

Farewell Johnny Hugel

10 Jun 2009 by Jancis Robinson

One consequence of the communications revolution is that news travels so fast. Thus it was only three hours after Jeanny/Johnny Hugel, 84, passed away last night, with his wife Simone at his side, that his nephew Etienne posted this great [online tribute](#) to him. It includes a link to a fascinating 2005 interview in which he, unusually, spoke about his wartime years which involved, inter alia, running the army bordello in Monte Cassino. Additions to the online tribute are welcomed.

Johnny was one of the largest characters in the international wine world of the 1970s and 1980s, then dominated by characters rather than corporations, that I encountered when I started writing about wine late in 1975. Just like his friend the late Gérard Jaboulet of the Rhône, he travelled the world making friends, sharing bottles, and acting as an unforgettable ambassador for his region, Alsace. He was exceptionally well loved, but not because he was in any way smarmy. He was rather outspoken in fact and, until relatively late in life, smoked like a chimney. He and his UK importer Parry de Winton were regular customers and puffers at Nick's restaurant L'Escargot in Soho in the 1980s, and he was always of the firm conviction that fine wine could be enjoyed only with food.

I went to his 80th birthday lunch at Le Gavroche (pictured, with Johnny making a point in his usual forceful manner), a wonderfully jolly occasion. His 70th birthday was celebrated in his native Riquewihr, on which beautiful medieval village descended hundreds of Johnny-lovers from around the world, including such luminaries as the lady who bought all the wine for the Icelandic wine monopoly, Michael Broadbent, and Len Evans all the way from Australia.

He was initially involved in the commission that drew up the boundaries of Alsace's Grands Crus, but left when he saw that compromises were being made on behalf of commercial interests. He had more luck with his major role in the rules governing the production of top quality sweet wines. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Alsace, other than his tireless promotion of its wines, was the effort he put in to drawing up the particularly exacting regulations for Sélection de Grains Nobles late harvest wines.

Etienne reports:

Came back last Friday night from a week in the UK and made a full report to Johnny. He did not miss a bit of it. In the last months he always insisted I continued my planned travels.

His last wish was to see the vineyards one last time as they were in full blossom. One of our vineyard employee did a video report which I showed him that same last Saturday. It brought a big smile on his face, his last one.

Soon after he lost consciousness and decided to pass with just Simone next to him after I had just left the room with his daughter Judith.

Overwhelmed with testimonies from so many persons he had met, what an uncle...

Remember one of this great wine lover's strongest beliefs:

'People who like wine are nicer people than those who do not like wine.'