

# Alsace 2007 – A Snapshot

## *The Peter Hampson Memorial Scholarship Report*

by Anne McHale

*Alsace lies between latitudes 47.5 degrees and 49 degrees north of the equator, giving a long, cool growing season. It is important for the vineyards to make the most of the sun's rays, and so most of the best vineyards are on south, south west, or south east facing slopes, sheltered from the wind by the Vosges. Average annual rainfall is one of the lowest in France, due to the influence of the Vosges mountains.*

*Oxford Companion to Wine, 2006 Edition.*

Ah, the Vosges mountains. I'd been hearing about this near-miraculous range of hills for years, ever since I began my WSET qualifications as a young graduate starting out in the wine trade. The undulating vineyards of Alsace lie on the eastern slopes of the Vosges and are thus protected from the worst rain, which falls on the western slopes of the mountains and only rarely manages to make it over the top. So it is not hard to imagine why I chose this region when I was privileged enough to be awarded The Peter Hampson Memorial Scholarship. In July, surely I would be guaranteed a week of dry, sunny weather? Added to which, I had heard colleagues and customers rhapsodising about the beauty of Alsace and its wonderful food. The wines had of course spoken for themselves during my own tasting experience. So how did it all go?

Well – to put it bluntly, I wasn't too impressed by those Vosges mountains. The weather was nearly as patchwork as in my native Ireland – perhaps even more so, given that it ranged from scorching 36°C heat upon my arrival to 20°C and torrential downpours by the end of the week. Perhaps those textbooks need to be amended...

On a more serious note – aside from the failure of the famous mountains to keep me dry, I must say that everything else I have heard about the region was true. Stunning scenery, adorable villages, exquisite food and superb wines all tempted me to extend my stay. I visited 7 wineries (and a cheese farm!) throughout the week, and all gave me an insight into some of the topical issues currently affecting the region's wine industry. I will look at some of these issues in closer detail.

### **The Grand Cru System**

A focus of much controversy ever since its creation in 1983, the Alsace Grand Cru appellation still causes heated debate today. Subjects of disagreement range from vineyard boundaries to the blending of grape varieties. Thus my question 'what do you think of the Grand Cru system?' elicited a range of responses, from an indifferent shrug of the shoulders to an enthusiastic nod of approval, or at the other end of the scale a disgusted French 'ooh la la' and agitated hand movement. André Ostertag of Domaine Ostertag and Lucas Rieffel of André Rieffel are happy with the system,

being of the opinion that it is better than no system at all. Etienne Sipp of Louis Sipp in Ribeauvillé believes that some 'lesser quality' Grand Cru vineyards should have their status removed, since it is difficult to force the growers to produce higher-quality grapes when they can still sell under the Grand Cru banner with minimal effort. One of the most famous opponents of the system, Maison Trimbach, echoes this sentiment, preferring not to use the Grand Cru appellation for some of their wines which are in fact entitled to it (the best known example being the Riesling Clos Ste-Hune, which sits within the Rosacker Grand Cru), due to the fact that poorer quality entry-level wines are being produced from the same vineyard and using the Grand Cru name to boost their prices. This sets Trimbach apart from the majority – and given that Clos Ste-Hune appears on every Michelin starred restaurant list in the region, it clearly hasn't done the wine any harm! Another difference of opinion centres around the blending of grape varieties. Nearly everyone I spoke to is vehemently opposed to this, insisting that the true character of an Alsatian wine lies in its varietal expression. Yet a visit to Marcel Deiss yielded the opposite point of view – that terroir is more significant than grape variety – hence Deiss's decision to develop a 'vins de terroir' range of co-fermented field blends, marketed simply under the name of the vineyard (e.g. Altenberg de Bergheim, a Grand Cru only recently allowed by law to appear on the labels of field blends from that vineyard). Deiss comes under fire for this, not only due to the lack of 'varietal expression', but also because his wines are not necessarily very consumer friendly. Few enough people understand Alsace wines outside of the region as it is, so relying solely on the vineyard name and not specifying the grape variety is obviously going to cause confusion. Perhaps his main aim is a 'point of difference' like Trimbach – and he certainly gets a lot of PR because of it. Personally, I subscribe more to the view held by the majority – with a varietal wine, you know exactly what to expect. Deiss's wines were concentrated with superb fruit and minerality, but somehow did not seem to capture the essence of Alsace.

So what to make of the system overall? Some think a Premier Cru tier would improve the situation enormously. Yet, like many French wine classifications, it is unlikely to be quickly resolved in a way which keeps everyone happy. In the meantime, I'm with André Ostertag and Lucas Rieffel: better a system than no system. Until the Alsatians fine-tune their system so that more trust can be placed in it, there is no better course of action than tasting the wines and following recommended producers.

### **The Vineyards and Biodynamism**

The vineyards of Alsace are indeed as beautiful as one is led to believe. The views from the rolling hills of Grand Crus like Wiebelsberg and Zotzenberg or the vertiginous slopes of Kessler and Kitterlé are breathtaking. It's not all just pretty scenery, however: there is an intense degree of introspection and debate over the intricacies of slopes and soils. Domaines Schlumberger in Guebwiller, for example, take advantage of their vineyards' five general different aspects to fit in with the ripening times of different grape varieties, and also to achieve a more interesting range of weight, richness and flavours in the finished wines. The genuine concern growers have for their soils has undoubtedly helped to make the region a fertile environment for the growth of biodynamic philosophies, with their primary concern for the health and expression of the soil. This sensitivity over the nature and condition of the vineyard soil is further reflected in the resurgence of interest in the traditional

technique of using draught horses for cultivation – for example at Schlumberger, at nearby Dirler-Cadé in Bergholtz, and also at Zind-Humbrecht in Turckheim.

Biodynamism has been a hot topic for many years in Alsace – and like the Grand Cru system it is rife with differences of opinion. Most of those whose vineyards are not currently biodynamic see it as their ultimate goal; Schlumberger have too much vineyard area to convert completely, but are currently trialling 3 hectares, and run the rest on either organic or sustainable viticulture principles. Louis Sipp are moving towards it, and currently use no insecticides or herbicides, preferring instead such techniques as pheromone confusion and careful control of cover crops. For Etienne Sipp the lack of 'chemistry' in the vineyard, as he puts it, has certainly produced a purer minerality and fruit expression in the wines. Full biodynamism is the next step. Ostertag also runs on biodynamic principles. Asked why he thinks it works, André replied very honestly 'I don't know, but it does'. He persists despite the mockery to which he is subjected by his non-biodynamic neighbours. They may laugh at his unkempt rows of vines with their overgrown and biodiverse plant life, but they certainly cannot deny that the critical acclaim received by his wines suggests that he is doing something right. Given this kind of success and the current emphasis on environmentally friendly produce, it is very likely that biodynamism as a philosophy will continue to grow throughout the region, even with those who profess themselves to be ever so slightly cynical.

### **Small-scale Winemaking**

Alsace is still overall a region of small, mostly family-owned domaines, with nothing remotely approaching the scale of the large corporate wineries of the New World. However within the region, the differences between 'large' domaines like Schlumberger or Trimbach and tiny growers with barely more than a hectare or two are enormous. I visited one such small producer in Niedermorschwihr – Domaine Weinzorn, by no means famous on export markets but widely reputed in the local villages. His little winery, house and tasting room (or rather, shed) were full to the brim with character, having been in the family for hundreds of years; yet they were a far cry from the sleek, polished tasting rooms of Trimbach and Schlumberger, with their branded crystal glasses and personalised tasting sheets. In fact, Monsieur Weinzorn could have done with a diary – he had completely forgotten I was coming and had to be roused from a deep sleep by his wife. He is clearly not used to receiving trade visitors either – there was not a spittoon in sight and he was deeply offended when I sheepishly asked for one! But all joking aside, wine production can be a risky business for such small growers. This year, a large part of M. Weinzorn's harvest was destroyed by hail, and he didn't have adequate insurance. The contrast is indeed stark between his precarious livelihood and that of the larger companies, and serves as a reminder that winegrowing is not always the idyllic occupation that it is often portrayed to be.

### **The Wines**

I had tasted quite a few Alsace wines before visiting the region, so for me the interest lay more in seeing the vineyards and experiencing the place – yet once again I was

struck by the pure, concentrated fruit and the intense mineral character of the wines. Searingly dry Riesling, rich Pinot Gris, luscious but mineral Gewurztraminer (Schlumberger's 'Cuvée Anne' being naturally my favourite) and toasty, subtle Champagne-blend Crémant all scored high points in my tasting notes. I even tasted a white Pinot Noir! There isn't room here to go into detail about all the wines I tasted – but what is most striking about Alsace wines is the extent to which they manage to express a sense of place: horizontal tasting of the same grape variety from neighbouring vineyard sites repeatedly revealed fascinatingly precise differences.

### **Climate Change?**

Speaking of Pinot Noir (red this time) – will the Alsatian versions ever be able to match the quality of top Burgundies? After all, climate change research has predicted that Alsace could be successfully growing Cabernet Sauvignon by the end of the century. At the moment this is hard to imagine – to be honest, I wasn't blown away by any of the reds I tried, as they don't yet have the depth of fruit or concentration of their Burgundian counterparts. Winemakers are notably reluctant to commit to an opinion on the subject. I get the impression that most of them don't really, truly believe that climate change will affect them to a great extent. André Ostertag has noticed some of its effects so far – but he commented on the difficulties caused by the unpredictability of today's weather versus that of ten or twenty years ago, rather than the consequences of warmer weather on grape varieties and ripening times.

One thing *is* certain – 2007 has been a difficult vintage. When I was there those grapes had been through a lot. Sunburn, hail, torrential rain, mildew – you name it, they had suffered it! Yet every year we find quality wines coming from the region – and with the effort and skill of the producers, this year is likely to be no different. The latest reports have been very positive, and despite the miserable summer, the harvest has been almost the earliest in 100 years, beaten only by the infamous 2003 vintage.

In conclusion, Alsace was a fascinating region to visit. Personally, I hope that the growers manage to pull closer together to resolve tricky issues – such as the vineyard classification system and current labelling conventions – in order to guarantee that the wines of Alsace continue to be understood and appreciated by consumers, as they deserve to be. I hope to have the opportunity to return and learn more about this diverse region soon. And maybe the next time I visit, those Vosges mountains will be doing their job better too....