

Decanter PANEL TASTING

Alsace grand cru Riesling 2007

This French region may be king of varietal wines, with Riesling the jewel in its crown, but **SUE STYLE** finds much criticism of the grand cru status and bottle labelling

Riesling is the aristocrat among Alsace's six white grape varieties, yielding elegant, complex, long-lived wines. Arriving here from Germany in the 15th century it established itself in prime sites throughout the area. The Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace reports that there were 3,376ha of Riesling planted in 2008, of which 354ha were in grand cru sites.

The concept of a grand cru designation to single out terroirs with a centuries-old track record was first mooted in 1962, with the creation of Alsace AC. The work of the Comité de Délimitation des Grands Crus, presided over initially by Johnny Hugel, led in 1983 to a list of 25 grand cru vineyards, followed by 25 in 1992 and the addition of Kaefferkopf in 2008, making 51 today. Together grand crus represent about 10% of total AC Alsace production, about 1,500ha out of the 15,300ha under vine.

But the grand cru designation for Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Muscat, is not without critics. For many, including Hugel, who later resigned, disillusioned with the direction things were taking (*see And Another Thing, p13*), the rules on minimum alcohol levels, must weights and yields were over-indulgent, though good work has since been done to tighten these up. The most serious criticism was (and still is) of the

grand cru vineyard boundaries, which were drawn too widely. The limits of the Schlossberg vineyard, for example, were initially set at 28ha (hectares) but later grew to 80ha. There was also the 'me-too' phenomenon: every village along the Route des Vins wanted (and mostly got) its grand cru status, regardless of merit.

In light of the above, it would be a mistake to regard the designation as a guarantee of quality, rather (at best) as an indicator of terroir. Riesling's great trump card is that it combines its noble nature with a chameleon-like ability to reflect the characteristics of the place in which it grows. It is in grand cru vineyards, with their multiplicity of terroirs, that you will find Riesling's most vivid and varied expressions – citrus fruit, mineral and floral notes and the famous oily, petrolly aromas found in Rieslings grown in certain soils and of a certain age.

Alsace being the champion of varietal wines, mention of the grape features along with the grand cru name (ie: Riesling Grand Cru Schlossberg). A recent proposal to drop any mention of grape variety in grand cru wines was roundly criticised by many winegrowers who value the simplicity of varietal labelling, calling the proposal 'a catastrophe'. (*See decanter.com for recent developments.*)

The 2007 Riesling vintage was textbook. Spring was exceptionally warm but the summer turned cool, bringing violent hailstorms to some Haut-Rhin vineyards. But generally the grapes matured slowly and as the season wore on, the nights were deliciously cool – just what Riesling loves. The harvest, in sunny September, was quite early but with a 'late vintage character' to it, according to Etienne Hugel. Rieslings from this



vintage, with steely acidity and complex mineral aromas, are worth stocking up on and squirrelling away – five years in any case, but 10 or more for the finest wines from the best sites and growers

NB: *The producers Hugel, Trimbach and Beyer don't mention grand cru on their labels, so don't feature in this panel tasting. They insist they aren't against grand cru – indeed their finest wines have always come from vineyards designated grand cru (Trimbach and the Rosacker vineyard, where Clos Ste-Hune is grown; Hugel and Schoenenbourg; Beyer and Pfersigberg) – but they consider the term devalued because a) the delimitation of grand cru vineyards is over-generous; b) it is meaningless as an indicator of quality; and c) it seems to privilege terroir over the reputation and skill of the grower. For more on Hugel's views, see p13 **D***

ALSACE RIESLING:
KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

- 2007** A textbook Alsace vintage with beautifully structured Rieslings. Keep.
- 2006** Fine wines made by the most skillful. Choose carefully. Drink up.
- 2005** A patchy year so important to be selective and patient. Keep.
- 2004** Wet summer but good harvest; skilled viticulture helped. Drink or keep.
- 2003** Heatwave; Riesling's acidity helped it. Drink or keep.
- 2002** Mixed year; capricious harvest but some excellent Rieslings. Keep.
- 2001** Off summer and wet harvest, but some concentrated wines. Keep.
- 2000** A bumper vintage with some standout wines. Drink up.

THE TASTERS

Antony Moss, wine educator, Wine, Spirit & Education Trust; Freddy Price, wine writer; Margaret Rand, wine writer; Stephen Skelton MW, viticulturist; Tom Stevenson MW, wine writer; Marcel Orford Williams, buyer, The Wine Society

Alsace grand cru Riesling: results

Despite the obligatory dry/sweet dilemma, our tasters were unanimous in their praise of a charming, captivating vintage. **GUY WOODWARD** is licking his lips...

We haven't done an Alsace tasting for a while, but were persuaded that the 2007 vintage merited consideration. So does it?

Without doubt. '2007 is an excellent, potentially really great vintage,' said an enthusiastic Tom Stevenson, who had 'never given so many high marks – 18s, 19s and even one 20 – in a tasting.' 'It's a very safe vintage to buy,' said a very impressed Anthony Moss, while Margaret Rand hailed it as 'a fabulous tasting.'

What was so good about it?

'It's not a vintage that is overloaded with overripe grapes and too much alcohol,' said Freddy Price. 'The great thing about these wines was their balance,' agreed Rand. 'You don't taste the alcohol; everything is beautifully tucked in, very sleek, detailed. Wines with great power, wearing that power with great lightness, and it's an utter, utter joy. Marvellous.'

Did all the wines conform to this style?

'In terms of quality, it was generally a very, very high standard, but in terms of style, I found there was a very wide diversity,' said Moss. 'The vineyards were hugely different; it was amazing the differences one saw,' said Rand. 'Whether that was terroir or winemaking is difficult to say – I kept note on the vineyards but I didn't find any consistent vineyard style.'

So are there not any particular crus we should be looking out for?

'I was trying to correlate my notes to the different terroirs and geology and find out if there were any common denominators for the different crus,' said Stevenson. 'But apart from a few minor things, I really couldn't.' Rand felt that while 'there were certain vineyards that did consistently well, like Schlossberg and Schoenenbourg, which were very, very good,' she didn't feel she 'could ascribe a particular style to them'. Price also singled out Schoenenbourg as 'very special'.

Why aren't the terroirs more evident?

'There were *some* distinct terroirs coming through,' said Stevenson, 'but what complicates matters is the winemaker, who can make or break a wine.'

THE SCORES:

112 WINES TASTED	
★★★★★ Decanter Award	6
Outstanding (18.5–20pts)	
★★★★★ Highly recommended	36
Very good to excellent (16.5–18.49pts)	
★★★ Recommended	56
Good (14.5–16.49pts)	
★★	11
Fair (12.5–14.49pts)	
★	0
Poor (10.5–12.49pts)	
Faulty	3
£	
Good value (under £18)	18

In what way?

'I love the purity, finesse, elegance and focus of Riesling,' said Stevenson. 'But it's a very direct, linear variety and should not have malolactic fermentation applied to it – that gives you a buttery, creamy characteristic which makes it very muddled.' The technique 'blurred the fruit definition,' felt Moss, who also detected 'extreme' ripeness in some quarters which made the fruit seem 'washed out'. As a result, both felt that while there were plenty of highs, 'there were also a few lows'.

Well, there had to be *some* quibbles...

And we haven't even broached the thorny issue of sweetness levels yet.

BEST VALUE

DOMAINES
SCHLUMBERGER,
SAERING (Residual
sugar: 6.2g/l)

★★★★★

£14.95–£21

'This is true Riesling, a wine in waiting. Needs two years at least before it will begin to show its potential. From 2012.' (TS)
Stockists: F&M, Fou, Hds, P&R, Wmb, WSo



Oh dear, I feel a heated debate coming on...

There was one, but it can be distilled down to the following conclusion, from Moss: 'If you're expecting a particular kind of wine from Alsace grand cru Riesling, you've either got to approach your purchase with a generous and tolerant spirit or you've got to get highly involved and know exactly what you're buying.' Even Stevenson and Price, world-renowned Alsace experts, admitted to confusion over sweetness levels, with neither being able to predict a wine's sweetness with any certainty. 'I know a bit about Alsace wines,' said Stevenson modestly, 'but in a restaurant I don't know whether I'm ordering a dry or sweet wine. So the ordinary consumer has no chance.'

'I know they've been arguing about it for years, but they should find a way of describing sweetness on the label, for everyone's sake,' said Rand. Alas for Alsace, things aren't quite that simple. 'Some wines have quite a lot of [residual] sugar yet actually taste quite dry, and there are others with a very low amount of sugar that taste quite sweet,' observed Price (see Note, opposite).

Can't we expect most wines to be dry?

Generally, yes. 'Alsace is traditionally a dry wine area,' reiterated Stevenson, who was 'pleasantly surprised' that most were on the dry side. 'If they're producing anything else, they should make it clear on the label.'

How long will these wines last?

'The dry wines don't generally develop for as long as the sweet wines,' said Price, who gave the former 10 years and the latter 'at least 20'. The wines should 'become a bit drier over the years,' he said, but 'will evolve more on a fruit basis than towards a petrol character' said Stevenson. That said, Moss found 'there wasn't a single wine which wouldn't be very pleasurable to drink right now'. Which pretty much summed up what was 'a very good tasting,' said Stevenson. Moss was willing to go a step further: 'Most of the wines were verging between the delicious and the "made-me-weak-at-the-knees",' he sighed.