RIQUEWIHR is your archetypal fairytale village, with vibrantly coloured, wood-framed houses and crooked cobbledstone paths straight out of some Brothers Grimm story. When you walk through the town gates, you are greeted by the fragrant smells of the countryside: the aroma of frying potatoes and sausage wafts from the outdoor markets, the spicy notes of fresh-baked gingerbread from hole-in-the-wall bakeries, and the musty, yeasty bouquet of fermentation as streetside vendors offer a taste of the new season’s wine for the princely sum of 1€.

Amid the hubbub of village life, the great stone building on Rue de la Présidente Armée beckons like a lighthouse, proudly proclaiming the names of its masters: Hugel et Fils. Hugel is undoubtably one of the world’s most important wineries, and its history reflects that of Alsace and Alsatian wine.

In 1639, Hans Ulrich Hugelin established the family in Riquewihr and founded the company, among the first of Swiss migrants brought in to repopulate the province after the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War. His descendant, the legendary Jean “Johnny” Hugel, pioneered the reintroduction of late harvest wines (VT and SGN, see box) in Alsace, and drafted the stringent laws governing their production in 1977. He also presided over the first advisory committee on Alsatian Grand Cru vineyards from 1975 to 1978. Jean’s nephew Etienne inherited his mantle as the company’s travelling face, with such success that over 90 percent of Hugel’s annual million-bottle output is now destined for overseas.

Etienne runs Hugel’s operations together with his winemaker brother Marc and cousin Jean-Philippe, the CEO of Hugel et Fils. This involves overseeing the induction of the 13th generation into the family business. Earlier this year, Etienne allocated responsibility for the US market to his son Jean-Fredéric – “I have been travelling to America for 27 years and there is only so much big talk and bullshit I can take,” Etienne jokes – and had him, his daughter Charlotte and their cousins work the Hugel booth at last June’s Vinexpo in Bordeaux.

“Their involvement is a blessing for me and the family,” Etienne enthuses. “At this point, our youngsters are still in their exploration phase; summer jobs in the tasting room but also in the vineyards or in the harvest. Our job for now is to let them discover and understand all aspects of our business as the choice will be theirs one day. But we didn’t need to force them: they discovered that when your name is Hugel, there is probably no better thing to do than continuing the family tradition. After all, how many of us can afford doing a job that is also a passion?”

As we walk into the courtyard, a well-dressed elderly gentleman walks up to Etienne and kisses him on both cheeks. “Daddy,” admonishes Etienne fondly, dabbing his father’s cheek with a handkerchief where he nicked himself shaving that morning. Despite the size of its operations and polished professionalism, you are continually reminded that Hugel et Fils is strongly anchored around family and community – the Hugels live here, work here and are fiercely proud of what they have built.
124 grapes are harvested by hand, even for plots, we watch the harvesting crew. The warmth has allowed the grapes to ripen in spite of the cool August, recent unseasonal rains, and the grapes are a deep red. De Cru Sporen, where tight clusters of Pi plump grapes basking in the sunshine. Harvesters here, just verdant vines and green grapes. De Gris and Gewurztraminer’s trade mark blush dot the vines. We taste the Gewurztraminer straight off the vine, sweet with flavours of tropical fruit.

Asian Focus
Etienne has trained his sights on Asia, believing that it represents the future for Alsace wine. “I love Singapore!” he exclaims, excitedly describing his recent breakfast at Tiong Bahru Market where he paired his wines with local hawkers’ favourites. “While sales are not so big, it represents what the rest of Asia is going to be in 15 to 20 years, so it is very important to us.”

Despite concerted efforts from various wine producers and marketing bodies, Etienne acknowledges that Alsace remains a hard sell. “Alsace is made up of mostly small private and family producers who do not have the marketing muscle of the industry’s corporate giants. In Asia, we have the huge handicap of not being red. In China, for example, red wines account for 90 percent of the market and many consumers don’t even know that wine can be white! But the more people are educated, the more they will discover the beauty of Alsace wine among Asia’s amazing cuisines.”

Etienne drives us around the vineyards in his VW Phaeton (which Etienne calls his “Protestant Bentley, bought second-hand”), firstly to the slopes of the Grand Cru Schoenenbourg, which rise steeply over Kipperwir and provide the Hugels’ best Riesling. Even though it’s late September, there are no harvesters here, just verdant vines and plump grapes basking in the sunshine. “The simpler regional grapes are being harvested now,” Etienne explains. “Our estate fruit gets harvested later.”

Our next stop is the marly-clay Grand Cru Speron, where tight clusters of Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer’s trade mark blush dot the vines. We taste the Gewurztraminer straight off the vine, sweet with flavours of tropical fruit. Despite the cool August, recent unseasonal warmth has allowed the grapes to ripen beautifully. At the low-lying regional plots, we watch the harvesting crew squating by the vines, seculatres speedily clicking away. Hugel insists that all grapes are harvested by hand, even for its entry-level wines. “Our philosophy is that the wine is already in the grape,” shares Etienne.

After a quick tour of the cellars, we head to the underground tasting room to sample some of the current vintages. Hugel has a relatively compact and easily understandable range of wines. Its dry wines fall within three categories: ‘Classic’, made from bought fruit, ‘Tradition’, from the younger estate vineyards, and ‘Jubilee’, from the best estate fruit, often Grand Cru. For the Classic and Tradition ranges, vintage variability is subtle, with an almost Cham pagne-like “house-style” consistency (and a very un-Champagne-like value for money!). First, we sample the Gentil, a fruity and refreshing blend, then a simple Muscat, light and grapey. Pinot Noirs are next – I’m not a fan of Hugel’s 2007 and told Etienne as much, but the 2009 Classic is far superior, with lots of aromatic fruit upfront. The single vineyard, 2009 “Les Неveux”, named for Johnny’s three nephews who now run the family business, has a beguilingly subtle nose but packs serious black fruit on the palate with hints of roast meat. “Robert Parker gave this 92 points,” says Etienne, matter-of-factly, “not bad for a white wine region.”

A series of impressive Jubilier Rieslings and Pinots Gris follows, before the house specialty: late-harvest wines of astounding complexity and character. We start with a mystery wine – Etienne will only disclose that it is a Gewurztraminer VT, and invites us to guess the vintage, and we are astounded to learn it is a 1991… astonishingly fresh and vibrant, it typifies the tremendous cellaring potential of Alsace late-harvest wines. “The year Charlotte was born,” Etienne explains proudly. ’1991 was a great year for vintage port and I didn’t want her drinking fortified wine her entire life!” But the 2005 Gewurztraminer SGN (97 Parker points) steals the show, with intense flavours of dried fruit, figs and butterscotch.

A Primer on Alsace Wines
Alsace and its wines don’t get the best coverage, which is a pity as Alsace is home to some of France’s most beautiful scenery and architecture, as well as some of its most passionate and hospitable winemakers. Spend an afternoon tasting with Catherine Fallier in her parlour at Domaine Weinbach’s Clos des Capucins and you will never want to leave. Nestled at the foot of the Voges mountain range, Alsatian wine country is a patchwork of soil types and terrains exposed by geological fault lines. It is in these diverse conditions that Alsace’s four noble grapes – Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Muscat – attain their ultimate expression. Alsace wine is about crisp, fresh fruit with little or no oak influence, so generally only old barrels are used for micro-oxygenation and yeast transference; Hugel still uses the Ste Catherine, the world’s oldest oak cask dating back to 1715.

Alsace is unique among French wine regions. The first noticeable difference is the use of the taller, slender Germanic flute bottle. The second is that wines are labelled by grape variety in addition to, as opposed to just, vineyard or region, making them accessible to consumers more familiar with New World labelling and marketing practices. Despite the varietal focus, the lesser-known blends Edels wicker and Gentil are also gaining greater acceptance overseas.

Hugel wines are available in good restaurants in Malaysia and Singapore. Check www.hugel.com to find your local distributor.