

WSET ALSACE TRIP – MAY 2010

The week before the start of our trip, Alsace had experienced temperatures in the mid 20s, but the forecast of rain and temperatures barely into the 'teens' proved unerringly accurate. The trip, hosted by Léna Martin from CIVA, took in a mix of independent producers, co-operatives and a terroir themed talk at the Maison d'Alsace.

Maison d'Alsace: www.vinsalsace.com

Here we were welcomed by oenologist, Thierry Fritsch. His talk to us focussed on terroir and this theme was echoed by many of the producers we visited. However, we also gained a perspective on some of the key issues under discussion within the Alsace wine community, such as, the Grand Cru system and bottle labelling to indicate a level of sweetness for Riesling. 75% of Alsace wine production goes to the domestic market, with the remaining 25% exported, principally to Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany.

13 soil types have been identified and mapped across the region, ranging from valley floor alluvial soils to volcanic sedimentary soils. Rainfall ranges from 500ml/annum in Colmar to 2000ml in the Vosges and the region experiences cool nights and warm days during maturation. Thierry listed some of the soil types and characteristics of the wine made from vines based on those soils:-

- Calcareous – lemon, long acidity
- Marl – powerful, peppery
- Sandstone – nervy
- Granite – fruity
- Schist - rangy, austere

We were then asked to taste, blind, three Rieslings based on different soil types – granite, clay/limestone and limestone. Most of us were able to identify the limestone based Riesling, with its mineral characteristics, but there was divided opinion on which was the granite based sample and the clay/limestone based sample.

Alsace Grand Cru status was recognised by the INAO in 1975 and the number of Grand Cru vineyards now stands at 51, numbers having gradually increased in 1983, 1992 and 2007. Much debate has centred on the suitability of some vineyards for Grand Cru status, the size of some Grand Cru vineyards, which range from 3-80 ha. and whether blends or varieties other than Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Muscat and Pinot Gris should be allowed in Grand Cru wines. Some producers, such as Hugel, opt out of the Grand Cru system, claiming their name and designated site (lieu-dit) is an equally good, if not a better, indicator of quality. Some producers, like Jean-Michel Deiss, have worked hard to promote the value of high quality blends and now, Kaefferkopf and Altenberg de Bergheim are entitled to Grand Cru status for the production of blended wines and Zotzenberg is entitled to Grand Cru status for its Sylvaner.

The amount of residual sugar is often a topic of discussion, where a wine can range from dry to sweet, none more so than in the case of Alsace Riesling. However, Thierry said that it was wrong to focus on residual sugar, when the real issue with these wines was balance. Consumer demand has frequently moved between a richer style and a dryer style, but unless the consumer is familiar with the style of wine from a particular producer, it is impossible to know, from the label, what style of wine has been

bought. Now, there are attempts to have a 1-10 scale for Riesling, starting at 1 with bone dry. Some of the producers have already started to include this on their labels, but you may have to look hard to find it. Thierry's informative talk ended with a tasting of a 1979 Riesling – bright mid gold, initially damp wood on the nose, followed by petrol and wood polish, flavours of honey and grapefruit, which stayed in the mouth.

The Co-operatives

In 2009, co-operatives accounted for 38% of Alsace wine sales. There are 17 in total and many of them have a good reputation for quality and include Grand Cru wines within their portfolios.

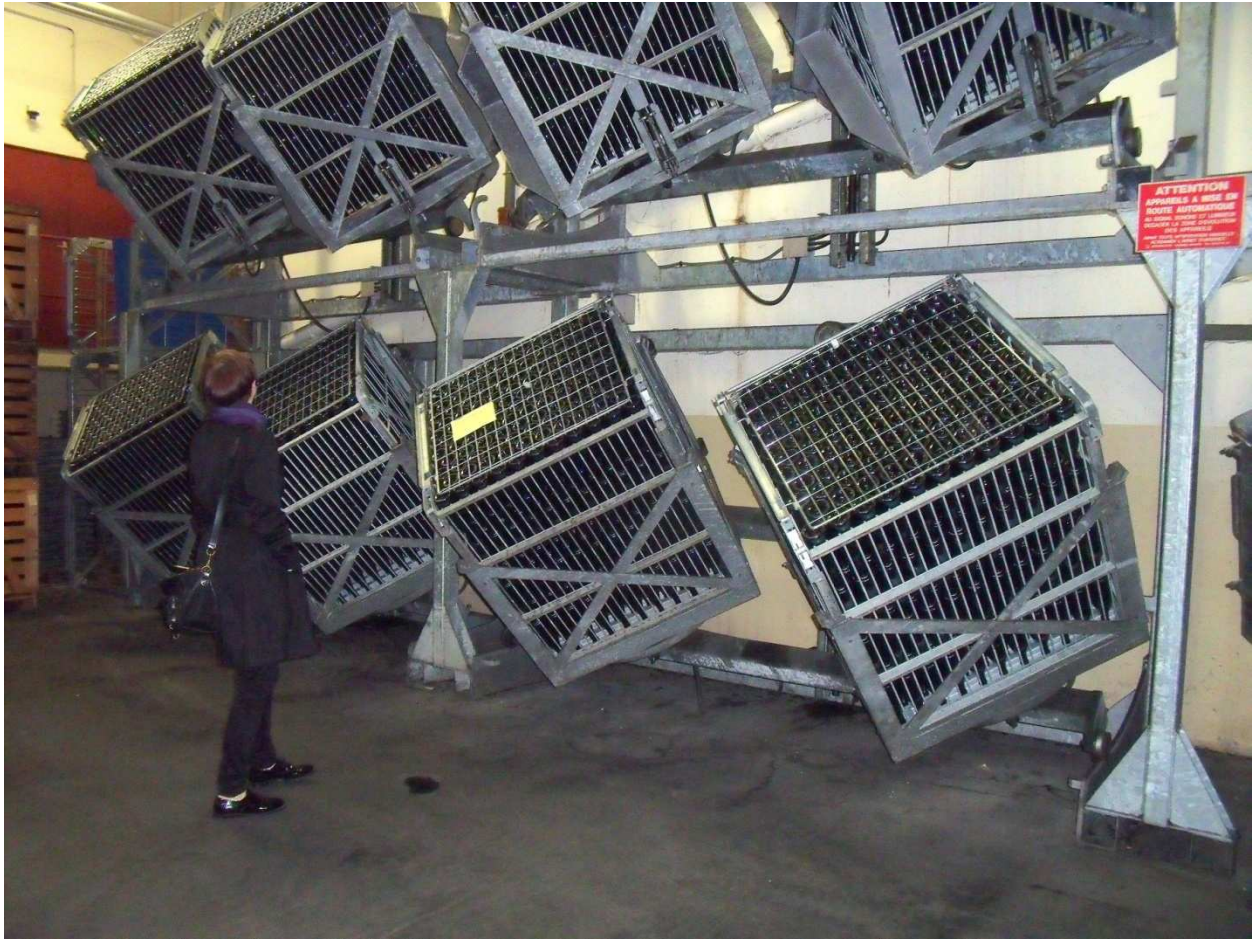
Beblenheim: www.cave-beblenheim.com

Fronted by a picturesque chateau, the co-operative was founded in 1952. It has 70 ha. of vineyards, managed by 121 growers and produces 4 million bottles of still wine and 1 million bottles of Crémant per annum, with 36 % of its turnover exported. Supermarkets are important customers, including Waitrose in the UK. Prices paid to growers are determined by weight and potential alcohol of the grapes and a premium is paid for grapes from older vines. Oenologists work with growers to encourage good practice and yield restrictions, and payment is reduced where these are not implemented. Grand Cru wines are produced from Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer, mainly on the marl-limestone soils of the Sonnenglanz.

We started our extensive tasting of the Beblenheim wines with three different Crémant d'Alsace: the first made from virtually 100% Auxerrois, the second from Chardonnay and the third from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Alsace Crémant is not widely seen in the UK and the quality of all three of these wines was good, with the third wine 'Sub Rosa' particularly appealing, with its elegance and depth of flavour, having been aged for 18 months. The still wines that stood out for me were three, of the four, Pinot Gris we tasted. The Vieilles Vignes 2008 had light fruity marmalade flavours, while the Grand Cru Sonnenglanz 2007 had sweet spice on the nose, with sweet orange flavours, balanced by a nice level of acidity. The Sonnenglanz, with its marl-limestone soils produces generous wines with ripe fruit and spice on the nose and palate and the 1996, in contrast to the 2007 had developed a nose of sweet and savoury dates, with a complex fruity palate including mango and fig.

Pfaffenheim: www.pfaffenheim.com

Established in 1957, this co-operative boasts a brand new wine making plant. It has 250 members from two villages. Its growers follow sustainable agricultural practices and all grapes are hand picked. An interesting feature in its production of Crémant is the outsourcing of the 'disgorgement' process. We tasted a Brut Pinot Gris 2005, where the bruised apples and yeasty characteristics of the wine came through clearly. The interestingly named 'Black Tie' 2007 drew contrasting comments. This is a 60/40 blend of Pinot Gris/Riesling, with a quince nose and quince and apple flavours and prompted some purchases from group members. The Grand Cru Steinart Pinot Gris 2007 contrasted in style with the Sonnenglanz wine. The Steinart is based on limestone and a pronounced acidity was evident in the Seville orange flavours. A blousy rose petal nose indicated our move from the Pinot Gris to a Gewürztraminer VT 2007, with rich orange and apricot on the palate.



Gyropalettes, ready to 'turn' at CV Pfaffenheim

Independent Producers

Domaine Riefle – Pfaffenheim : www.riefle.com

Jean Claude welcomed us to this long established family estate on the edge of Pfaffenheim, looking out towards the slopes of the Grand Cru (GC) vineyard of Steinart. Although the estate employs only 7 people, 70 % of its 250 thousand bottles of production are exported, 50% of which is outside the EU, to countries such as China and Canada. The style of wine, for Riesling in particular, is rich and fruity and although the soil in the area is predominantly limestone, there is less acidity than you would expect. Jean Claude thinks his style of wine is good for new consumers.

There was much discussion about the Côte de Rouffach, a single vineyard which is aiming for AOC status. Comparisons with the AOC hierarchy in Burgundy were made, where vineyards, such as the Côte de Rouffach, could be given Premier Cru status. The Riefle estate is moving towards organic status. Harvesting is, mainly, by hand and a sorting table is used, which is unusual in Alsace. Grapes are treated with care and only gravity flow is used in the cellar. As mentioned earlier, the 'rich' style of wine made means some residual sugar is left e.g. 4 gms/litre for the Riesling. However, there is a move away from chaptalisation, a realisation that it is better to have a lower volume of good wine than to compromise on quality. We tasted a range of wine: a Crémant; a blend of Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris; a Côte de Rouffach Pinot Noir; Steinart GC Riesling; Steinart GC Pinot Gris, and a Vendanges Tardives (VT) Gewürztraminer. As an example of the Riefle style, the GC Steinart 2007 Riesling had a citrus, oily nose,

with peach and honey on the palate, a good balance of sweetness and acidity. The Pinot Noir, Côte de Rouffach 2008 was pale ruby in the glass, a nose of violets and oak, with ripe strawberry and cherry flavours, a good example of the quality level which can be reached by Alsace Pinot Noir.

Sipp Mack – Hunawihr: www.sippmack.com

Here we were welcomed by Jacques and Laura who run this business, formed by the marriage of two families, one from Hunawihr and one from Ribeauvillé. Jacques and Laura met when Jacques was studying viticulture and working in vineyards in the U.S. Laura is a graduate of the UC Davis Viticulture and Enology programme. Sipp Mack has 15 ha. of vineyards and including Grand Cru from Osterberg and Rosacker. Production methods are based on sustainable agriculture and Sipp Mack is signed up to the 'Tyflo' integrated pest management system, particular to Alsace. Jacques said that, although the system allowed the use of copper sulphate in the vineyard, in certain circumstances, he was motivated by employee and environmental safety to move away from the use of chemicals. One row is ploughed, in the vineyard and the next one is left and cover crops are used to encourage 'friendly' insects and to develop natural nutrients in the soil.

In the winery, both natural and synthetic yeasts are used. Jacques encourages oxygenation through use of huge oak barrels, where wine is stored for 3-4 months. He is clearly passionate about his business and keen to embrace the best methods for all aspects of his wine production. Our tasting covered 4 different varieties, with three different levels of Riesling, including Grand Cru from both Rosacker and Osterberg. The Rosacker 2007, with soils based on dolomite limestone, had a spicy citrus nose, with complex stone fruit on the palate and a hint of pepper. By contrast, the Osterberg 2004, based on marl, showed more development, with butter and honey on the nose and citrus and honey on the palate. We were initiated into the tradition of eating the speciality cake 'Kugelhopf', whilst tasting the two Gewürztraminers. I found the Vieilles Vignes 2007 to be almost VT quality with its aromas of rose and Turkish Delight and rich spicy orange and lychee flavours. However, the Lucie Marie VT 2007 showed another level of concentrated orange and honey.

Marc Kreydenweiss – Andlau: www.kreydenweiss.com

We were almost into the foothills of the Vosges and hiking country, as we stopped by the 12th century church, opposite the Kreydenweiss sign. Marc spends most of his time at the Kreydenweiss estate in the Rhône, leaving the management of the Alsace vineyards to his son, Antoine. Our tasting room, above the shop, where Antoine talked to us about his wine, gave a view of the steep slopes of the Grand Cru Kastelberg, one of three in Andlau; the other two being Moenchberg and Wiebelsberg.

The Kreydenweiss estate has gone down the biodynamic path for over 20 years, the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner seen as essential in the family approach to winemaking. Only natural yeasts are used in the winemaking and malolactic fermentation is allowed for all the wines, an unusual approach in Alsace. Storage is in old 'foudres'. Another feature of the Kreydenweiss approach is the commissioning of a different artist to design each vintage bottle label. Total production from the estate's 13.5 ha. is 90 thousand bottles, 20 thousand of which is Riesling and 20 thousand of Pinot Blanc.



Tasting with Antoine Kreydenweiss

The soils surrounding Andlau are complex and the estate lists ten different terroirs in its portfolio of wine and our tasting encompassed eight of them.

Kritt: a very rocky area, with soils based on ferruginous quartz and a 'lieu dit', which appears on the labels of the Pinot Blanc and Gewürztraminer. We tasted the 2008 for both varietals and both had characteristic spice on the nose, which carried through to the palate. The Pinot Blanc is picked when the grapes are very ripe and is round and full, with underlying minerality. The Gewürztraminer was delicate and restrained, with rose petal aromas.

Andlau: soils here are based on 'Gris des Vosges' (pink sandstone) and the 2008 Riesling had a hint of cinnamon on the nose, with crisp citrus and stone fruit flavours.

La Fontaine aux Enfants: a blend of Pinot Blanc and Auxerrois; the 2008 had fennel and white pepper aromas, with round soft stone fruit flavours. The vineyard is situated on a plateau of granite and schist.

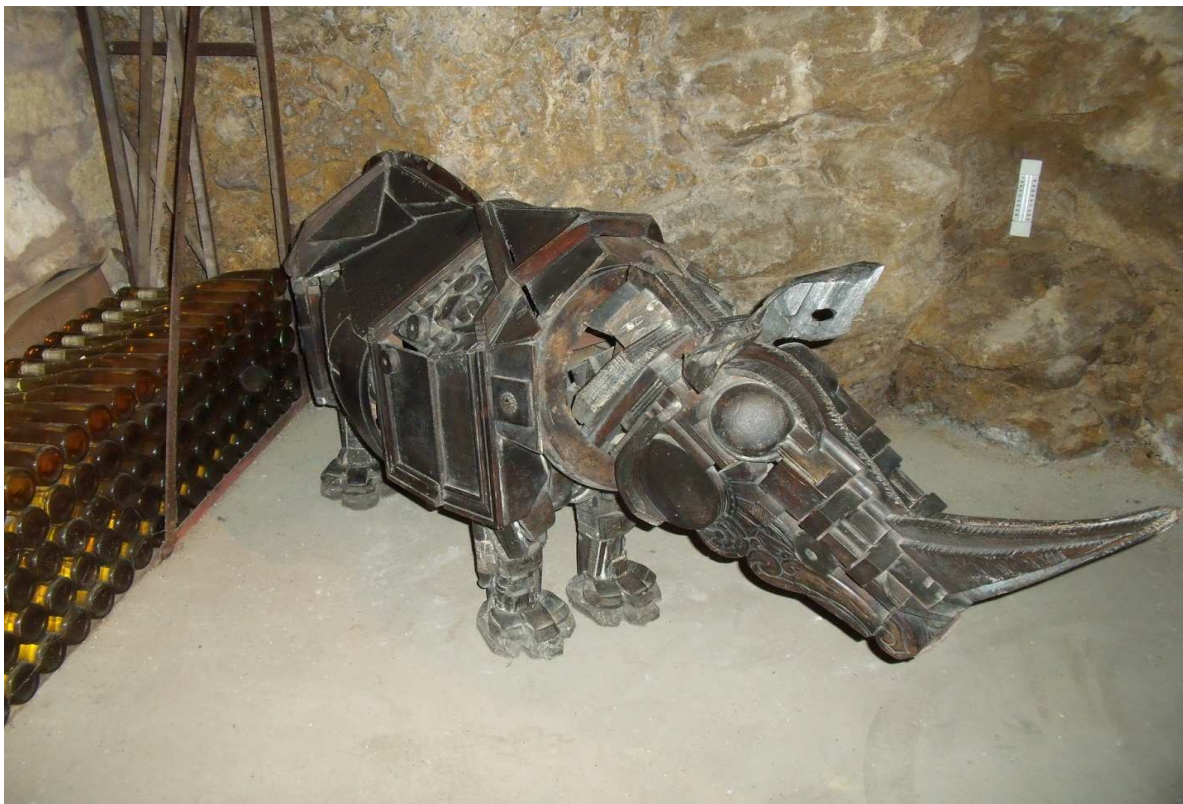
Clos Rebberg: steeply sloping, with soils based on pre-Cambrian schist, a strong mineral note runs through the 2008 Riesling, but both this and the Pinot Gris 2008 were complex wines. The Riesling had dried fruit and citrus on the nose, with lemon and butterscotch flavours. The butterscotch notes were also present in the Pinot Gris, with caramel and an aniseed twist on the palate.

Clos du Val Elèon: just down the slope from Clos Rebberg, the strong mineral content in this blend of Riesling and Pinot Gris (2007) suggested a continuation of the slate soils.

The Grand Cru: the Wiebelsberg 2008 is made from grapes grown on soils based on pink sandstone. The wine needed time to open and develop, with delicate lime flavours and crisp acidity. The Kastelberg vineyards are on slate soils and the 2008 Riesling showed mineral and citrus on the nose, with complex flavours of citrus, stone fruit and mineral on the palate. Whilst the Moenchberg is, perhaps, best known for its Riesling, we tasted two examples of Pinot Gris. In contrast to the ancient rock base of the Clos Rebberg, the Moenchberg is based on glacial deposits, marl and sandstone scree. The 2008, although aged in new wood, has long lees ageing, which allows the aromas of violet and mineral and the sweet honey flavours to come through. The 2005 VT, where all grapes picked were used, without selection, had a sugared fruit and marzipan nose, with rich sugared fruit and marmalade on the palate, balanced by a fine level of acidity.

Albert Seltz et Fils – Mittelbergheim: www.albert-seltz.fr

A promotional leaflet for the Domaine highlights that Albert is a 'Vigneron responsable'. He follows organic practices, but prefers to work without any certification. The domaine hand harvests, presses its grapes for 2-8 hours and uses only gravity flow. Wine is left on the lees for 4-5 months before filtering.



Guarding the Sylvaner

Albert, took over the Domaine from his father in 1980 and immediately cut production and reduced yields. He believes that low yields help maintain a high quality of wine for each vintage. He does not make any blends and was keen to emphasise the variety of wine found in Alsace, even amongst a single grape variety. This, he claimed, meant lots of opportunities for matching the wines with a range of food.

Albert has Grand Cru wines from Zotzenberg, including Sylvaner and was a key person in persuading the INAO to grant Grand Cru status to the Sylvaner. We toured the 17th Century cellars, which contained some interesting exhibits (see photo above) and 80 thousand bottles of wine, as Albert is keen to see how his wine develops with age. We were shown the seams of limestone and sandstone before we returned above ground level for our tasting. The Sylvaners were the first we had tasted on our trip. The 2007 (Vieilles Vignes?) had flavours of pear and quince, whilst the 1998 VT, made without any botrytis, had sweet marmalade on the palate with a nice bitter twist on the finish. These examples showed that, in the right hands, Sylvaner can be much more than a light carafe wine. Albert's Pinot Blanc 2008 was fresh and spicy, with a good mouthfeel, but it was the Riesling 2006 which, for me, provided the unexpected highlight of the tasting, with its fresh peach and plum flavours.

Bernhard Reibel – Châtenois: www.domaine-bernhard-reibel.fr

Pierre, pictured below, welcomed us warmly, despite our late arrival and proudly introduced his mother Cécile as the first female Grand Maître of the Confrérie St Etienne in February 2009. The 'cave' is a relatively new building, where the company is aiming to concentrate its business. The vineyard operation is all organic, covering 22ha., with soils based on red granite, sandstone and gravel. Slow and gentle pressing is the norm here, lasting, on average, 7 hours. The juice is then allowed to settle for 12 hours, before fermentation at between 18-22 C., using natural yeast. Each parcel picked is pressed separately before the final 'assemblage' is decided. The wine is stored in old barrels before bottling. Output is 130 thousand bottles per year and Pierre buys in a bottling machine for this annual activity.



Although there are no Grand Cru sites in these vineyards, there are a number of listed sites, with their own particular characteristics. At the entry level, known as 'Tradition', the Sylvaner 2008, from grapes grown on gravel soil, had a nice weight in the mouth, with ample stone fruit flavours. The Riesling 2009, was still young and needing time to bring out the citrus fruit flavours.

Weingarten – based on granitic soils, rich in iron and magnesium; this is an area where Pierre is experimenting with biodynamic practices. The Riesling 2007 had a citrus and petrol nose, with complex flavours of citrus petrol and stone fruit.

Hahnenburg – mineral rich granitic base, again, with a thin layer of limestone soil. The 2007 Riesling had grapefruit aromas, with grapefruit and spicy pear on the nose, lighter and fresher than the Weingarten. The Pinot Gris from 2008 had hints of marmalade on the nose, with cooked grapefruit and tangy orange flavours. Kugelhopf made its appearance again as we tasted an elegantly perfumed 2008 Gewürztraminer.

Rittersberg – granitic soils, rich in mica. The Riesling 2004 had intense petrol and wood polish on the nose, but I found the fruit starting to fade; probably just past its best. The Carrata selection is a Pinot Gris, made only in special years. The 2005 had beautiful rich, but fresh orange flavours, balanced by fine acidity.

Unusually, Pierre also makes a small amount of a still blanc de noirs, which a curious few of the party sampled as we tried to do justice to a second Kugelhopf, which arrived, courtesy of Cécile.

Bruno Sorg – Eguisheim: www.domaine-bruno-sorg.com

Bruno's address is found in one of the many streets containing centuries old houses in this most picturesque village. The location of the winery has changed since it was founded in 1965 and based in Ingersheim. Sustainable agricultural practices are followed and the winery lists three Grand Cru: Pfersigberg, Florimont and Eichberg, all dominated by limestone, but with elements of marl (Florimont and Eichberg) and sandstone (Pfersigberg). Bruno is keen to focus on organic techniques in the vineyard, but finds that his efforts to limit vigour and growth on his vines does not always fit well with organic techniques. His yields for his entry level 'classic' wines are 65 hl/ha and for Grand Cru, 45 hl/ha. 70% of his wines are sold to private customers, many of them tourists visiting Eguisheim or travelling through Alsace to other parts of France and beyond.

He was keen to show how his wines might match different foods and provided some samples of different cheeses to help us make up our own minds. He aims for a dry, balanced style of wine and our extensive tasting was grouped by grape variety, to show the quality progression from entry level to Vieille Vigne to Grand Cru and Vendanges Tardives. We were also able to compare Grand Cru for Riesling, Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer. However, to begin, we tasted a Crémant, made from Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay and aged for 25 months. It had a hint of yeast on the nose, with a lively mousse and elegant apple fruit flavours. A recent bottling of 2009 Pinot Blanc had fresh apple and pear flavours and a Sylvaner 2008 Vieille Vigne had a bright citrus nose and waxy citrus fruit on the palate. We were pleased to be able to taste our first Muscat, the entry level 2007 having a recognisable grapey and elderflower nose and flavours, finishing dry. The Grand Cru Pfersigberg 2008 was much

more complex, with grape and mineral notes on the nose; flavours of rich, but elegant spicy fruit; finishing dry, but long.



Eguisheim

The Grand Cru Rieslings from 2007 contrasted the Florimont with its complex grapefruit and pear flavours with the Pfersigberg's citrus dominated flavours. Both had long finishes. A 2005 Pfersigberg showed further development, with a real intensity of lime on the nose and lime and mineral flavours, for which Pfersigberg is noted. Again, with the Pinot Gris examples, the Florimont (2008) showed a slightly richer style, spicy honey and marmalade, than the Pfersigberg (2007) with its balanced style of fruit and spice, with a hint of sweetness. A VT from 2007 was rich and intense with its creamy peach and apricot flavours. Finally, the Gewürztraminer, after an entry level 2007, with its classic intense lychee aromas and flavour, the Pfersigberg 2008 was elegant with perfumed rose on the nose and Turkish delight on the palate. The Eichberg 2008 had more spice on the nose and a more restrained, but complex spicy palate whilst a VT 2007, without botrytis, showed an elegant style, with sugared grapefruit, apricot and pineapple flavours.

Dinner at the Michelin starred 'Rendez-Vous de Chasse', hosted by Philippe Blanck (Paul Blanck), Philippe Durst (Dopff Au Moulin), Thierry Bougit (Cave de Ribeauvillé) and Foulques Aulagnon (CIVA).

www.blanck-alsace.com

www.dopff-au-moulin.fr

www.vins-ribeauville.com

In addition to the producer visits already outlined, we had the privilege of attending a dinner, hosted by several more producers, who introduced a wonderful selection of their wines with each course, as listed below. Our setting for the dinner was elegant, but the atmosphere was relaxed, with a contemporary style of cuisine shown against some of the best wines Alsace had to offer. There was an opportunity to talk to all our hosts, and we enjoyed their presentations, made with good humoured rivalry and respect for each other.

Amuse Bouche
AOC Crémant d'Alsace Brut Cuvée Julien DOPFF AU MOULIN
AOC Alsace Andante Collection 2009 CAVE DE RIBEAUVILLE

Le Foie Gras d'Oie Brûlé, Chutney de Rhubarbe au Piment d'Espelette
AOC Alsace Grand Cru Gewurztraminer Furstentum Vielle vignes 2001 PAUL BLANCK
AOC Alsace Grand Cru Pinot Gris Gloeckelberg 2004 CAVE DE RIBEAUVILLE

L'Ombre Chevalier en Croûte de Pain, Pousses d'Epinards Mi-cuites Sauce Vierge aux Piquillos
AOC Alsace Riesling Collection 2009 CAVE DE RIBEAUVILLE
AOC Alsace Grand Cru Riesling Schlossberg 2004 PAUL BLANCK

Le Suprême de Volaille Fermière Artichauts Poivrade
AOC Alsace Pinot Gris de Riquewihr 2007 DOPFF AU MOULIN
AOC Alsace Pinot Noir F 2008 PAUL BLANCK

La Variation de Fraises et de Rhubarbe avec son Sorbet Marbré
AOC Alsace Grand Cru Riesling Schoenenbourg 2004 Vieilles Vignes DOPFF AU MOULIN

Petit Fours

I could not end this report without mentioning the excellent arrangements made by Léna Martin and her colleagues, from CIVA. Our coach drivers were friendly and accommodating; the independent producers and the co-operative representatives were enthusiastic about their work and gave us a real insight into the wines of Alsace; local restaurants provided timely hospitality, based on regional cuisine and our base hotel, in Colmar, was well chosen

Thanks also to Nick, our WSET tour leader, who took on this unexpected challenge with aplomb!

The final word, however, must go to Jean-Michel Deiss, whose profile is highlighted in Andrew Jefford's book, 'The New France'. After a grape tasting organised for fellow growers, he says '***When we tasted the Sylvaner, the Pinot Blanc, the Pinot Gris, the Riesling that grow in Schoenenbourg, we discovered that they all had the same taste. The character of the place is stronger than the taste of the varietal. That's what we learned together***'

Peter Clayton

July 2010