

## **Tasting Room Notes**

### **Geoffrey Jameson Scholarship Visit to Alsace, June 2009**

My mother always told me that you should not judge a book by its cover. Whilst this may be true in literature, it seems to me that the diametrical opposite may apply to the oenological world. In fact, I have long had a theory that it is possible to tell a lot about a producer's wine just by looking at their tasting room, but until this year, I had not had the chance to test the idea scientifically. So, accompanied by John Townley of the WSET (who wanted to learn to love Gewurztraminer) and Kirsty McKenna of Alexander Wines (who already did), we took up temporary residence in Colmar for three nights, and set to with a demanding research schedule to see if my theory held true.

The introduction to the region was given by M. Vézien, the director of the Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace in its headquarters outside town. I would guess that the building is early 1980's. It has something of the architect's model about it. Surrounded by the sort of trees and car park borrowed from a railway set, the main interest inside is the bright, white tasting room which is shaped in a quarter circle. At the apex there is a screen, which is faced by around fifty fixed desks each with its own basin spittoon and foot-operated tap. Behind the desks on the curved wall, there are seven frosted windows, each etched with the name of a grape variety. The Tokay one has not yet been changed. Erratic electric blinds complete the Roger-Moore-era-Bond lair image. The lecture was introductory, but with the occasional nugget to savour: I had forgotten that Alsace was exporting the same amount of wine at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War as it does now. As for the wines, one thing was crystal clear: they were varietally characteristic. The Sylvaner tasted like Sylvaner, the Riesling like Riesling, the Gewurz like lychees (not to John's taste) and the Pinot Gris like Tokay. The windows had said it all.

Just down the ring road lies a large warehouse, black as beetle wings with "Wolfberger" emblazoned on its side in a golden gothic script. Inside, there are titanic stainless steel vats, and spider-like gyro-palettes riddling the largest production of Crémant in Alsace: six million bottles a year. The tasting room is next door, part of the company's retail outlet. The wares on show range extensively from generic Alsace to an impressive collection of Grand Cru names, Crémant and eaux de vie. The overall impression is commercial, and the wines were too: very well-made, but slightly one-dimensional. Over some fairly high dosage Brut, I was beginning to think that my theory may have something in it. As for John, a super-ripe, bubblegummy, Pfersigberg 2003 impressed, but still failed to win him over.

The next morning we drove up north, nearly as far as Strasbourg, and visited the chocolate-box Pfister winery. With bright red geraniums bursting over each of the wooden balconies, we saw beautifully maintained tradition, but at the same time the small but perfectly cleaned winery rooms revealed a modern side. Melanie showed us around, fresh from completing a WSET unit 3 examination the previous day. Her mother, a physics teacher, looked in on us and also offered a warm welcome. We started with a buttery, toffee and brioche-like NV Crémant and finished on a Silberberg VT Gewurz with pâtes de fruits, orange and a wonderful chalky minerality. John began to come round. What a way to start the day! As for my theory, I saw tradition and minerally terroir in the wine, but there was also a modern purity of fruit. Three out of three.

The Gresser house in Andlau has a similar rational and traditional air. Labelled vines, one from each noble Alsace variety, climb up the wall of the courtyard, geraniums adorn the windows and the ancient-looking pinkish grès des Vosges keystone above the door is inscribed with the date: 1994. Inside, the Winstub (best not to call it a tasting room) is like an old Austrian Railways carriage, with blonde wood panels and a bright window. The benches are hard, but curiously comfortable. M. Gresser is a big serious man with a passion for his vines, his region and his country. The fact that his country is France seemed to me a contradiction. As if to answer my thought he said "we are not like the Germans, the fact is that the Germans are like us, because their language is derived from that of the Allemanisch tribe which settled this area of Western Switzerland, the Schwarzwald and Alsace before Charlemagne's time". We started with a flight of five Rieslings to illustrate the effect of terroir. The Kastelberg 2005 is grown on schist and has an austere majesty: "it cuts, like stone". The wines were uncompromising, beautifully made and firmly rooted in the terroir, like the man, and... like the tasting room.

Down the road, Dambach la Ville is a very pretty mediaeval village seemingly stuck in time. The Gisselbrecht winery is on the outskirts in a 1960's building with a passing nod to local architectural styles. Through the door there is a sense of being in a le Corbusier monastery which has seen better times. The tasting area is an enlarged hallway, next to the WC. The lighting is dim. Unfortunately, I allowed this all to affect the way I taste, and despite enjoying the fresh Médaille d'Or 2007 Riesling, could not get the best out of the wines. Perhaps my mother was right after all. Perhaps I had let the surroundings impinge on my judgement. We should have taken a few bottles away with us and tasted them in the summery vineyards as a control experiment....

The next morning we visited Hugel. Sadly, the patriarch Johnny Hugel had died the previous day, and there was a palpable sense of loss in Riquewihr. However, David Ling was adamant that Johnny would not have wanted us to cancel our visit, and he gave us an unforgettable tour of the extraordinary cellars. The house of Hugel is based in the middle of the old town and the logistics are impressive: the company maintains a fleet of old, extra-small Berliet lorries just in order to be able to bring the harvest in through the narrow mediaeval gateways. David's enthusiastic explanation of the viticultural history of the area from the end of the Thirty Years' War to the present day was really brought to light with physical examples: the 8.8 hl Ste Catherine barrel from 1715 is the oldest barrel in constant use in the world, and the flagpole flies the colours of the Texas Rangers once a year to commemorate the liberation in winter 1944/45. The sense of tradition continues into the tasting room with letters from Churchill and pictures of a moustachioed Comte de Paris. We started the tasting with the "Gentil" blend – a classic with balance, elegance and length. The style is food focussed; no vulgar modern fruit pyrotechnics here. The last wine in the line-up was a 1988 SGN Gewurz with roses, lemon bonbons, and minerals. I made a fool of myself and compared the nose to the roses of Barolo, but then again I hope I can be forgiven for getting carried away. John was definitively converted.

After a delicious apricot and Muscat lunch at the Sarmet Doré, we hurried off to Hunawihr. Here we spent our visit in the beautiful and fascinating Rosacker Grand Cru vineyard. Nicolas Garde is the oenologist at the village cooperative here, which is one of the best regarded in the region. In the space of a short walk he described the mineral breakdown of the soil, the way in which different varieties react to it, and the realities of working a quality cooperative where members' pride in producing the best is more powerful than money. In the course of the walk he was looking at the vines like a doctor and diagnosed a few cases of court-noué, and chlorosis, explaining the symptoms as he went. The tasting room is simple, with a large window overlooking the vines. Here, the message seems to be that the only factor of any importance is the vineyard. We only had time to taste the superbly pure Rosacker Riesling, and it was difficult to disagree with this message.

At Kientzler, the tasting room is similarly simple and focused on the vines. It is isolated, on a slight rise in the road near Ribeauvillé and seems to command the landscape. Walls of glass show green rows stretching away to the Geisberg and Osterberg in the distance. M. Kientzler gave us a quick and no-nonsense tasting of his range which has rapier acidity and minerality. I am sure that the wines will mellow and gain complexity with age but for me

standing there, looking down on all that I surveyed, they mainly seemed closed, if not downright superior.

The next morning we returned to Ribeauvillé to visit Trimbach. Past the storks in their nests standing guard above the gate, the curious half-timbered cellar and townhouse combine the values of bourgeois nineteenth century commerce with 1950's state-of-the-art concrete. Inside, the tidy cellars show a flexible use of a range of technologies, from large, old vats, to glass-lined concrete and the ubiquitous stainless steel. In the tasting room, the non-message is the same. Yes, it is panelled with lightly coloured wood, yes there are a few mementoes on the wall, but there seems to be no clear statement here, other than an immensely practical approach to winemaking. In the same way, I found it hard to pigeon hole the Trimbach house style with a useful adjective like "traditional" or "modern". An example of a more traditional approach was the Pinot Gris Réserve Personelle 2002 showing honeysuckle, smoke and mushroomy richness on a nearly dry food-friendly palate. On the other hand, the 2002 Clos Ste Hune was arguably more modern in style with purity, minerality, lemons and pine needles. Interestingly, the 2003 was released before the 2002, illustrating again an un-dogmatic openness and flexibility aimed at getting the best out of each individual cuvée.

We rounded off a great visit by calling in on Pierre Sparr at Sigolsheim. The buildings here are not particularly characterful, and the tasting room is dark. The glass display cabinets around the walls exhibit old labels and prizes won by the wines in bygone years. Recent additions to the silverware are limited. The tasting reflected this with a selection of recent wines which, whilst being perfectly well made, lacked a certain vigour. However, as the immensely generous line-up proceeded past the millennium vintage, the wines became more interesting, culminating in a beautiful Grand Cru Schoenenbourg 1996 with high, mellow acidity, a rich orange and Demerara nose, honey, balance and elegance. We ended the tasting with a tank sample of 2008 SGN ice wine which could well herald a return to the house's old form. All that is required now is for the tasting room to be given a makeover.....

On, the whole, this trip did seem to confirm that tasting rooms say an awful lot about producer styles, but then again, it is very hard to be scientific and I can feel more home-based research coming on! Nevertheless, for this initial exploratory overview I would like to offer sincere thanks to the Geoffrey Jameson trustees, to John Townley and June Grant of the WSET, to all at the CIVA, and to the winemakers who so generously gave us of their time.