come to a head, as it became this region's 51st *grand cru*.



TOM STEVENSON

In 1975, the first list of 94 proposed *grands crus* was submitted to INAO for consideration; 25 of these were classified in 1983, a further 23 were awarded *grand cru* status in 1985, and another two in 1988. In *The Wines of Alsace* (Faber & Faber, 1993), I included Kaefferkopf as one of the 51 Alsace *grands crus* profiled, even though there happened to be only 50 at the time. I did this because, unlike many Alsace *grands crus*, Kaefferkopf was

authentic, famous, and deserving, having been the very first named vineyard in Alsace to have its boundaries delimited (in 1932 by a Colmar tribunal) and the only named site to be defined in the original AOC Alsace of 1962.

So, why was Kaefferkopf not classified as a *grand cru* until 2006? For the very reason that made it famous in the first place: its traditional practice of blending two or more grape varieties, which was contrary to the pure varietal concept of Alsace Grand Cru. The authorities would not allow this exception to the rule and, quite rightly, a significant number of growers refused to be bullied by the bureaucrats. Even some who had never produced blends

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 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 and attracted the mother of all reviews in the UK from Malcolm Gluck, who declared: "It is not simply the best book about Alsace wines ever written, or the most penetrating book about a French wine region ever written; it is the greatest wine book ever written, period." A revision is in the pipeline but more than a few years away. Tom is chairman of the Alsace panel at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards.

(Kaefferkopf is also known for its pure varietal Gewurztraminer and Riesling wines) objected to its demise. After all, the producers of Kaefferkopf were for decades the sole standard bearers of high-quality blends. Edelzwicker had long become synonymous with Zwicker and thus cheap *vin ordinaire*.

If the *Champenois* could get INAO to accept that champagne rosé may be produced by blending a little red wine with white for no other reason than most rosé-style Champagnes had always been made that way, then INAO should have accepted the traditional practice of blending Kaefferkopf from different varieties. Especially since the blending of different varieties to make a white wine is a classic technique, whereas blending red with white to make pink is illegal anywhere else in the EU!

Another excuse why the authorities refused to classify Kaefferkopf was because of the geological diversity of its topsoil. However, although geological uniformity is often spouted by those supporting the expansion of an authentically sized *lieu-dit* into an overblown *grand cru*, geology can only be true to the subsoil, not the topsoil, and all of the Kaefferkopf classified by the tribunal is situated on pure granite.

So here we are, 31 years after the first *grands crus* were proposed and 16 years after the bureaucracy belatedly recognized, but did not classify, Kaefferkopf. This famous vineyard has at last achieved its true position in the Alsace hierarchy. Approximately 70 ha have been classified, compared to the 67.81 ha delimited by the Colmar tribunal in 1932, and although some previously classified Kaefferkopf vineyards have been excluded, their owners have the right to use the Kaefferkopf name for the next 25 years! The authorized grape varieties are Gewurztraminer, Riesling, and Pinot Gris (each as a single variety or blended) plus Muscat (part of a blend only). Currently the vineyards are planted with approximately 59 per cent Gewurztraminer, 35 per cent Riesling, 5 per cent Pinot Gris, and 1 per cent Muscat.

### Alsace should be screwed

Alsace wines are ideal for the latest screwcap technology, but few Alsace producers have taken advantage of this. The biggest stumbling block is that, apart from the so-called *grands maisons*, relatively few Alsace producers are seriously involved in export markets where the benefits of these closures are widely accepted by large and increasing numbers of fine-wine consumers, but not the French. Even Domaine Paul Blanck, the most screwcap-minded of all Alsace exporters (started in 2001 and now bottles *grands crus* under screwcap), does not dare to use these closures for its wines on the home market. Although Trimbach is one of Alsace's most widely exported brands, it won't invest in the technology until it is accepted in the USA, its most important export market (although there is hope with Parker's

prediction back in 2004 that screwcaps "will become the standard for the majority of the world's wines"). Meanwhile, Willm has supplied the Swedish Monopoly with 16,000 bottles of its recently launched 2004 Pinot Gris/Riesling (not tasted). Other producers using screwcaps include Jean-Pierre Frick (Pfaffenheim) and Gustave Lorentz (Bergheim), but generally the take-up is very poor considering how well youthful aromatic white wines respond to this technology. If Alsace producers wait for French consumers to catch on without doing anything proactive, I fear they will wait forever. They need to follow the example of Blanck and sell *grands crus* under screwcap but not restrict this to export countries. They should take this initiative to the home market and make a bold statement in the process, such as selling exactly the same wine in both cork and screwcap, but charging 10 per cent extra on the screwcap bottles. Only then will the average French consumer of Alsace wine stop and think. Perhaps it might also be instructive to sell a mixed case of cork and screwcap wines to lay down for a few years for comparative purposes?

### Grapevine

- **Tokay disappears as of 2006**, when the varietal designations Tokay d'Alsace and Tokay Pinot Gris must be replaced by Pinot Gris, plain and simple. The reaction to this should clarify any doubts as to whether they are French or German in Alsace, since over 11 per cent of the Pinot Gris submitted to my annual tasting at CIVA carried the Tokay designation, and that is the highest percentage I have encountered in five years!

- **Black Tie®** is a new, upmarket blended white wine produced by the Pfaffenheim cooperative. Intended to retail at €10, Black Tie consists of 60 per cent Pinot Gris and 40 per cent Riesling. If we are to believe the label, this is a selection of the best Pinot Gris and Riesling grown in the cooperative's not inconsiderable 235 ha of vineyards. The label is tastefully understated on a bottle that is tissue-wrapped and presented in a textured black gift box. While naturally suspicious of any wine that puts presentation and name first, I welcome such obvious marketing ploys in any instance that involves

raising the standard of generic blends. Following the demise (in quality) of Edelzwicker, any attempt to raise standards can only be for the good.

- **At the 2005 Decanter World Wine Awards**, the Regional Trophy for the Best Alsace Riesling went to Pierre Sparr 2001 Riesling Grand Cru Schoenenbourg; the Best Alsace Aromatic White went to Schlumberger 2002 Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Kitterlé; and the Best Alsace Sweet Wine went to Schoenheit 1998 Riesling Holder Vendanges Tardives Cuvée Adrien.

- **The 9th World Riesling Competition** was held in Strasbourg on 8 March 2005. There were exactly the same number of wines entered as last year (569), but from 16 rather than 11 countries. Of these entries, 61 received gold medals and just six were awarded trophies, three of which were from Alsace (Riesling Schiefferberg 2004 Willy Gisselbrecht, Riesling 2004 Joseph Moellinger, and Riesling Vendanges Tardives Vallée Noble 2002 Seppi Landmann).

# Opinion:

## Alsace lets its wines do the talking

My rant against the false god of 'physiological ripeness' in *Wine Report 2006* attracted a lot of sympathetic correspondence from like-minded producers (not just in Alsace). The general consensus was that as long as enough dry wines are produced in Alsace, they (me included) have no argument with those who produce sweeter styles. However, concerns were expressed that if sweet wines are not confined to VT and SGN (or another, new sweet-wine category), the traditional reputation of Alsace as a dry-wine region will become lost; and once it is lost, the Alsace wine industry will struggle on a sweet-wine image, since the market for such wines is so limited. Famous producers will still be able to sell sweet wines at high prices, but others will suffer.

Some correspondents complained about the "arrogance" of one very famous proponent of 'physiological ripeness'. As lesser-known growers without any export reputation, they felt powerless when slapped down by this particular producer, who made them feel ignorant of such basics as when to pick a grape. They thanked me for using Trimbach's world-class dry Riesling, Clos Ste-Hune, and Cuvée Frédéric Emile to demonstrate the fallacy of his words. No one can slap down Trimbach, whose example has encouraged many to remain true to their own ideals and not be seduced by the sweet-toothed god of 'physiological ripeness'. If others are seduced, they should at least be honest with themselves, come out of the candy closet, and declare themselves sweet-wine producers.

Some of these very same correspondents had noted my heading "Luxembourg: The New Alsace?" in the latest revision of *The Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia* (DK, 2005) and online at wine-pages.com, but they wanted to let their dry wines do their own talking. At the time, it did not occur to me that this would result in any significant increase in the number of wines submitted to my annual tasting at CIVA. There are usually around 350 wines waiting for me, but in 2006 the number jumped to 432, mostly due to those growers who took the time to write to me, submitting their wines for the first time. I always find plenty of excellent Alsace wines to recommend, but the extra numbers pushed the standard up, especially for Pinot Noir. I wish I could tell you about the fabulous wines, both dry and sweet (and very sweet!) that failed to make the cut for this year's Top 10s, but you'll have to go to wine-pages.com for that!

# Vintage Report

## Advance report on the latest harvest

### 2005

A typically cold winter with hard frosts in December and January. A lack of rain between November and March reduced water reserves, potentially restricting yields. A wet and mild April encouraged an excellent budburst, followed by a perfect flowering in high temperatures at the end of May. Warm weather from mid-June until late July encouraged the vines to develop well. The first half of August was fine, and although the second half of the month was cold and varied, this helped preserve acidity levels. Fine, sunny weather from the end of August enabled the grapes to ripen in clean and healthy conditions, with humid conditions towards the end of the harvest promoting good botrytis. Overall, 2005 is better than 2004, with brighter fruit flavours. This vintage possibly vies with 2001 and 2002, but the wines need time to confirm precise qualities. As far as the grapes were concerned, Gewurztraminer was the best all-round performer, while Riesling was the most variable (however, some Rieslings were as good as the best Gewurztraminers). Pinot Gris was excellent. All other varieties good to very good. Ideal conditions for botrytis suggest excellent botrytized (as opposed to *passerille*) VT and SGN.

## Updates on the previous five vintages

### 2004

**Vintage rating:** Red: 86, White: 87

After the exhausting task of tasting more than 350 acid-deficient wines from 2003, it was a delight and a pleasure to taste over 430 wines from 2004, which is definitely a more classic vintage, with good fruit and excellent acidity levels. Not in the same class as 2002 or 2001, but it has a distinct edge over 2000 and is certainly fresher, fruitier, and more classic than 2003.

### 2003

**Vintage rating:** Red: 93, White: 65

There is no doubt that the oppressively hot year of 2003 provided an exceptional and extraordinary growing season, but apart from – potentially – Pinot Noir and a handful of anomalies, the quality is neither exceptional nor extraordinary. Ploughing through 350 wines from this vintage in March

2005 was one of the hardest, most unenjoyable, but academically most instructive tasting experiences of my life. Acidification was allowed by special dispensation, but not everyone took advantage and, of those who did, very few got it right, whereas many of those who did not acidify failed to produce wines of any elegance. Most are ugly with a deadness of fruit. Pinot Noir should be the star, but I have not yet tasted a glut of great Pinot Noir, although the optimist in me hopes that I will have more exciting news to report in the next edition of *Wine Report*. Putting to one side Pinot Noir, the most expressive 2003 grapes were Pinot Gris, which in fact looked as black as Pinot Noir on the vine and were made with a natural *vin gris* colour.

## 2002

**Vintage rating:** 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:** 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's 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:** 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.

## GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

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

## FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

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

## NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Laurent Barth
- 2 André Kleinknecht
- 3 Leipp-Leininger
- 4 Gruss
- 5 Yves Amberg
- 6 Domaine Stirn
- 7 Jean et Daniel Klack
- 8 Clément Klur
- 9 Fernand Engel
- 10 Baumann-Zirgel

## BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

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

## GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **\*Riesling Grand Cru Schlossberg 2004**  
Domaine Weinbach (€22)
- 2 **Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg 1995** Robert Faller (€24.50)
- 3 **\*\*Riesling Grand Cru Brand Samain 1991** JosMeyer (€32)
- 4 **\*Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Hengst 2004** Zind Humbrecht (€40.40)
- 5 **\*Riesling Grand Cru Brand 2004** JosMeyer (€24.90)
- 6 **\*Riesling Cuvée Frédéric Emile 2004** Trimbach (€30 – not yet released)
- 7 **\*\*Pinot Gris Grand Cru Rangen 2004** Zind Humbrecht (€43.20)
- 8 **\*Muscat Herrenweg 2004**  
Zind Humbrecht (€21.70)
- 9 **\*Pinot Noir Elevé en Barrique 2002** André Kleinknecht (€10)
- 10 **\*Pinot Noir M 2004**  
Laurent Barth (€12)

## Grapevine

• **Laurent Barth** steams into number one in the New Up-and-Coming Producers with his first vintage, 2004, from 3.5 ha of organically farmed vineyards in Bennwihr. His Pinot Noir is the best 2004 tasted, while his 2004

Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Marckrain is another stunner. Its complex, fresh, spicy-peachy fruit makes it a great wine now, but it will be even greater in five years' time. An exciting new name making some excellent wines sold at sensible prices.

**BEST BARGAINS**

- 1 **Riesling Grand Cru Wineck-Schlossberg 2004**  
Clément Klur (€12)
- 2 **\*Riesling Vieilles Vignes 2004**  
Gruss (€6.10)
- 3 **\*Riesling Westerweingarten 2004** Anstotz (€6.20)
- 4 **\*Riesling Grand Cru Schlossberg 2004**  
Domaine Weinbach (€22)
- 5 **Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg 1995** Robert Faller (€24.50)
- 6 **\*Pinot Noir 2002** Yves Amberg (€6.30)
- 7 **Pinot Gris Grand Cru Marckrain 2002** Domaine Stirn (€9.80)
- 8 **\*Muscat Domaine de la Tour Blanche 2004** Jean et Daniel Klack (€5.60)
- 9 **Gewurztraminer 2004**  
Leipp-Leininger (€9.50)
- 10 **Alsace E de Engel NV**  
Fernand Engel (€4.50)

**MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS**

- 1 **\*Riesling Vieilles Vignes 2004**  
Gruss (€6.10) *High-quality, truly dry Riesling at an unbelievably low price.*
- 2 **\*\*Riesling Grand Cru Brand Samain 1991** JosMeyer (€32)  
*This beautiful, petrolly, off-dry, late-picked (but not vendange tardive) Riesling is a classic from the master of finesse in mature Riesling. JosMeyer's use of "Samain" indicates that the grapes were picked on 11 November, St. Martin's Day.*
- 3 **\*Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Hengst 2004** Zind Humbrecht (€40.40) *Truly dry Gewurztraminer was rare even before the pagan god of 'physiological ripeness' was conceived, but at just 3.9 g of residual sugar, this 2004 is a*

*textbook example for New World devotees trying to achieve intense varietal character of this grape in a dry-wine format.*

- 4 **\*Riesling Grand Cru Schlossberg 2004** Domaine Weinbach (€22) *This truly dry Riesling has great purity, intensity, and finesse, demonstrating that Weinbach's 'magic' exists beyond the veil of sweetness found in some of its other cuvées.*
- 5 **\*Riesling Grand Cru Brand 2004** JosMeyer (€24.90)  
*Fascinating comparison with JosMeyer's 1991 Brand Samain, this wine is from the same vines – but not late-picked – 13 years later.*
- 6 **\*Pinot Noir Elevé en Barrique 2002** André Kleinknecht (€10)  
*One of the two best Alsace Pinot Noirs tasted this year – not from a high-profile name, and €3.50 cheaper than the lowest-priced Alsace Pinot Noir to grace this report in previous years. Needs to be cellared for two years.*
- 7 **\*Pinot Noir M 2004** Laurent Barth (€12) *Even less well known, this is Laurent's first harvest! Equal in quality to above, and will improve but can be drunk now. Presumably M stands for Marckrain, a grand cru, thus not allowed on the label of a Pinot Noir.*
- 8 **\*Pinot Gris Fondation 2004**  
JosMeyer (€21.60) *The best truly dry Pinot Gris tasted this year.*
- 9 **\*Muscat Grand Cru Spiegel 2004** Dirlor-Cadé (€11.60) *Not the quality of Zind Humbrecht's Herrenweg Muscat, but only two points adrift and 53 per cent of its price.*
- 10 **\*Crémant d'Alsace NV** Paul Zinck (€7) *The best Crémant d'Alsace tasted this year.*

Notes: \* Dry, \*\* Off-dry