

## INTRO

A 3 day tour of the 7 Grandes Maisons d'Alsace provided a wonderful insight into the making and selling of their renowned wines. Also, a chance to sample the local food and hospitality of the medieval town of Riquewihr whilst staying at the Hotel de la Couronne.

### The Grandes Maisons d'Alsace

An association of 7 leading wine producers from Alsace. They are appointed by the group themselves. The key criteria to join are that the producer has family involvement in the running of the business, that they own vineyards in the prime viticultural sites of Alsace (including Grand Crus) and they run their domaine whilst respecting both the local traditions of winemaking history, and the local environment in which they work.

They are all situated in the quality area of the Haut-Rhin, ie the Southern part of Alsace. There are quality implications in the vineyard and cellar too, with yields generally being lower (less no of buds per vine for example), and an emphasis towards making wine as naturally as possible in the cellar (they are moving away from centrifuging as a method of clarification for instance).

Some, eg Josmeyer, are estate wines only, however Trimbach and Hugel produce both domaine and negoce wines, usually under two different styles of labels. The GMAs also produce a range of GMA labelled wines (one producer per varietal wine). The producer's name does not appear on the bottle, and each year the variety that the each producer works with is different.

What was clear on meeting the group was that the camaraderie they spoke of was genuine, with a very warm atmosphere which lasted throughout the three days. One memorable anecdote which illustrates this is from 1971: when a difficult harvest dramatically reduced yields of Trimbach and Josmeyer's Muscats, they vinified together in order to produce a wine of marketable quantity. Thus their museum releases are exactly the same wine!

### A Gourmet region!

Dated doorframes of the local Riquewihr shops hinted at the long history of the region. Vines have been grown in the area since Roman times, and winemaking records date back to the time of the 'Gourmet', the French name for the wine-broker who acted on behalf of the producers, selling the local village wines from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. Whilst the 1789 Revolution opened up trading, meaning that the Gourmets were no longer needed, their legacy as connoisseurs of fine wine and food lasted and the word is used in France and England today in this latter sense. Culinary traditions still run strong, with specialties such as macaron, kougelhof, liqueur beers and schnapps dominating the shop windows and restaurant lists. We were lucky to try many delicious dishes, including 'choucroute royale', a mix of cabbage, sausage, potato, and pork belly, cooked in and then doused with Cremant!

### A chequered history

In 1648 Alsace was given to the French (previously it was part of the Holy Roman Empire), marking long period of contestation between France and Germany. In 1871 with the German annexation came Riesling and other quality white grapes which still dominate the winemaking today (previously Alsace was mainly red wines, many from

Pinot Noir). Phylloxera and Oidium hit in the 1880s however, and quality suffered. 1918 saw Alsace being returned to France and from then on the reputation increased (whilst overall acreage declined, from 19000 hectares in 1920 to 15000 hectares today, which are farmed by 7000 growers, and commercialised by 1000 producers). In 1962 Alsace was granted official AOC; mise en bouteille became obligatory in 1972 (no wine is allowed to be bulk exported, or exported in box); Cremant d'Alsace became an AOC in 1976, and lastly in 1983 25 Grand Crus were identified and legally delimited.

### Alsace Viticulture

Vineyards run between the banks of the River Rhine (to the East, with Germany's Baden on the other side, and the Black Forest further East). The Vosges mountains are to the West, protecting the vineyards from bad weather. In fact it is a dry region (Colmar is the second driest city in France, the climate is continental) with only 450mm of rain per year. The area is also distinguished by both high altitudes meaning good temperature variation and the pink Vosges sandstone said to impart a mineral flavour to the wines. Otherwise soils are clay and limestone.

Yields are 80hl/ha usually, with a maximum of 24 buds per double guyot vine for AOC wines and an average vine density of 5000 vines/ha although Rene Mure for example has nearly double this. It is a favourable climate so 4-6 sprayings are made per year, with Schlumberger and Josmeyer in particular seeking organic and biodynamic methods of cultivating the vines (eg the horses used to work the terraces at the former, avoiding soil compaction that machines often cause).

### Grand Crus

A controversial system for many reasons. They were introduced based on potential for quality when combined with certain grape varieties. Initially grapes are only designated AOC status, then 8 days before the harvest, Grand Cru is announced based on yields and ripeness achieved (some would say this is far too late). Pinot Noir is not officially a Grand Cru Variety which therefore excludes several high quality reds from single vineyard sites at Rouffach (Rene Mure). In addition, Trimbach's Clos St Hune Riesling does not bear the Rosacker Grand Cru name on the bottle as the producer feels the wine is above the quality of the other wines produced there.

### Alsace Winemaking

Distinctive points to note are the sugar and alcohol limits for Vendanges Tardives and Selection de Grains Nobles where Gewurztraminer and Pinot Gris must reach a minimum potential of 15.3% alcohol and Riesling and Muscat 14%. Minimal chaptalisation is allowed for other wines. Oak (usually distinctive oval barrels) is used for many of the quality wines, including Riesling, and there are many old barrels still in use, the tartrates having built up to such an extent that the surface has effectively become inert.

Cremant, of which Dopff is probably the most famous producer, is made similarly to champagne in methods although there is a minimum ageing of 9 months. Chardonnay can be used for cremant only. 150 kg/100l of (whole bunch) pressed juice is achieved. Brut has a final sugar level of 5-15 grams per litre.

### Conclusion

Many thanks go to all seven of the Grandes Maisons d'Alsace for a fantastic few days. The visit was very educational, with our exam at Beyer on the last day keeping

us on our toes! It was a superb opportunity to taste what the region has to offer; further highlights were the amazing old vintage tasting held at Hugel, as well as the sumptuous feast at L'Auberge de l'Ill on the Wednesday. A true privilege. Thank you.