

Alsace

Tom Stevenson

After last year's lead story welcomed the fact that "after more than 30 years, the saga of Kaefferkopf's *grand cru* classification finally came to a head, as it became this region's 51st *grand cru*", some readers may be surprised to hear that the saga continues.



TOM STEVENSON

According to the new *décret*, some 70 ha have been delimited as Grand Cru Kaefferkopf, and this would seem to compare favourably with the 67.81 ha delimited by the Colmar Tribunal in 1932. However, the new Kaefferkopf includes just over 12 ha of vineyards not previously classified as Kaefferkopf and excludes 15 ha that were delimited in 1932, leaving 32 growers very miffed indeed. So miffed, in fact, that in March 2007 they took the case to court

in Colmar, demanding the annulment of the new *grand cru décret*. According to the regional newspaper *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, this was the first occasion that a *grand cru* designation had been legally contested, and although the case was kicked out, the growers are now pursuing it all the way to the national court.

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.

I feel like grabbing hold of the 32 growers by the scruff of their necks and banging their heads together with those who delimited the new *grand cru*. Both sides have got it wrong, and the only ones laughing are the lawyers. When you consider the travesties of delimitation that have been committed in other *grands crus* (Brand, for example, which was originally barely more than 3 ha, whereas Grand Cru Brand today is a whopping 57.95 ha), would it not have been simpler to include the entire area of Kaefferkopf as delimited in 1932? And if the growers were included in the Colmar Tribunal delimitation of 1932, would they not have stood a better chance of using the courts to force their inclusion in Grand Cru Kaefferkopf than they do of getting the law annulled?

What's in a name?

On 17 April 2007, the Association des Viticulteurs d'Alsace (AVA) voted to ban the sale of Pinot Gris as Pinot Grigio on the grounds that it is not on the list registered with the EU by France of all its accepted varietal synonyms. The Turckheim cooperative had been supplying Marks & Spencer, which had rebranded its Alsace Pinot Gris in the summer of

Grapevine

- **At Sainsbury's**, you really can taste the difference. Sainsbury's Taste the Difference 2005 Gewurztraminer (produced by the Cave Cooperative Turckheim) walked off with the Alsace Dry Aromatic White Under £10 Trophy at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards (DWVA).

- **Other DWVA trophy winners** were Riesling Cuvée Frédéric Emile 2001 FE Trimbach (Best Alsace Riesling Over £10), The Wine Society's Exhibition Gewurztraminer (Alsace Dry Aromatic White Over £10), and Riesling Eiswein Silberberg 1998 Domaine Pfister (Alsace Sweet Wine Over £10). This was Alsace's most successful year yet at the awards. As chairman of the Alsace panel, I'm biased, of course, but the fact that this is the only wine

competition in the world that employs specialist panels to judge wines on a regional basis and allows the chairmen to select and fine-tune their own specialist panels, it really is a different wine competition and, I believe, the best in the world. We are not judging Alsace Riesling against German, Austrian, or Australian. Or at least not until all the regional trophies go head to head for the international trophies. Other regions have taken this on board, but despite 2007 being the best yet for Alsace, it does lag behind other regions (Greece submitted four times as many wines, for example). More Alsace producers should support the DWVA by entering the competition. E-mail worldwineawards@decanter.com in any language for details.

2006 and attracted a lot of publicity with its labelling of Alsace Pinot Grigio. Marks & Spencer had caught on to the marketing fact that “the sexy and magical words ‘Pinot Grigio’” sold wine, whatever happened to be in the bottle. This was taken very seriously by some in Alsace, who saw it as an erosion of the tradition and heritage of their wines – and I suppose it might have led to that, had it gone on. Certainly it happened at the wrong time, having coincided with the phasing out of Tokay Pinot Gris in favour of Pinot Gris. The loss of a Hungarian-influenced name at the same time as the emergence of an Italian varietal name was confusing to say the least. Furthermore, Pinot Grigio infers an essentially light and fresh style of wine, with relatively bland fruit (bar well-known exceptions) and absolutely no spice, whereas Alsace Pinot Gris is more structured, with higher alcohol, and a distinctive spice character. So am I happy with the AVA for stopping Alsace Pinot Grigio? Yes. Do I mind it ever happening? No, and nor should anyone in Alsace, since it gave some of their wines some publicity and sales to some consumers who might not otherwise have purchased an Alsace wine. Indeed, I look forward to the next “Pinot Grigio”-type episode in the certain knowledge that the AVA will act to protect the reputation of Alsace after it has benefited from a good breath of positive publicity.

Grapevine

• **Wolfberger** offers an amazing cache of mature vintages on its website: Pinot Blanc Médaillé 1960 (€15.60); Pinot Gris Cuvée du Schloscherr 1961 (€20.20); Muscat Grande Médaillé 1962 (€17); Gewurztraminer Sigillé 1964 (€13.50); Muscat Médaillé 1965 (€20); Gewurztraminer Sigillé 1966 (€20.60); Riesling Médaillé 1967 (€20); Riesling Cuvée 1969 (€19); Muscat Cuvée de la Comtesse 1970 (€13.80); Pinot Gris Cuvée du Schloscherr 1971 (€20.20); Gewurztraminer Cuvée St-Léon 1973 (€18.60); Riesling Armorié 1985 (€20); Pinot Gris Cuvée du Schloscherr 1986 (€13.20); Gewurztraminer Cuvée St-Léon 1988 (€16.80); and Gewurztraminer Cuvée

St-Léon 1989 (€17.90). I've not tasted many of these wines for a long time, but I intend doing so for the next edition of *Wine Report*, if any are left! Obviously Riesling is longest lived, and a 48-year-old Pinot Blanc will be more interesting than actually enjoyable, but there are some fabulous vintages here, the wines have not moved from their ideal storage conditions since they were made, and the prices are ridiculously cheap. Why not enjoy a weekend in Alsace, buy a mixed case direct from Wolfberger in Eguisheim, chill them down, try them with a picnic, and go back to Wolfberger the next day to buy your favourites?

Opinion:

Sugar can kill!

There is no room for sweet wine in Alsace other than *vendanges tardives*, *sélection de grains nobles*, and maybe the occasional *vin de glace*. These are speciality wines and, as such, are expected to be rarities, prized and expensive. The increasing sweetness of all other Alsace wines is doing irreparable harm to the hard-earned reputation of Alsace as a dry varietal-wine region. They are killing Alsace. In 2006, Etienne Hugel was reported in a trade publication as saying, “In a restaurant, people expect a dry wine, so why is it that some people produce sweet wines? It’s not the upper level where there’s a problem – the problem lies with entry-level wines that are made sweet, not grown sweet.” He is wrong – there is a problem in the upper level. Far be it for me to suggest that Etienne might not want to offend his colleagues in the “upper level”, but that is precisely where the biggest problem exists. If there is also a problem with entry-level wines that are chaptalized but end up with residual sugar, there is a simple answer: get off your butt and push for this practice to be made illegal. It might be within the letter of the law, but it is certainly not within the spirit. If a wine ends up sweet, why would there be any need to chaptalize it? The technology exists to identify wines that have been chaptalized, so collect some examples and make your case, Etienne.

You are absolutely correct, however, about the dilemma in restaurants, although the biggest culprits are upper level, especially the *grands crus* and producers who believe in the false god of physiological ripeness. I taste more than 350 Alsace wines every year, and I don’t know if a particular *grand cru*, *lieu-dit*, or *cuvée* will be dry or sweet from one year to the next, so how can the producers of these wines expect Joe Public to know? These sweet wines are killing Alsace from the top down. They are deterring people from ordering Alsace in restaurants, which is a pity, because they are such natural food wines. With the exception of VTs and SGNs, which should be produced in the most limited quantities to preserve their value, sugar is the long-term enemy in Alsace. But in the short term, is it too much to ask for an obligatory dry designation to help consumers make a choice?

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2006

As with most of France, this was a very strange year, with a baking hot, very sunny July (the hottest on record for Alsace) that pushed the vine's growth cycle way ahead of the norm, only for the *véraison* to be stopped dead in its tracks by a cool August. Then there was rain in September that not even the Vosges could stop, and rot set in. But it was the downpour on 3 and 4 October that caused the biggest problems. However, the crop ripened, thanks to a beautiful Indian summer soon after. Strict selection in the vineyard was vital, but some excellent wines have been made, including VT and SGN.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2005

Vintage rating: Red: 88, White: 90

Overall, 2005 is better than 2004, with brighter fruit flavours, and vies with 2001 and 2002. But the wines need time to confirm their precise qualities. Gewurztraminer was the best all-round performer, while Riesling was the most variable (although some Rieslings were as good as the best Gewurztraminers), and the Pinot Gris was excellent. All other varieties were good to very good. Ideal conditions for botrytis suggest excellent botrytized (as opposed to *passerillé*) VT and SGN.

2004

Vintage rating: Red: 86, White: 87

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; 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 yet to taste a great 2003 Pinot Noir. The optimist in me hopes that one has not been released and is slowly maturing somewhere, just waiting for me to taste. 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.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

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

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 Schlumberger
- 2 Becker
- 3 Hugel
- 4 Robert Faller
- 5 Lucien Albrecht
- 6 Paul Blanck
- 7 Albert Boxler
- 8 André Rieffel
- 9 Antoine Stoffel
- 10 Dirlir-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 & Daniel Klack
- 8 Schoenheit
- 9 Clément Klur
- 10 Fernand Engel

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 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 ***Seigneurs de Ribeaupierre 2005** Trimbach (€21)
- 2 **Gewurztraminer Altenbourg Cuvée Laurence 2005** Domaine Weinbach (€35)
- 3 ***Riesling Grand Cru Schlossberg Cuvée Ste-Cathérine 2005** Domaine Weinbach (€32)
- 4 ***Riesling Grand Cru Froehn Bio 2005** Becker (€11.50)
- 5 ***Riesling Cuvée Ste-Cathérine 2005** Domaine Weinbach (€28)
- 6 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Kessler 2005** Schlumberger (€17.50)
- 7 **Riesling 2005** Meyer-Fonné (€24.50)
- 8 ****Pinot Gris Grand Cru Hengst 2005** JosMeyer (€24.90)
- 9 **Riesling Holder Vendanges Tardives Cuvée Adrien 1998** Schoenheit (€25.50)
- 10 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Kitterlé 2005** Schlumberger (€17.50)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 ***Riesling Grand Cru Froehn 2005** Jean & Philippe Becker (€11.50)
- 2 ****Muscat d'Alsace 2005** Bott Frères (€9.70)
- 3 ***Riesling Les Pierrets 2005** JosMeyer (€19.50)
- 4 ***Muscat Cuvée de la Comtesse 2005** Wolfberger (€7.50)
- 5 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Kessler 2005** Schlumberger (€17.50)
- 6 **Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Kitterlé 2005** Schlumberger (€17.50)
- 7 ***Riesling Grand Cru Muenchberg 2005** Ostertag (€19)
- 8 ***Riesling Grand Cru Mandelberg 2005** Bott-Geyl (€16)
- 9 ***Gewurztraminer Turckheim 2005** Domaine Zind Humbrecht (€14)
- 10 ****Riesling Réserve Personnelle Sigillé de la Confrérie St-Etienne 2005** Bott Frères (€11.80)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 ***Seigneurs de Ribeaupierre 2005** Trimbach (€21) *This stunning wine demonstrates that totally dry Gewurztraminer is not only possible in Alsace but can be top class.*
- 2 ***Pinot Noir "F" 2005** Paul Blanck (€23.20) *This silky, seductive 2005 has great finesse and is the crowning glory of Frédéric Blanck's long search to perfect the feminine side of truly serious Alsace Pinot Noir.*
- 3 **Riesling Grand Cru Wineck-Schlossberg SGN 2004** Meyer-Fonné (€28 per 50-cl bottle) *Not one of the sweetest SGNs, but undeniably one of the purest and most elegant.*
- 4 ***Riesling Clos St-Urbain Grand Cru Rangen 2004** Domaine Zind Humbrecht (€45) *A dry Rangen from Zind Humbrecht with none of the hot, sun-baked, peaty, brûlée, volcanic goût de terroir of some vintages.*

Grapevine

- Hugel has always had one of the better websites, and it has now launched a fascinating interactive map that can show the spread of its own 27 ha of vineyards and overlay this with maps broken down by grape varieties, *grands crus*, and different geological areas. Interactive mapping of the entire Alsace region is also provided (see <http://blog.hugel.com/en/>).

- At the 10th World Riesling Competition in Strasbourg on 5 February 2007, 534 wines were tasted from 300 producers in 12 countries. Alsace scooped all three of the generic trophies awarded

(Riesling Zellberg 2005 Pierre Koch et Fils, Riesling Cuvée Brigitte 2005 Denis Meyer, and Alsace Riesling 2005 Ruhlmann-Dirringer) and one of the two Grand Cru trophies (Riesling Grand Cru Rosacker 2005 François Schwach et Fils) but only one of the three Vendanges Tardives trophies (Riesling Vendanges Tardives 2004 Louis et Claude Hauller, Domaine du Tonnelier). Germany bagged the rest, plus the only Sélection de Grains Nobles trophy and the only Eiswein trophy. Alsace also picked up 43 of the 79 gold medals and 58 of the 79 silver medals.

- 5 ***Riesling Grand Cru Muenchberg 2005** Ostertag (€25) *André Ostertag's Muenchberg just gets better, and the 2005 is his most elegant vintage yet.*
- 6 ***Pinot Noir Clos St-Landelin 2005** René Muré (€31.95) *Deeply coloured, but not overextracted, this is probably René Muré's best Pinot Noir so far.*
- 7 ***Pinot Noir BIO 2005** Jean & Philippe Becker (€12) *The best guzzling, fruity style of (red) Alsace Pinot Noir I've tasted in a long time.*
- 8 **Tokay Pinot Gris Grand Cru Furstentum 2005** Paul Blanck (€23.40) *This medium-sweet Pinot Gris just beats Blanck's dry Riesling Furstentum to the punch.*
- 9 ***Muscat Cuvée de la Comtesse 2005** Wolfberger (€7.75) *The best of the cheapest Muscats I've ever tasted, Cuvée de la Comtesse is a huge step up from Wolfberger's basic Muscat Médaillé for just one more euro.*
- 10 ****Gewurztraminer 2005** Gruss (€6.50) *Just a tad sweeter than off-dry, this very fruity, delicately spicy Gewurztraminer is a perfect example of why Gruss is such a highly thought-of up-and-coming producer.*

Notes: * Dry, ** Off-dry

Grapevine

• **Last year I reported** that Tokay would not be allowed as part of the Pinot Gris appellation in Alsace as from 2006. Well, I was wrong. Readers must forgive me for thinking that an agreement means what it says. In 1993, the EU and Hungary (then not a member) formally agreed that the Tokay Pinot Gris appellation will not be permitted when referring to Pinot Gris from Alsace, allowing a transitional 13-year period for producers to adapt to the new rule. That period ended on 1 April 2007 (which is either 14 years or an April Fool's Day joke). Furthermore, vintages up to and including 2005 will be permitted to be sold with the former appellation name until stocks run out. So, now it's going to be even longer than 14 years. Also, for the newer vintages, those wines that were put into retail distribution

before 31 March 2007 may also continue to be sold as Tokay Pinot Gris until stocks run out. So even vintages beyond the 13-year transitional period are allowed to use the banned Tokay name more than 14 years later. Anyone who thought the Alsace people to be more German than French should think again!

• **Planning a visit?** With 46 fêtes and foires every year, there is the opportunity to taste Alsace wines in one village or another almost every week. Make sure your trip coincides with one of these festivities in the area of Alsace you will be visiting by downloading the most up-to-date calendar of events from vinsalsace.com/en/pdf/calendrier_manifestation.pdf.