

Wine & Spirit Education Trust / Geoffrey Jameson Award
Scholarship Study Tour to Alsace

2008

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ITINERARY

Tuesday	AM PM	Travel to Alsace Conseil Interprofessionel des Vins d'Alsace (CIVA)
Wednesday	AM & PM	Hugel
Thursday	AM PM	Leon Beyer Trimbach
Friday	AM PM	Bestheim Return to London

CIVA – An Introduction to Alsace and the current state of the market

The Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace (CIVA) plays a small regulatory role but its principal aim is to drive sales of Alsace wines through communication and promotion. They place cuisine at the heart of this role – they explained that the style of the wines of the region have evolved over centuries to match the local cuisine, with its emphasis on smoked and salted meat. Thus the wines are fresh and crisp, rarely undergoing malolactic fermentation. In addition to matching the local cuisine, they explained that this style cleanses the mouth from the sometimes oily food and helps digestion.

A few headline facts on Alsace:

- ? 91% of the wine produced is white
- ? Annual production currently runs at 150m-160m bottles per year
- ? 25% of the total volume is exported
- ? There are approximately 5,050 growers in Alsace, supplying 1,000 companies who sell bottled wine
- ? 80% of the volume is sold by the largest 220 of these companies.

The main grape varieties planted are as follows, with current (2007) percentage of land planted and the percentage of land that was planted in 1969 in brackets:

- ? Riesling 21.8% (was 12.7%)
- ? Pinot Blanc and Auxerrois 21.3% (was 11.0%)
- ? Gewurztraminer 18.6% (was 20.6%)
- ? Pinot Gris 14.7% (was 4.1%)
- ? Pinot Noir 9.6% (was 2.1%)
- ? Sylvaner 9.3% (**was 27.3%**)
- ? Muscat d'Alsace 2.3% (was 3.6%)
- ? Chasselas 0.6% (**was 10.6%**)

It is interesting to note the shift away from the lower quality varieties (Chasselas and Sylvaner) towards the noble varieties, which reflects the increasing emphasis on quality at every level of the region's wine production.

A very noticeable feature of the region is that they are content with their production and sales volumes. Their production is reasonably constant year after year (other than fluctuations driven by vintage variation) and they successfully sell the wine that they produce. Unlike many areas of France, they do not have a "wine lake" of excess production which they cannot shift. And, as their production is geographically limited, neither do they (nor indeed can they) aspire to massive volume growth.

The culture of Alsace is an unusual mix of French and German, and the region has often changed hands between the two countries in time of war. Despite this, the locals seem to view themselves as predominately French and it is interesting to note that while German wines are currently tending to become drier and drier the vogue in Alsace seems to be in the opposite direction. Although many of the "great" houses still maintain their traditional dry style, the co-ops and more volume-oriented producers are producing wines which are ever-sweeter.

The contrast between these two styles is one of the great polemics of the region at the moment. The other is the Alsace Grand Cru appellation, which was introduced in 1983. This created a new tier, whose aim was to delineate the best wines of the region. The appellation covers more than 50 single vineyard sites, and is highly controversial. The areas covered are very large, and while they incorporate many of the best sites in Alsace they also include many vineyards which struggle to produce wines of exception. Some of the leading houses therefore regard the term as worthless and refuse to use the “Grand Cru” appellation, even for those of their top cuvées which would happily qualify under the rules.

The varying Grands Crus styles can be roughly divided according to the soils of the sites:

“FRUITY” WINES:

Granite: Aromatic, good quality wines, with elegant acidity. The terroir really enhances the varietal differences on these soils.

“STONY” WINES:

Sandstone: Nervy
 Calcareous: Lemony, with a long streak of acidity
 Marl (Clay): Powerful, peppery wines (almost taste tannic)
 Clay: Harsh and powerful (again, almost taste tannic)
 Schist: Rangy and austere
 Volcanic: Full-bodied, smoked, mineral, almost salty

Hugel & Fils

Riquewihr, founded 1639

We were met by Jean “Johnny” Hugel, a wonderful host, who gave us a potted history of both the company and the region. Hugel is a grower / négociant with 30 hectares of vineyards (a figure which has doubled since the war). They have long-term relationships with about 120 growers, each of whom has between fifteen and thirty individual parcels. The grapes they buy in are used for their entry-level or “Classic” range. The premium wines are made from Hugel-grown grapes.

The Hugel philosophy is purist. Wines are either dry or sweet (ie *Vendage Tardive* or *Selection de Grains Nobles*), nothing in between. They are one of the true international success stories of the region, and export over 90% of their wines. Winemaking is completely focused on obtaining pure varietal expression. The pneumatic presses are gravity-fed, and they only press whole bunches. The wine is then made in old wooden casks (over 150 years old), whose only nod to modernity is a carefully hidden temperature control system. They admit that their use of wooden casks rather than stainless steel is mainly driven by tradition – the casks were made by their ancestors – although they claim that stainless steel gives more austere wines due to the absence of any oxygen whatsoever.

Yeasts are a mixture of wild and cultured as required, although they endeavour to use wild yeast for the more premium wines whenever possible. Malolactic is sometimes used if the acidity is very high and needs softening, though never for Riesling.

Etienne Hugel commented that chaptalisation is very rare these days, and that they now use 15-20 times less sugar than they did 30 years ago and now pick about 2½ weeks earlier, a clear indication that the climate is getting hotter.

The wines are very traditional in style, yet somehow they were the softest and most approachable of the three houses we visited. It should be noted, nonetheless, that this is only true within the context of three of the driest house styles in Alsace, and that compared to the majority of the region's production they are very dry indeed.

Léon Beyer

Eguisheim, founded 1580

Our guide at Léon Beyer was Yann-Léon Beyer, who explained to us that the house aim is to produce wines which are pure and bone-dry; "Good wine is made in the vineyard, and the aim is to save it in the cellar." Of all the wines we tasted over the week, these were notably the most austere in youth, the most consistently dry, and displayed a striking acidity. The older wines were much more approachable; the acidity had mellowed slightly, and the incredible purity and depth of fruit was really starting to show. Yann described sugar in wine as being "like salt in food – if food needs more flavour, you add salt. If wine needs more flavour, you add sugar, but the aim must be to make wines which have or develop enough flavour that they do not need sugar."

In the vineyard Léon Beyer follow the principals of *La Lutte Raisonnée*, which is a sustainable approach to viticulture. It focuses on minimal intervention and very careful use of chemicals where necessary, to limit damage to the soil and ensure the most natural grapes possible. The soils here are very fertile (Yann told us that non-wine crops in Alsace give yields twice as high as would be expected elsewhere in France) so the vines have naturally high crops and require very careful tending throughout the year.

The wines are fermented in old oak casks (like Hugel, Yann believes that this gives a smoother result than stainless steel) using only natural yeast. They try to avoid malolactic fermentation whenever possible, although sometimes "it just happens". The wines stay in tank for eight months before bottling, and are kept in bottle until they are ready before being released - six months for the classic wines and four years for the Comtes d'Eguisheim wines.

Of particular interest here was the Pinot Noir, which is made using the same approach as the white wines. In contrast to Burgundy, the aim is to show as much of the fruit as possible, and therefore the wines are unoaked. The cool nights of Alsace give a much wider range of lighter aromatic notes to the Pinot Noir and the resulting wines are very light in colour, with bright berry fruit and the gentlest of tannins.

Trimbach

Founded 1626, Ribeauville

The last of the major houses which we visited was Trimbach, where we were greeted by Jean Trimbach. Another négociant-grower, Trimbach owns 35 hectares of vineyard, and buy from a further 60-70 hectares each year. Jean commented that the quality of the grapes they buy is improving year after year, as the younger generation of growers is taking over, and they appreciate that quality is crucial.

The vineyards and cellars are run by Pierre Trimbach, who describes his aim very simply as "to make wines that we ourselves will love to drink." The approach here seems much more rooted in the practical than the

traditional; they use a combination of wood and stainless steel for vinification, and pick which to use “depending on the size of the parcel” rather than because they believe that it makes any difference to the style of the wine. Similarly they make no real qualitative distinction between wild and cultured yeasts.

The aim is for a quick fermentation – 3 weeks or so, as this gives consistency. All the tanks are temperature-controlled. Bottling takes place in the spring after the vintage, and the wines are stored on the premises until they are ready for release. Here, as at the other houses, none of the wine is bottled under screwcap. The reason for this is that the wines are stored unlabelled in huge crates, and the process of putting them in and out involves quite a lot of hard contact between the bottles. Screwcaps are quite delicate, and would be damaged by the bottles clashing against each other, so they are not currently a practical option.

The Trimbach style is very traditional – the wines are bone dry. The depth and complexity of fruit was particularly striking, even amongst the youngest wines. The acidity was also remarkable – even the Riesling 2000 Selection de Grains Nobles Frederic-Emile, which had 92 g/L of residual sugar, had such zingy acidity that the sugar tasted not just balanced but restrained.

Bestheim

Co-Operative, Westhalten

The last visit of our tour was a complete contrast to the previous days. Bestheim is very modern co-operative which represents 300 growers with 650 hectares of vineyard. The site we visited was the sparkling wine production site, which was a state-of-the-art custom-built facility producing ten million bottles a year. The vinification takes place in a multi-level gravity-fed winery built into the side of a hill. Grapes are received in 100kg tubs, which go in whole bunches into a series of eight ton pneumatic presses. The facility handles 200 tons a day during the harvest. From here, the juice flows down one storey into tanks where it is left to settle for 10-20 hours, before flowing down again into the fermentation tanks on the ground floor. These sit in a huge hall which has three metres of soil on the roof, keeping it naturally cool.

The scale of the operation was very impressive, as was the attention to detail given their volumes. Of particular interest was their take on sugar levels in the region. They have traditionally paid for grapes according to volume and sugar levels, which are used as the measure of quality. Over the last decade, however, they have been receiving grapes with ever-higher sugar levels as growers sought to increase their profits. As a result Bestheim have capped the sugar level which they pay for, and they are now seeing sugar levels slowly dropping. As a commercial operation, they are very conscious of consumer demand, and say that the recent rise of off-dry wines has been driven by increasing sales of those styles of wines. They also commented that this tide has changed, and that the trend is starting to swing towards slightly drier wines again.

It was very interesting to note that none of the Alsatians we came across during the week actually seemed to like the off-dry style of wines to drink themselves; it was repeatedly pointed out to us that you cannot drink off-dry wines with food, and therefore the locals fail to understand their point.

Conclusions

Surprisingly for such a tradition-steeped region, Alsace has a vibrant wine culture and is in the middle of a fascinating period of change. At every level there is debate – the premium houses are passionate about the rights or wrongs of the Grand Cru situation, while the more volume-focused companies are engaged in ongoing debate about how sweet the so-called “drier styles” of wine should be. The region is intensely passionate about wine (it was remarkable to walk through Eguisheim with Yann-Léon Beyer; his family is so intertwined with the village that he knows everyone in the village, and he told us that his father had been mayor for decades) and it is this passion which – despite the fact that there is no pressure to drive more sales – is driving a constant desire to improve and develop the wines of the region.

This was a fascinating trip which gave me a great insight into Alsace. It was fantastic to have the chance to spend time with members of the leading families of the region, and to get their first-hand take on the region, its wines and its future. It was also really useful to start with the CIVA overview, which put the region into local and international perspective (as well as topping up the knowledge on grapes and soils!) and to finish with Bestheim, which provided an interesting contrast to the premium houses which comprised the rest of the week.

I would like to finish by saying a huge thank you to the June Grant at the WSET for organising the trip, to Gareth Lawrence for his expert companionship, and above all to the trustees of the Geoffrey Jameson Award, whose kind support enabled me to go.

Jon Pepper