

Hugel at a glance

Holdings
30ha of estate vineyards plus grapes bought from another 100ha

Grape varieties
Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Gewurztraminer, Muscat, Sylvaner, Pinot Noir

Annual production
1 million bottles

Key personnel
Marc Hugel, winemaker; Etienne Hugel, sales and exports; Jean Philippe Hugel, CEO

Exports
90% of production

Wines produced
Classic (including Gentil), Tradition, Jubilee, Vendange Tardive, Sélection de Grains Nobles; new Schoelhammer

Producer profile

Hugel

The 13th generation has just started working at this famous Alsace producer, notable for setting the rules for (and later boycotting) the region's grand crus. Margaret Rand meets a few of the family and tastes the new Schoelhammer bottling – the best 30 rows of Hugel's best Riesling vineyard

IT IS SAID – usually by the producers themselves – that there are Catholic and Protestant wines in Alsace. The former are more oxidative, forward and ebullient; the latter more reductive, austere and slower to reveal themselves. Riquewihr is a largely Protestant village, and the Hugels of Riquewihr are Lutheran. So there you have it, the style in a nutshell: Hugel wines are tight, structured, mineral and dry – unless they're sweet.

The last point sounds obvious until you remember that for years now, Alsace sweetness levels have been rising faster than Greek borrowing. Thirty years ago, says winemaker and viticulturist Marc Hugel, the problem in Alsace was getting ripe grapes. Now the issue is avoiding overripe ones. Wines that were routinely dry are now regularly off-dry or sweet, and sweet ones are super-sweet.

To insist on dryness for anything not labelled Vendange Tardive (VT) or Sélection de Grains

Nobles (SGN) is to swim against the tide. To refuse to put the words 'Grand Cru' on the front label when your Jubilee range comes from the grands crus of Schoenenbourg and Sporen – Hugel's finest estate vineyards, with Jubilee wines only made in the very best vintages – is also to swim against the tide. And the irony is that Johnny Hugel had been in charge of setting the grand cru rules.

Johnny Hugel (his name was Jean, but the British trade renamed him) also drafted the guidelines for the 1984 regulations governing VT and SGN; before that, the German designations were used. He was an influential figure in an influential family: the Hugels, like so many wine families in Alsace, arrived during the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) and have made wine ever since. Johnny ran the company, with his brothers André and Georges, between 1948 and 1997, when the next generation came to the fore. André still visits the office every day and is a

formidable historian of Riquewihr. His mission now is to obtain fair treatment for Alsace veterans of the Second World War, who were conscripted into the German army and receive no pensions.

Johnny tramped all over Alsace with a geologist for three years, examining where the grand cru boundaries should go. 'If the classification had been honest,' reflects André's son Marc, 'it would have taken one minute, because everyone knew where the boundaries should have been.' Instead, they were drawn generously. 'There should probably be 20 grands crus, and the rest should be premier cru,' says Marc's nephew Jean Frédéric. So Hugel, having

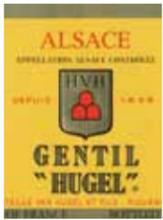
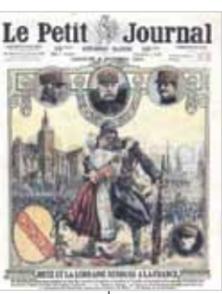
been instrumental in setting up the classification, walked away from it. Trimbach did the same; so did Léon Beyer. No Hugel wine has ever been declared as grand cru, even though many could have been.

The trouble with making a high-minded decision is that the rest of the world goes on without you. Everyone agrees the Alsace Grand Cru classification is not all it should be; but at the same time, most people accept that, overall, it has been a good thing. The decision to boycott it is clearly a difficult one to rethink, yet one wonders how much it benefits Hugel these days. In some Alsace tastings, its flagship Jubilee wines will be ranged with basic >

Above: Hugel has been making wines in Riquewihr, Alsace, for 376 years



Hugel: a timeline

<p>1639 Hans Ulrich Hugel, who settled in Riquewihr during the Thirty Years' War, is made freeman of the city</p>		<p>1802 Earliest existing records of Hugel owning land in Sporen and Schoenenbourg. Earlier records were destroyed during wars</p>		<p>1902 Frédéric Emile Hugel buys the buildings in Riquewihr where the company is still based</p>		<p>1911 Hugel starts bottling its own wines</p>		<p>1940 Alsace is occupied by Germany (below)</p>		<p>1945 Alsace is returned to France</p>		<p>1980 Hugel is the first company in Alsace to introduce temperature-controlled fermentation ></p>
<p>1672 Hans Ulrich's son builds a house in Rue des Cordiers; the shield he carved over the door still appears on Hugel labels</p>	<p>1865 & 1876 The last Hugel to be a cooper as well as a grower builds, and dates, casks that are still in use today</p>	<p>1871 Alsace annexed by Germany after the Franco-Prussian War</p>		<p>1918 Alsace is returned to France under the Treaty of Versailles</p>	<p>1948 Frédéric Emile's son Jean (right, with mother Mimi and brother André) joins the company. Hugel begins working with other growers</p>							



Schoenenbourg vineyard

Launch of the Schoelhammer Riesling

Schoelhammer is an historic, organically farmed Riesling vineyard of just 30 rows at the heart of the Hugel family's Schoenenbourg grand cru holding.

The 2007 vintage, launched in April 2015, is the first wine made solely from these vines (with an average age of 22 years planted on clay-marl soils) and has matured in the Hugel cellars since bottling. The wine – Hugel's first new

release since its 350th anniversary Jubilee range in 1989 – revives an Alsace tradition that wines from specific sites were labelled only by the name of the vineyard they came from.

It is a dry Riesling, which has 7.7g/l of total acidity to balance the 7g/l of residual sugar; just 4,288 bottles and 352 half-bottles were made. Contact UK agent Fells for price and availability.



Alsace – and that is not necessarily an advantage, given that the former are tight and reticent, and the latter mostly off-dry and come-hitherish. And so Hugel's grand cru position is under discussion.

There is something else: the best parcel of Riesling in Hugel's Schoenenbourg holding has just been released, in April 2015, as a separate bottling called Schoelhammer (see box left). The first vintage will be 2007, which neatly gets around the grand cru problem, because if you want to declare a grand cru, you must apply to do so before the vintage. So it won't be. But it is splendid.

What makes it so good? Tension, in a word. If you want another word, minerality. Schoenenbourg is impressive to look at – it rises steeply from just outside the old walls of Riquewihr – but it's not homogeneous. Schoelhammer is a perfect kernel of 30 south-facing rows mid-slope, and it was the first Hugel parcel to go organic. 'It's clear to the taste when a wine is terroir-driven or varietal,' says Etienne; and it's clear here.

The world moves on. They're all keen to stress that they're not averse to change; it's just that they like to do things gradually – change the details rather than take U-turns. The Jubilee range, named to mark the company's 350th year in 1989, is being renamed because few people know what it refers to; each wine will now have a separate name.

Does this, along with the Schoelhammer launch, constitute a grand cru coming-out? 'It's a terroir coming-out,' says Jean Frédéric. They're going to make more of a fuss about their undoubtedly excellent vineyards. And Marc is the person to talk to about these: geology has become a passion of his. Did you know that the old vineyard roads in Alsace follow geological fault lines? There are umpteen faults running southwest to northeast, with other, transverse faults running across them. It's as complicated as the Côte d'Or, which explains why the soils are so many, and so varied.

Obsession with precision

Marc's winemaking style has evolved over the years. He loves finesse and elegance, and he doesn't want the mechanics of winemaking to show in the wines, but in 2007 he started doing a little battonage (lees



Clockwise from top left: three generations of the Hugel wine dynasty – Etienne, André, Jean Philippe, Marc, Jean Frédéric and Marc André

stirring) – not much, and only when it suits the year – just to open up the wines. And he wants absolute accuracy in everything. When he picks for SGN these days, it's individual berries, not whole clusters. 'The first 15 minutes of picking [for SGN] are the most important,' he emphasises, for pinpoint accuracy and purity in the final wine. 'If you want the best possible wine, you have to be incredibly precise.'

Sweet wines – VT and SGN, and especially the former – are flagships for Hugel. 'Gewurztraminer VT is 90% of our sweet wine production,' says Etienne, Jean Frédéric's father. 'People confuse sweet wines with dessert wines; it goes beyond pairing them with dessert.'

But the same climate change that has made the general run of Alsace wine sweeter than it used to be has made VT and SGN less exceptional. When

Thierry Meyer's top five from Hugel

Hugel & Fils, Schoelhammer Riesling 2007 19/20 (96/100)
POA Fells

An exceptional year for this first release. Schoelhammer is the named place (*lieu-dit*) of one of the best areas within the Schoenenbourg grand cru vineyard. Open and complex nose, with ripe kernel fruits, smoke and hints of butter. Palate is dense and saline, with great length. Enjoyable upon release but keep a few bottles for the long run.
Drink 2017-2037 Alcohol N/A

Hugel & Fils, Gewurztraminer Vendanges Tardives 2007 18.5 (95)
£33-£56.05 Hawkshead Wines, Fells, Slurp, The Wine Society

SGN-like maturity results in a very ripe nose, with honey and orange peel aromas. Rich palate, with strong sweetness balanced by a strong acidity. Long finish, with flavours of exotic fruits. Harmonious wine to drink now over dessert or pair with mature cheeses after five more years in the cellar. **Drink 2015-2027 Alc 12.7%**



Hugel & Fils, Jubilee Riesling 2009 18 (93)
£27.20 Forth Wines, Hawkshead Wines, Inverarity Morton, Slurp

Discreet, smoky nose, profound and dry on the palate, with great length. Should reach its peak around 2025.
Drink 2017-2039 Alc 13.5%

Hugel & Fils, Gewurztraminer 2013 15.5 (85)

£16-£19 Forth Wines, Hawkshead, Inverarity Morton, Le Vignoble, Slurp, Oxford Wine Co
Intense rose and black pepper but very light sweetness for an overall dry balance. **Drink 2016-2018 Alc 13.2%**



Hugel & Fils, Gentil 2013 15 (83)
£12.40 Forth Wines, Hawkshead, Inverarity Morton, Slurp, Tanners, Oxford Wine Co, The Wine Centre

Flower and hazelnut aromas, with hints of grapefruit, fresh and dry balance on the palate.
Drink 2015-2017 Alc 12.5%

For UK stockists, see p103

Thierry Meyer is the DWWA Regional Chair for Alsace

Jean Frédéric lists great sweet-wine vintages, he names 1989, 1997, 2000 – then 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. Yes, they are more selective than ever, make less per year than they used to, and, says Etienne, sweet wine is still only 2% of their production, but still. Great sweet wine is no longer a rarity in the world – and world demand has not risen. 'We sell all we produce,' says Etienne, but one might surmise that shouting a bit louder about the rest of the range might not be a bad thing.

The world moves on. If Schoelhammer is the future, then it works. **D**

Margaret Rand was the 2013 Louis Roederer Feature Writer of the Year for her articles in Decanter

Hugel: a timeline (continued)

Early 1980s

Jean, as president of the Alsace Grand Cru delimitation committee, was charged with drawing the boundaries of the new grands crus. INAO also asked him to draw up rules for VT and SGN wines



1982

Marc starts to take over as winemaker

1983

Etienne starts to take over as head of sales



1984

VT and SGN regulations come into force



1989

The Jubilee range is launched at Hugel's 350th anniversary party



1992

The decree governing Grands Crus Sporen (above) and Schoenenbourg come into force; Hugel decides not to use the designation

1994

Jean Philippe takes over as CEO

2009

Organic viticulture starts in Schoelhammer. Now, most Hugel vineyards are farmed organically



2011

Jean Frédéric, (above left with Etienne) joins the company, initially running the tasting room

2014

Marc André joins the company

2015

Schoelhammer is launched