

## Emma Dawson – August 2010

### The meaning of “Grand Cru” in relation to Alsace wines and its relevance as a quality indicator to consumers

Alsace is a winemaking region in France with an equally unique history and style of wines. The only region that uses varietals on its wine labels for all quality levels of wine, well before the new world started this trend with seven main grapes in use: Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Muscat, Sylvaner & Gewurtztraminer. Also the only European region to make fine and long lived dry Rieslings. Its wines reflect the history of the region which has passed hands between France and Germany over time from the 30 years war, the French Revolution and most recently between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Since 1945 it has remained in French hands and has therefore become part of the French AOC regulation system for wines. But a shared heritage is visible in the Germanic green flute shaped bottles of its wines and aromatic varietals in use which are more typically found in Germany. Land holding in the region is extremely fragmented with average landholding under 2 hectares and over 2000 growers, but co-operatives have over 45% of production meaning most growers sell on their grapes to be made into wine<sup>1</sup>. The end result is that the industry is divergent with either small micro producers or large co-operatives bases and little inbetween.

The AOC system was set up later than the rest of France because it was delayed during the Second World War when Alsace was annexed by Germany. A first draft was written in 1945 but only formalised by the INAO in 1962 into a simple AOC Alsace but with no quality tiers. It permitted a 100hl/ha yield which was the highest in all of France and stated the varietal names should be used on all labels with 100% of that grape variety in the wine otherwise the label “Edelzwicker” could be used or a brand name<sup>2</sup>. A Grand Cru Commission was set up in 1973 to establish a higher quality tier with high profile Alsace winemaker Johnny Hugel as president. The commission was to set the precise boundaries for Alsatian vineyards that could produce the finest wines and be designated Grand Cru. However the commission could not agree and was disbanded so the INAO set up a final decree in 1975 recognising 50 grand cru sites – a mid tier premier cru system was never established as in other French appellations<sup>3</sup>. Top producers Hugel, Trimbach and Beyer all felt strongly that the boundaries of the Grand Cru system were too wide and sub standard vineyards had been allowed in for commercial and political reason. They therefore boycotted the system and have always used their producer name on the label even for wines that could legally termed Grand Cru. For these reasons a legacy of controversy has remained around the system. Jancis Robinson states on her website “The words Grand Cru are no guarantee of quality as some producers have seen Grand Cru simply as an excuse to charge more rather than as an opportunity to make seriously fine wine”<sup>4</sup>. For a consumer trying to navigate the complex and fragmented region this seriously undermines a basic trust in quality Alsatian wines.

To evaluate the credibility of Alsace’s Grand Cru system it is important to understand the basics of how it is defined as well as the changes that have been made since 1975. Grand Cru sites have now been expanded to include Kaefferkopf in 2007. Only four grapes are authorised for Grand Cru: Riesling, Gewurtztraminer, Pinot Gris & Muscat d’Alsace, however Sylvaner has been permitted for Grand Cru Zotzenberg since 2005<sup>5</sup>. Although Hugel disagreed with the boundardies for Grand Cru sites he was part of the 1977 INAO committee that set up the regulations for winemaking and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alsace\\_wine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alsace_wine)

<sup>2</sup> [www.vinsalsace.com](http://www.vinsalsace.com) “Vineyards and wines from Alsace”

<sup>3</sup> [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6597086.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6597086.ece)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/a200808191.html>

<sup>5</sup> [www.vinsalsace.com](http://www.vinsalsace.com) “Vineyards and wines from Alsace”

himself claimed they are “the strictest and most rigorously enforced wine law in place anywhere in Europe”<sup>6</sup>. Having been reinforced and tightened in 2001 the regulations now stand as follows. Maximum yields are set at 55hl per hectare and minimum alcohol 11-12.5%abv; higher than 9-11% for standard AOC. Minimum planting density is now 4500 vines per hectare, vineyard sites must be between 200-300m elevation, all grapes are handpicked and no chaptalisation is permitted. Each producer must declare the vineyard and grape varieties it intends to have as Grand Cru and their varieties before harvest. All wines are then tasted by a panel the June post harvest each year before being passed for designation, wines can be resubmitted by if they fail three times they are declassified. The smallest Grand Cru is Kanzlerberg at 3.2hectares and the largest Scholssberg at 80.3hectares but the total area is small when compared to the 280 hectares covered by Chablis Grand cru <sup>7</sup>. Vendage Tardives, Selection de grains nobles or Beernauslese wines are subject to further restriction on natural sugar levels. 4% of total production in Alsace is now Grand Cru. These rigorous regulations suggest that there is a quality process which should make Grand Cru wines distinct from other Alsatian wines.

The Grand Cru system has particular relevance to understanding Alsatian wines for reasons beyond simple quality aspirations. Alsace shares a “Graben” rock formation with Burgundy and also has a special pink “Gres de Vosges” sandstone sub soil and over 13 different soil varieties, many which overlap each other and have varying qualities that suit the seven varieties it produces differently. Such is the patchwork of soils that within 100m the terroir can change completely<sup>8</sup>. The soil structure is the result of the chronological deposition of a variety of soil types from a glacial rift produced over the Ages right through to the Jurassic era when the mountain range collapsed forming the valley. The Vosges mountain range to the left of this valley now provides a rain shadow and protection from the wind which means the region enjoys long period of sunlight and only 500-550mm rainfall a year, which is a minimum level required for viticulture. This means despite the northerly latitude of the region winemaking is still possible but also accounts for the wine’s unique style which combine ripeness of fruit not found in many German aromatic whites along with steely acidity. The Grand Cru sites sit on the best land which is a narrow strip 120km but only a few kilometres wide along a geological fault but the exact soil types within this area will vary dramatically<sup>9</sup>. This has relevance because each soil type will bestow difference flavour profiles onto the wines and suit particular varieties. So Rieslings suit limestone whilst Gewurztraminer suit heavier marl-clay soils. Granite soils produce wines with more fruity, aromatic style whilst limestone soils create citrus flavours with high acidity. This is due to the individual microclimate created by the soil structure and not a direct flavour imbued into the wine by the soil. So whilst the term Grand Cru may indicate a higher quality of a wine it doesn’t help the consumer understand the style of wine they are buying.

So if there wasn’t a Grand Cru system in place how else would a consumer be able to understand the quality and, or style of Alsace wines from the labels. There are a plethora of options in place which make the situation quite confusing for the consumer. First well known producers like Hugel have created their own quality tiers: Classic, Tradition & Jubilee – the later being a Grand Cru site<sup>10</sup>. There are also more common terms shared by producers for their higher quality wines such as “Reserve”, “Reserve personelle” or “Cuvee X” with a personal name choice attached to the latter. Or similarly to Burgundy the term “Clos” is used for small enclosed vineyards that have longer histories than Grand Cru e.g. Clos Ste-Hune situated in Grand Cru Rosacker. There are also thousands of “lieux dits” which is a term for an area which has no formal AOC status but can be used on a label

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<sup>6</sup> [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6597086.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6597086.ece)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.alsace-wine.net/a/grandcru.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.alsace-wine.net/t/geology.shtml>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.alsace-wine.net/t/geology.shtml>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.alsace-wine.net/a/designations.shtml>

nonetheless. Given that Alsace labels uniquely use the varietal names for each wine this is also a tool for consumers to use, particularly to understand style. Varietals will have varying qualities dependent on what terroir they are produced from so it can be sensible to remember the names of AOC communes from which they have the best expression. So if you like Riesling you would look for one produced in Steinert which is an area high in limestone. Failing that the simplest option is to familiarise yourself with the producers whose style you like and simply buy their wines, there are a small collection of well known producers other than the three mentioned which are held in high regard e.g. Zind-Humbrecht, Kreydenweiss, Bruno Sorg.

So what is the attitude of producers who do use the Grand Cru terminology? From visiting the region they are all keen to point out their Grand Cru sites, at Domaine Rieflee in Pfaffenheim they went to great lengths to show the precise location of the Grand Cru parcels to show they were based on the higher slopes on limestone outcrops. For them it is a useful shortcut to explain quality to their customer base and without strong brand names that are recognised worldwide it is important that the terminology is recognised and trusted. Producers are painfully aware that the controversy over the Grand Cru system may be one of the reasons that Alsatian wines have failed to find widespread popularity particularly in the UK where they have been in steady decline for many years. There is potential in the future to expand into the growing Asian markets because the aromatic style of their wines is a great match for their cuisine. These markets are very brand driven and to use Grand Cru Alsace as a commonly recognised brand term would help in this process.

In recent years the Alsatian wine community have also made great steps to improve overall quality of their wines. In the vineyard there is a widespread move to converting to sustainable viticulture, organic or biodynamic winemaking. In the cellars there has been modernisation with many wineries converting to modern stainless steel winemaking and temperature control. This leads to a conclusion that the controversy over Grand Cru status has been overstated. In tastings of several producers, Grand Cru wines do stand out as quite obviously higher quality. But also at a basic level the quality of Alsatian wines is very consistent and should be trusted by a consumer. A new "gestion locale" system has been put in place so each Grand Cru committee can choose to place tougher regulations for themselves; Altenberg de Bergheim has reduced its maximum yield further to 50 hl per hectare<sup>11</sup>. So there is a concerted effort in the community to maintain quality in these wines. Although the term doesn't help a consumer understand the style of the wine it is most definitely the best tool to denote quality, with producer name coming a close second.

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<sup>11</sup> "The New France" Andrew Jefford p61

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