

Alsace

10 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Terribly useful, often overlooked, soft, smoky whites.

Main grapes: Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Sylvaner, Muscat (white).

Alsace is one of the great, under-appreciated treasures of the wine world. This pretty enclave of fairytale villages in the lee of the forested Vosges Mountains offers a wide range of varietally labelled wines, of which the aromatic whites are much more successful than the light reds. For much of its history, Alsace was Elsass and part of Germany. The local surnames and tall green tapered bottles reflect this, along with the dominance of Riesling and the fragrant nature of many of the wines. But unlike in Germany, traditional winemaking philosophy in Alsace was to ferment all of the grape sugar into alcohol, resulting in dry, full-bodied wines (quite different in structure from Germany's lighter, sweeter counterparts). Today it is less uncommon to find some slight sweetness in the wines though this is rarely indicated on the label, making it more difficult for consumers. Both countries deliberately avoid new wood and the second, softening, [malolactic fermentation](#), however, preferring to preserve the direct, fruity aromas of each grape variety.

The following are the most important names of wines in Alsace, the first four of them being designated 'noble' grape varieties.

Riesling is the most respected grape variety in Alsace, and quite rightly. Alsace Riesling is steely, sometimes tough in youth, and perhaps a little austere for newcomers. It handsomely repays ageing in bottle, however, for up to 10 years in the case of top bottlings such as Trimbach's Clos Ste Hune (although most examples are fine after three or four years). Like all but the richest Alsace wines (VT and SGN), these wines can make great aperitifs. The late-ripening Riesling vine has to be planted in one of Alsace's most favoured sites, typically in a well-exposed situation in the hillier southern half of the region.

Gewürztraminer, often spelt Gewurztraminer here in France, is the easiest Alsace wine for beginners to enjoy. In fact for many of us, Gewurz (probably the most frequently misspelt wine name of all) is one of the first wine tastes we ever latch on to. It is full-bodied, almost fat, and tastes pleasantly off-dry and generally stuns the taste buds into admiring submission - although in very hot years it can topple over into oily flab. The most lightweight, cheapest examples smell gently flowery (often very similar to Muscat) but a really rich, concentrated version can smell of bacon fat, on top of the vaguely rose-petal and lychee-like smell of any Gewürztraminer. This is the white wine to drink with supposedly red wine food or, many argue, oriental food.

Pinot Gris, known as Tokay d'Alsace until the Hungarians made a fuss about confusion with their sweet white Tokay, can make wonderfully full-bodied yet-dry wines that go quite happily with such strongly flavoured dishes as venison. These wines are not particularly aromatic, but they taste delightfully smoky and exotic. Pinot Gris makes particularly good late-picked (VT) wines.

Muscat, or Muscat d'Alsace, is one of the region's most distinctive styles. Usually a blend of Muscat Ottonel and Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, this unusual wine is delicate and dry yet smells often overpoweringly grapey and therefore almost sweet. It is not made in huge quantity, and rarely ages particularly well, but can make a delightful aperitif.

Pinot Blanc is Alsace's bread and butter variety, and very useful too. Known sometimes as **Plevner**, the wine is broad and smoky with the distinctive perfume of any Alsace white, but with less definition than a Riesling and much less body than a Gewürztraminer or Pinot Gris. A similar but distinct variety called **Auxerrois** is often blended with it to be sold as Pinot Blanc. A Pinot Blanc from a good producer is one of the wine world's bargains.

Sylvaner is much more difficult to appreciate. It can taste quite lean and needs a good site to ripen fully even though it does not fetch particularly high prices, which is why its fortunes are declining in Alsace. Nevertheless, a Sylvaner from a producer particularly good at producing steely Rieslings (such as Trimbach) can taste really quite distinguished.

Edelzwicker means 'noble mixture' but is in fact a blend of any old varieties, in practice usually the lowly Chasselas variety, Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc. This easy, soft blend is also sometimes sold as **Gentil**.

Pinot Noir is Alsace's contribution to the world of red wine, except that in cooler years it can be some shade of pink and tastes very lightweight too. More and more producers are trying to make more full-bodied Pinot Noir, and ageing it in oak barrels.

Crémant d'Alsace is the region's dry sparkling white wine, made like champagne. It can be very refreshing and can age for a few years, but is more notable for its youthful crispness than for great substance.

One of Alsace's great attractions for the, er, gastronomically inclined, other than the wines and the enormous number of Michelin-starred restaurants (so great that Alsace warrants its own specially enlarged box on the Michelin star map), is the region's **eaux-de-vie**, potent colourless spirits distilled from the fruits that grow there. These can smell like essence of raspberry (Framboise) or pear (Poire Williams) and should probably never actually be sipped.

Some favourite producers: Beyer, Hugel and Trimbach among the bigger merchants (who buy in substantial quantities of grapes) and Blanck, Marcel Deiss, Josmeyer, Kientzler, Kreydenweiss, Muré, Ostertag, Rolly Gassmann, Schlumberger, Schoffitt, the Fallers at Domaine Weinbach and Zind-Humbrecht.

Understanding Alsace labels

The following terms may be applied only to wines made from one of the four noble varieties (the first four listed above).

Grand Cru, one of more than 50 individual vineyards granted superior status, amid some controversy, relatively recently. 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 - although admittedly the maximum permitted yields are lower than the Alsace norm. Many of Alsace's best wines are Grands Crus, however. A few top producers such as Trimbach have Grand Cru sites but don't refer to them on the label.

Vendange Tardive (VT) translates directly as Late Harvest, which is indeed what these wines are. Certain minimum ripeness levels have to be met (the best producers generously exceed them) and the grapes may be picked only when official authorisation is given. The trouble with Vendange Tardive wines is that they can vary from almost dry (but quite concentrated) to really quite sweet, yet no hint of sweetness level is given on labels. The best of these wines can be aged for many years.

Sélection de Grains Nobles (SGN) signifies a wine made from even riper grapes, often at least partly concentrated by the [botrytis](#) fungus. These relative rarities are easiest to make in the region's sunniest years, from the obliging Gewürztraminer grape. Their sweetness level can also vary quite considerably, although individual producers will generally ensure that their SGNs are definitely sweeter than their VTs.

See [Alsace Wines](#) for more information on this region.