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## REASONS FOR THE RENAISSANCE OF ALSACE WINES

Visitors of the wine towns of Alsace are always impressed by their size and by the richness of their architecture. These houses, dating from the 15th and, above all, 16th centuries, were built by the winegrowers themselves, for their own use, with the income earned exclusively from the sale of their wines. At that period, the winegrowers of Alsace were dynamic and very rich.

It is interesting to consider the reasons and origins of such remarkable wealth :

In order to succeed, the winegrowers had to produce wines which, by mean of their natural composition and structure, would keep well and therefore could be transported over great distances.

They had to be exportable, with no risk of alteration in the course of the journey, at a time when vinification was still a mystery and not yet a science.

The vineyards had to be situated near a navigable river, which flowed towards a wealthy population that prized quality wines but did not produce any itself. At that period in time, Alsace was the most southerly winegrowing region of Europe (and thus had the best climate), and was near a navigable waterway (the Rhine) flowing north.

The Mediterranean region, controlled by the Arabs, had completely lost its importance in the trading of wine. The Straits of Gibraltar shut off all access towards the northern seas, and so the Mediterranean became a vast landlocked basin, especially insofar as viticultural activity was concerned.

Trading in Northern Europe, the Baltic, Sweden and Russia was largely controlled by the Hanseatic ports and by the Dutch. The wine trade along the Rhine - the most important economic artery of Europe and which by chance flowed past Alsace - was from the 12th to the 16th century almost a monopoly of two cities: Strasbourg and Cologne.

This explains the remarkable statistics for exports of Alsace wine (for example, in 1481, over 600,000 hl). From Colmar alone 110,000 hl were exported in 1393 and 100,000 hl in 1452. These figures exclude exports upstream, along the Rhine to Switzerland.

Such surprising figures are only partially known for Strasbourg. This independent imperial city had the monopoly for the transport of wine between Basle and Mainz, operated by the clever Corporation of Boatmen, in other words, the monopoly of all the wine trade. Naturally, for tax reasons, the city kept very precise records of all exports. Figures for Colmar are the most accurate because the ledgers still exist today. From surviving records, it is clear that Alsace was the most important winegrowing region of Europe at that time, both in terms of quantity and quality of its product exported (with the possible exception of Bordeaux ?)

The reasons for success were also partly technical. At that time, wines were kept in cask for 2 or 3 years and were clarified each year by racking. Only quality products with the necessary structure to support such shock treatment could then be exported. All other wines had to be drunk in the region, where wine remained a common drink and not a luxury product which could command a high price.

This prosperous period was brutally ended by the terrible Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) when 90% of the population of Alsace was either exterminated or died from famine or disease.

For example, the population of Riquewihr was 2,245 in 1610 but only 74 in 1636. Bergheim had 2,600 inhabitants in 1610 and 20 in 1650.

In addition the Rhine, which had previously been the commercial artery that brought prosperity to the region, became a dangerous frontier between two states which were often at war. Abruptly, Alsace wines were cut off from all their export markets (except Switzerland). Alsace lost its economic importance, its vitality and its wealth. Considered « a foreign province » by Versailles, it was unable to establish a new market for its wines inside France.

Another change occurred of no lesser importance. To make up for the lack of population, immigrants arrived from Switzerland and more southerly regions which had been less affected by this disastrous war. They were attracted by the fertility of the soil, the excellent climate and the availability of houses which had been abandoned but not destroyed (this is proved by the fact that so many of these fine houses still survive today). Courageously, the immigrants set to work in the vineyards and resumed the production of wine. However these new « people of Alsace » were generally very poor and, having been labourers, farm-workers and tradesmen in their regions of origin, despite their manifestly good intentions they lacked specific viticultural knowledge.

Also, they had no notion of the economic importance of producing wines of high quality, which their predecessors had perfected over previous centuries, and they had no commercial contact with former customers.

Lastly, trade with Northern Europe had been terribly disrupted if not totally destroyed, and the Hanseatic ports had progressively lost their commercial influence. For our beautiful region and our vineyards, this period of slow but continuous decline lasted three centuries. We should never forget this sad fact.

After the First World War, in 1918, Alsace wines no longer existed. The situation in the vineyards was catastrophic because disease and insects, against which growers did not know how to protect themselves, had destroyed the crops and even some of the vineyards. It is still remembered that from 1901 to 1908, yields averaged about 6 hectolitres per hectare !

It was a time of abject misery. False prophets were numerous and their bad advice was often followed. The time had come for important changes to be made, as the survival of the winegrowing region of Alsace was in peril.

Luckily, in viticulture, thanks to the long life of the vine, any change is always very slow. There is time to think and to reverse any policy which turns out to be erroneous. Happily, this is exactly what happened...

Thanks to the vision and foresight of a handful of men with the ability to convince others by their own example, and a degree of courage which present generations would do well to emulate, Alsace made a radical change towards quality, real quality, the quality which begins in the

vineyards. (In particular, tribute should be paid to Mr Paul Greiner, a winegrower from Mittelwihr, and his friends).

Since 1918, and in particular since 1945, the vineyards of Alsace have undergone a remarkable transformation.

Knowing that every positive (or negative) action taken by a winegrower in the vineyard will always be revealed in the grape, and finally in the customer's glass (and headache !), it is important to realise that Alsace is the only winegrowing region in Europe which, over the past decades, has steadily improved the quality of its raw material, the grape.

Yet are we aware of this ? Do we know our own history ? For many people, since 1918 nothing has changed: the same grape varieties, the same methods of cultivation, the same vinification. This is an enormous error ; everything has changed !

The facts are as follows : In the vineyard, the six real quality grape varieties now account for 80% of the vineyard area. These quality varieties (which give the finest wines, the most complex ones, when they are fully ripe) are PINOT BLANC, PINOT GRIS, PINOT NOIR, RIESLING, GEWURZTRAMINER and MUSCAT (in my opinion, Chasselas and Sylvaner should not be included).

In 1918, these six varieties represented less than 10% of the total vineyard area (and in 1942 there were still 33% of hybrids planted) !

How many of our fellow-citizens are aware of this ? Is it possible to find another region in Europe which has made such consistent progress towards quality as Alsace has done ? There is none.

All these changes have taken time, but the results are very perceptible.

In Alsace, things have always progressed in the same direction, as can be seen from our affiliation to the family of AOC wines in 1962, the creation and delimitation of GRAND CRU in 1975, and the law governing VENDANGE TARDIVE AND SELECTION DE GRAINS NOBLES wines in 1984, together with, in parallel, a steady reduction in yields. The recognition of and enthusiasm for our wines amongst consumers all over the world proves that we are on the right track towards a revival which, only 50 years ago, would have been considered unthinkable.

We, the winegrowers of Alsace, the young generations of uninhibited, remarkably educated and enthusiastic professionals, can be justifiably proud that, for the first time in 450 years, we again have at our disposal (in the years when nature helps us, of course) a quantity of top-quality grapes, and well-trained men and women who are proud of their profession.

Never again must we make mistakes in the vineyards. In spite of worldwide competition a brilliant future awaits us.

I am convinced that in the 21st century, as they used to be from the 11th to the 16th century, Alsace wines will again become the finest white wines of Europe.

Jean HUGEL  
Winegrower in Riquewihr