

## NEW YORK WINE DIARY: DAY 25 – HUGEL’S NEW STAR RIESLINGS

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It might sound absurd to talk about innovation at a company founded in 1639, but that’s what Jean-Frédéric Hugel (left) and his father Etienne (right) were doing today in New York, and they brought the wines along to prove it. Hugel was already an extremely well established producer around the world when I first visited the family company in 1987, but there was a period when I found their wines extremely dependable (stylistically too – they were always dry wines that worked on the dining table), but not so often inspiring. That has very definitely changed, at the latest since Jean-Frédéric’s generation has begun exerting some influence on the company, but I am sure that Etienne’s generation has also done some important rethinking too. Now the fruits of this are reaching the market, most obviously in the form of Hugel’s new star Rieslings.

Before we get to those new wines I have to point out that the Classic range of varietal wines that is the foundation of Hugel’s business has also seen some changes.

The 2014 Riesling Classic is made from just over half from Hugel’s own grapes and a bit less than half from bought in grapes, and during the last years some of the weaker sources for the latter were weeded out and replaced. This and a modest change of emphasis in the cellar towards more fruit make the 2014 vintage of this wine – the aromas range from apple to fresh pineapple, the taste is juicy and fresh with a silky finish - the best I’ve ever tasted. I feel confident that this is joyful wine that will switch some consumers who don’t know them yet on to dry Riesling, Hugel and Alsace.

The difference between the 2014 Riesling Classic and the 2012 Riesling Estate is very clear, the latter being much more about texture than aroma. There’s a considerable amount of power and weight that comes from the just over 50% of this bottling that grew in the Grand Cru Schoenenbourg vineyard site of Riquewihr, where the Hugel cellars are. Already in 1643 the Swiss cartographer Merian declared that this vineyard site produce the most noble wines of the entire region.

I was glad that Etienne pointed out that back then Alsace exported more wine than it does today, most of these exports headed north by boat along the Rhine. The impressive architecture of Riquewihr from that period was paid for with the profits from this business. The top dry Rieslings from Hugel always came from this site, just as the best Gewürztraminers always came from the Grand Cru Sporen site.

You might think that this great tradition would be good reason for Hugel to proudly write those vineyard names on the label, but it was not, due to the scars left by the Second World War. After what Alsace and the Hugel family went through between 1940 and 1945 Germanic names were suspect, although the Alsatian dialect is actually one of German, not French, and Riquewihr was called Reichenweier until 1945! So, it took a long time for the region and the family to find its way back to this tradition .../...



2010 Riesling Grossi Läuse (the “Grosser Lage”, or great site, as pronounced in the Alsatian dialect) is so successful with this first vintage I can’t believe this decision could be reversed.

This wine is the most impressive new dry Riesling from Europe that I’ve tasted in quite a few years. Somehow this 100% Schoenenbourg Riesling manages to marry all the depth and power of this vineyard site (due in good part to the clay-rich marl soil) with a fruit that’s at once rich and subtle. The wine has near-perfect balance and from the first sip it captivated me, but every further sip revealed more nuances of flavor so I was busy with it for quite some time. It really deserves a large wine glass of the kind you’d normally serve red Burgundy in, because when I moved it into that kind of glass it instantly expanded to wide-screen format!

The same is true of the new top dry 2007 Riesling Schoelhammer, in fact it needs that big glass even more than the Grossi Läuse! Although it has a rather conventional 13% alcohol for a top dry Riesling this is a massive wine that is still rather austere although it’s more than eight years old. It demands both time and space to breathe. If I had some bottles – this one is an extremely limited production wine and it will set you back about \$150 – then I would definitely hold on to them for a few years. In contrast, the Grossi Läuse is already very pleasurable, but likewise has a couple of decades ahead of it. You should be able to find it for just under \$100 per bottle. To put this in context, that’s the high end of same price category as the Grosser Gewächs dry Rieslings from the top German producers.

Another things which changed are the labels. Although the yellow and red color combination has been retained, the company name has been changed to Famille Hugel, and the redesign has made it easier to immediately see exactly which bottle from the Famille Hugel you have in front of you. This is an obvious change. The more important ones are those of vineyard management, harvesting strategy (most importantly the grapes from every single vineyard parcel are now vinified separately), and bottled.

Those you can taste, and I strongly recommend you to experience the new star Rieslings from Hugel.

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