

The Alsace

On paper, the Alsace is an anomalous region of France, and is also anomalous as a French wine producing region – separated physically from the rest of France by the Vosges Mountains, which shelter it from much of the rain-bearing clouds that head its way. This range also has an incredibly diverse geology, and structure, consisting of a wide array of soil types, aspects, and altitudes.

Over the centuries, the Alsace has also seen various bouts of turmoil, annexation, and identity change with regards to its neighbouring Germany. Indeed, it still bears the scars of these conflicts, yet has also clearly taken some positive Germanic influences from this often strained relationship.

The Alsace is also the only great wine growing region in France to produce varietally labelled wines at AC level, which are then encapsulated in the traditional flûté bottle.

These factors have all contributed to the elevation of a region with great individuality, character, fortitude, pride, and adaptability, shown by the huge diversity of styles, which make the Alsace such an appealing region for me to delve into. Indeed, on a recent trip with my Managing Director at wine merchants Corney & Barrow, we tasted at a healthy string of Chateaux in Bordeaux, and he, as a big advocate of the “old school” English tastes for red Bordeaux and white Burgundy, asked me which worldwide wine region I would stick to for life if I had to make the choice. My instant reaction was the Alsace. Although I count myself very lucky indeed to have tried such a wide selection of the very finest wines of the region whilst on the Grande Maison d’Alsace trip (with special thought going to the older vintage tasting!), the wines seem to satiate every possible thirst, come in every possible form, and cover all possible angles – white, red, light aperitif-style, dry yet powerful, off dry, sweet, luscious, sparkling. Words that kept cropping up in my tasting notes spanned a myriad of styles, and include: opulent, rich, ethereal, fine, mineral, steely, lean, elixir.

It is the knowledge of the huge spectrum of soil types and delineation of very specific climats that produces these diverse and fine expressions of the four noble grape varieties – Muscat, Riesling, Pinot Gris, and Gewurztraminer. Centuries of experimentation and gaining understanding of optimal viticultural and vinification practises specific to each varietal, has allowed the aim of producing wines with very pure fruit expression, unfettered by manipulation or the use of “make-up”, to come about. The greatest wines are also able to age for unbelievably long periods, evolving into entirely different creatures, yet maintaining a freshness and deftness of touch – the 1971 Beyer Muscat springs to mind.

Another observation that I made on our trip was that the personalities of each of the GMA producers had seemed to somehow be translated into the styles of their wines. The exuberance, opulence, and flamboyance of the Hugel wines; the elegance, restraint, and intellectual nature of the Josmeyer bottlings; the steeliness, edge, and breeding of the Trimbach offerings; the understated power, and finesse of the Muré wines; the sturdy, masculine, and rich character of Beyer’s production; the elegant, refined, and deep personality shown in the Schlumberger creations; and also the effervescence and spritely

personality exuded by Dopff au Moulin. Maybe personality should also be included in the definition of the mysterious *terroir*?!

The romantic and undeniable notion of terroir is something that the average British wine shopper knows relatively little about, and current British thinking with regards buying Alsatian wine is peculiar. As a wine merchant, I have noticed that few of my clients and customers will themselves suggest that a wine from the Alsace is what they are after, despite having enjoyed the vast majority of wine that they have bought from the region, and also despite having reasonable wine knowledge. Alsace wine is seen as an oddity by the UK public – something exotic, possibly sweet, and relatively uncharted territory. Burgundy and Bordeaux are traditional and safe.

Another point that may have hindered English market penetration is the relative lack of sweetness information on the AC labels, as the Brits have a bizarre tendency to “stick with what I know” or “play it safe” when choosing wine from a list. Gradually though, over the last few years, and led by the production of fine dry/off dry Australian Rieslings, there has been a UK marketplace revival of German Rieslings, which is really coming back into UK fashion. People are realising that it is no-longer the Liebfraumilch sugar-water that once spewed from Rheinhessen, and this should help allay peoples’ fear of some residual sugar.

The English wine culture is also disparate from its European neighbours, not being a proper producer of its own styles in any great volume or with any huge success. Wine is usually consumed on a standalone basis, as we do not have the same relationship or mindset as the continent does. As is with the majority of European wines, those of the Alsace are largely produced with the end aim of being enjoyed as a beverage with a wide array of fine cuisine, and centuries of knowledge and experimentation have led to excellent matching of rich, characterful food with its finer bottles. Etienne Hugel told us “Germany produces largely off dry or sweet wines with low alcohol that are meant to be drunk as aperitifs or on their own, whereas wines of the Alsace can be either sweet or dry, and are meant to be enjoyed with food!”, which is certainly what I did on the trip – unforgettable choucroute!! In my opinion, and in agreement with those producers of the GMA, this is where the future lies for the Alsace. The English need to change their way of thinking – an epicurean mindset is vital to life!

I believe that a current vicious circle exists – few really great wines from the Alsace are available in our bars, restaurants, and regular merchants in comparison to those from the other major French regions, and therefore people are not all familiar with these fantastic wines, and the variety of styles to suit all occasions, in which they come. Conversely, if the market for UK imports of Alsatian wines is not as strong as exists for those from competing wine regions, then merchants, restaurants, and bars will not stock the wines.

The Grande Maison d’Alsace producers told us of their pro-activity in promoting and furthering knowledge of their wines, and even more tastings with the public and sommeliers/wine waiters/restaurant owners will certainly help spread the word. Having been totally won over and beguiled by this region, so rich in wine culture, cuisine, and character, I shall also definitely be doing my bit to help push my English clients not just to buy the wines of the Alsace, but also to visit the fantastically fairytale, and warm region.

Simon Eddleston – Grande Maison d’Alsace 2007 Trip