

Alsace sweet and sour

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See also my [tasting notes](#) on 169 Alsace 2007s.

It is perhaps not surprising that French wine producers have been much slower to embrace screwcaps as an alternative stopper to natural cork than, say, their more technically fastidious counterparts in Australia and New Zealand, some of whom have been heard to dismiss France's entire output as "dirty French wine". The only problem with natural cork is, as outlined many times on these pages before, the random incidence of a taint which can spoil wine, either by making it taste out and out mouldy or, arguably worse because less obvious, simply rob it of its natural fruitiness.

Screwcaps may not be pretty or romantic but they do leave wines taint-free, and they seem particularly well suited to aromatic, unoaked white wines. That being so, you would think that the one French wine region that might have made a concerted move to adopt screwcaps would be Alsace, which specialises in such wines.

But of the nearly 170 wines from the highly successful 2007 vintage that I tasted in Alsace at the end of last month, I noticed only one that had a screwcap. Thierry Fristch, the official oenologist at the Comité Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace, reckons that only about one per cent of Alsace wine today is stoppered by a screwcap, citing producers such as Gustave Lorentz, Albert Mann, Cave de Turckheim and Paul Zinck and having used them for some of their cheaper wines.

He reckons that although virtually all Alsace's grandest wines are still aged under natural corks, the majority of Alsace wine today depends on a synthetic cork, a plastic copy of a natural cork, to keep the wine in and both air and taint out. This worries me. Many wine producers have experimented with synthetic corks because they offer freedom from the risk of taint, only to find that they have proved an ineffectual seal over more than a year or two, letting in harmful oxygen and dissipating the wine's fruit. The manufacturers of synthetic corks have improved the performance of their products but they cannot avoid some people's distaste for synthetic products in general. The plastic cork is a relatively novel phenomenon in Alsace, however, and it could be that observation of their wines' performance under synthetic corks over the medium term will persuade growers in this fairly conservative, isolated region of the merits of screwcaps.

I mentioned the S-word to Jean Trimbach, Trimbach being one of Alsace's most admired family producers stoppering about 1.3 million bottles a year. He wrinkled up his nose - and this despite the fact that his wife Nicole works for Alcan, the company that owns the world's biggest screwcap producer. His concern is the fragility of screwcaps in transit. Trimbach famously bottles its wines the April after the harvest and then sends them down to the cellar to age for up to seven years before bringing them up again for labelling and release. He is worried that moving the bottles around the cellar could too easily dent the screwcaps and break the seal.

I put this objection to Thierry Fritsch but he pointed out that producers like Trimbach, Rolly Gassmann and Zind-Humbrecht are unusual in storing their bottled wines for long periods.

The pace of change is slow in Alsace. Throughout the 1990s murmurings from disgruntled wine consumers and wine media became wails of displeasure at the fact that Alsace wines seemed to be getting sweeter and sweeter (just as, over the Rhine in Germany, wines made from the same grape varieties such as Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc and Gewurztraminer were getting drier and drier). Alsace wines in their tall, thin, Germanic-looking bottles have never been easy to sell. What converts treasured was that they were reliably dry, but this is no longer the case.

The three exceptionally ripe vintages of 1988-1990 seemed to lull many producers into an expectation of richness which nature singularly failed to deliver in 1991. Winemakers therefore reached for the sugar they are legally allowed to add to bolster the alcohol level. This practice, called chaptalisation after Chaptal, the agriculture minister who originally devised it, is still permitted - despite climate change - in this region which prides itself on being one of France's driest and warmest, even for wines from their supposedly top sites, the so-called Grands Crus.

With the exception of a handful of houses such as Trimbach who are wedded to dry wines above all (which in less ripe vintages is why they need to give some of their wines all that bottle age) it has proved difficult to wean Alsace's winemakers off the prop of added sugar. Meanwhile increasingly warm summers have delivered grapes with more and more natural sugar in them. Winemakers can usually choose how much of this to convert into alcohol. The result is that nowadays residual sugar levels vary enormously, but only a handful of producers such as Rife, Turckheim and Zind-Humbrecht give any indication on the bottle as to the likely sweetness of the wine therein.

The residual sugar levels in the 2007 Pinot Gris I tasted in Alsace recently, for instance, varied from 2 g/l, which is effectively bone dry, to 67 g/l, really very sweet - ignoring the even sweeter, later-picked wines labelled Vendange Tardive and Sélection de Grains Nobles. Sweetness in the Rieslings varied from 2 to 25 g/l and in Gewurzes from just under 3 to 50 g/l. Alsace wine producers pride themselves on making wines that match well with food, but wines at such differing levels of residual sugar call for completely different dishes. And while they may be admirably made, many of these sweeter but not sweetest wines I find almost impossible to place in my drinking canon. They are too heavy to drink without food, not sweet enough to stand up to sweet food, but far too cloying for anything savoury.

I am far from the only one to have voiced concern about this issue and in Alsace there has been infinite discussion of it. Much has been made of the interdependent relationship between a wine's levels of sweetness and acidity. A high acid wine with 10 g/l can taste dry whereas one with low acid and the same amount of sugar can taste really quite sweet. In the end, as with all committee decisions, the local authorities have come up with a temporary fudge. They are proposing a new set of rules governing only the most basic sort of Alsace, and only the Riesling grape (presumably because its sugar levels vary less than those of the other major grape varieties. Provided these rules are adopted, as they are expected to be, from the 2008 vintage any Alsace Riesling that does not come from a Grand Cru or a specific vineyard or village, and is not a late harvested Vendange Tardive or an SGN, must by law be less than 6 g/l for any wine that has been chaptalised. For wines that have had no extra sugar added, residual sugar levels can be as high as 12 g/l, providing the acidity is high enough.

While it is admirable that the authorities have done something to address the problem, this seems a very timid first step - particularly when one remembers that the French national wine authorities (of which Alsace is proud to declare itself independent) recently ruled that 4 g/l should be the maximum sweetness level for any other French wine calling itself dry.

But this is to carp. As well as some real disappointments, I tasted some delicious wines. See the box for the producers whose 2007s looked particularly good.

SUPERIOR PRODUCERS OF 2007S

Paul Blanck
Josmeyer
Ostertag
Schlumberger
Trimbach
Cave de Turckheim
Willm

For more detail on specific wines, see my [tasting notes](#) on 169 Alsace 2007s.