New rules for 'dry' Alsace Riesling

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While American wine writer Dan Berger and the US-based International Riesling Foundation try to draw up a Riesling Taste Scale to give some guide to sweetness on labels, as reported here, the Alsace wine community has been working to combat increasingly vociferous protests from wine commentators and consumers at the high residual sugar to be found in so many Alsace Rieslings nowadays. This is their official statement :

Within the framework of new AOC Alsace specifications, Alsace wine professionals intend to clarify the conditions of production and labelling of Riesling. In effect, this wine is the most susceptible to variations in the level of residual sugar, and so the proposed text aims to dispel any existing confusion in the consumer's mind when purchasing certain Alsace Rieslings.

After several years of internal debate, the profession shortlisted three possibilities :

1. *To apply the INAO rule that a "dry"wine must not exceed 4 grams of residual sugar per litre (g/l). It should be remembered that this rule is applied in all other French wine regions except Alsace.*
2. *To apply the European rule which defines the maximum sugar level for a wine to be labelled "dry", "semi-dry", " semi-sweet" or " sweet".*
3. *To define the desired type of Riesling according to the levels of ripeness (with a limit imposed on chaptalised wines) and acidity.*

It is this third possibility that has been chosen.

So, it has been decided that the name "AOC Alsace" may be completed by the denomination "Riesling" for wines which, after fermentation, present a level of fermentable sugars equal to or lower than :

- *6 g/l for a wine that has been enriched (chaptalised), no matter what its acidity level.*
- *9 g/l for a non-enriched wine with a total acidity equal or lower than 6 g/l (tartaric).*
- *12 g/l for a non-enriched wine with a total acidity exceeding 6 g/l.*

To maintain consistency with existing legislation, this rule will not apply to wines that benefit from either the Vendanges Tardives or Sélection de Grains Nobles denominations, nor to wines of AOC Alsace with an additional village or named-vineyard denomination.

Every year, depending on the vintage, it will be possible to modify the minimum levels set by this new law, which at present applies only to Riesling.

This new production rule will come into force as soon as the official decree is published.

Hmm. So common or garden Alsace Riesling with sugar added at fermentation can still be 50% sweeter than any other regular French dry white wine. And surely the fact that wines with village or vineyard designations, along with Vendanges Tardives and SGN wines, are exempt continues to foster the suggestion that the best wines of the region are sweeter than dry?

I also think this superfluous sweetness problem applies just as much and arguably even more to Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer myself.

Obeying instructions from purple pager Mark Prust, I shall be tasting in Alsace later this month and will follow all this up.

Julia: I have to say that they seem to have picked the worst of the three options. Rather than restrict the sweetness levels that can qualify as AOC Alsace Riesling, much better to try give an indication on the label as to approximately how sweet the wine will taste - along the lines of Zind Humbrecht's sweetness index. The German regulations on what constitutes *trocken* or 'dry' are even more complex, as outlined in my article on German wine classification and the VDP - see especially the section near the end on definitions.