

Alsace

Tom Stevenson

The less-than-ideal sweetness labelling requirement that was announced in last year's report will not be implemented after all.



TOM STEVENSON

The problem facing consumers was whether an Alsace wine was dry, which is the style this area is famous for, or sweet, which is the current trend. The simple solution was to introduce an obligatory dry-wine designation. The worst thing to do was to emphasize the sweetness factor, yet that is precisely what was proposed. All wines with a minimum of 12 g/l (9 g/l for Riesling) of residual sugar were to be labelled *moelleux*. If a wine had more than 6 g/l of total acidity, then the minimum residual sugar would rise to 18 g/l. The *sec* designation would be permitted but not be obligatory. The main flaw was that defining the minimum residual-sugar content for a sweet designation does not necessarily mean that wines failing to qualify by this criterion are, in fact, dry. The proposed introduction of *moelleux* thus reduced, not solved, the problem, while from a global perspective, the act of distinguishing which wines are sweet, rather than dry, threatened to erode further Alsace's dry-wine reputation. Anyone who worries about the future of Alsace wine should not be unhappy by the stillbirth of this ill-conceived solution. However, all Alsace consumers should be wary that no replacement strategy is in place.

TOM STEVENSON specializes in champagne, but he is equally passionate about Alsace. In 1987 he was elected a *confrère oenophile* of the Confrérie Saint-Etienne, when he was the sole person to identify correctly a 50-year-old wine made from Sylvaner. In 1994, his 600-page tome *The Wines of Alsace* (Faber & Faber, 1993) won the Veuve Clicquot Book of the Year award in the United States; consumer champion Malcolm Gluck declared it "the greatest wine book ever written, period". Despite being daunted by the thought of writing a revision, pressure from Alsace aficionados has recently persuaded Tom to turn his attention back to this region. However, a new book is "more than a few years away". Tom is chairman of the Alsace panel at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards.

Opinion:

False god of 'physiological ripeness'

The increasing number of sweet *grand cru* and *lieu-dit* wines threatens the reputation and long-term viability of Alsace, yet producers have their heads firmly stuck in the sand, as they claim that the real damage is caused by growers who harvest at high yields, chaptalize, and then stop the fermentation so that the residual sweetness effectively comes out of a bag of sugar. Sure, this happens. And sure, it shouldn't. But do you know what? I don't give a flying *foudre*. We hardly ever see sweet, cheap, chaptalized Alsace wines on export markets, so they pose no threat to any international reputation, whereas the sweetness of Alsace's flagship wines does. Whether seeking out more famous producers or going up in range to more prestigious *lieux-dits* and *grands crus*, it seems that every way a consumer tries to drink better from Alsace, the result is sweeter, not superior.

The climate in Alsace is famously dry and sunny, therefore when grapes are grown at reduced yields on its very best sites, the wines made have some residual sugar. When those grapes are grown by *vignerons* who pursue so-called 'physiological ripeness' (late ripening), it is inevitable that the wines are as sweet as a *vendange tardive*. By all accounts this term was first coined by Zelma Long in the 1980s and, if so, I suspect that she must regret having given birth to such a monster. I started using the term about 10 years ago, but to describe almost the antithesis of the pseudo-scientific claptrap it has become, so I shall be weeding it out of my works in future. Grammatically, physiological ripeness is a nonsense, since the ripening process is intrinsically a physiological one, so what are the dedicated followers of this particular fashion saying, other than they are waiting for the grapes to ripen?

Brain-washed winemakers claim that physiological ripeness involves skin colour, stem maturity, tannin ripeness, aroma development, berry shrivel, pulp texture, and seed ripeness. The truth is that these factors are, along with the conventional parameters of sugar, acidity, and pH, all indicators of the progress of grape ripeness, not of grape ripeness per se. The only ripeness that matters is flavour ripeness (to quote Dr Tony Jordan) and that usually begins when tartaric acid starts to dominate. The only valid physiological test is that grapes come away clean when picked, rather than leaving the pulp adhered to seeds attached to the stems. The decision

when to pick after this point is a quality judgment that, subject to weather considerations, is based purely on the grape variety grown and style of wine produced. If winemakers want to delay harvesting, that is their prerogative, but they should not delude themselves that earlier-picked grapes are not ripe. Neither should they claim, as indeed they do, that it is not possible to make a dry wine on limestone or calcareous clay soils. This is their defence when, while tasting with them, you raise an eyebrow at the sweetness of a Riesling (one of the less sugar-rich varieties). They swear that even Riesling grapes grown on limestone or calcareous clay are far too sugar-rich to make a dry wine by the time they are 'physiologically ripe'. Obviously they have not heard of Clos Ste-Hune or Cuvée Frédéric-Emile, both grown on calcareous clay, both beautifully dry, and both widely acclaimed as among the very greatest of Alsace wines. Or does Trimbach make these wonderful wines from unripe grapes?

Grapevine

- **Alsace advertising** gets the bird! First, it was a duck and a chicken arguing about which of them tasted better with Alsace wine, and now we have airport advertising depicting a stork with a sparkling wine cork fired up its bum, remarking "Blimey, it's lively this Crémant d'Alsace."
- **Attempts to plant GM vines** in Alsace have attracted fierce resistance. Pressure is mounting to prevent the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) in Colmar from resuming field tests of GM vines. The first GM vine was a fan-leaf-resistant rootstock created in 1992 by Professor Pinck at the Institut de Biologie Moléculaire des Plantes in Strasbourg. Later that year INRA started 10 year-long trials at Colmar, but the programme was stopped in 1999 following a strong anti-GM campaign in France. In 2002, this culminated in INAO banning the use of any GM products in all AOC areas. However, the ban was not signed by the French Minister of Agriculture, and this has encouraged INRA to request resumption, a move opposed by Terre et Vin du Monde, a worldwide watchdog organization.
- **Some 1,500 Gewurztraminer vines** belonging to Joseph et Christian Binner, in Ammerschwihr's famous Kaefferkopf, were vandalized in September 2004. The Binner were not the only victims. According to the gendarmerie in Kaysersberg, two other similar acts occurred one month earlier, one close by in Ammerschwihr, the other in Eguisheim. In each case between 1,300 and 1,500 vines (the equivalent of 40 ares, or approximately one acre) were cut down by severing the trunk close to the ground using a special kind of long-handled secateurs. The method employed prevents any chance of reviving the vines and suggests that the culprits had some viticultural knowledge. No arrests have been made.
- **The Regional Trophy** for the Best Alsace Riesling at the 2005 *Decanter* World Wine Awards went to Riesling Grand Cru Saering 2002 Domaines Schlumberger. My fingers are crossed that this wine went on to pick up the International Riesling Trophy.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2004

August was wet, but temperatures were normal, encouraging the vines to be vigorous and verdant. The *véraison* occurred between mid-August and early September, with the vines and clusters enjoying perfect climatic conditions. The grapes were excellent at the start of the harvest, with higher ripeness-acidity levels than in 2001, but rain affected later-harvested grapes. Not likely to match the quality of 2002 or 2001, but might have the edge over 2000 and certainly fresher, fruitier, and more classic than 2003.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2003

Vintage rating: Red: 93, White: 65

There is no doubt that the oppressively hot year of 2003 provided an exceptional and extraordinary growing season, but apart from – potentially – Pinot Noir and a handful of anomalies, the quality is neither exceptional nor extraordinary. Ploughing through 350 wines from this vintage in March 2005 was one of the hardest, most unenjoyable, but academically most instructive tasting experiences of my life. Acidification was allowed by special dispensation, but not everyone took advantage of it and, of those who did, very few got it right, whereas many of those who did not acidify failed to produce wines of any elegance. Most are ugly, with a deadness of fruit. Pinot Noir should be the star, but I have not yet tasted a glut of great Pinot Noir, although the optimist in me hopes that I will have more exciting news in the next edition of *Wine Report*. Putting to one side Pinot Noir, the most expressive 2003 grapes were Pinot Gris, which in fact looked as black as Pinot Noir on the vine, and were made with a natural *vin gris* colour.

2002

Vintage rating: Red: 85, White: 89

Although there is some variability in quality, the best 2002s have the weight of the 2000s, but with far more focus and finesse. Riesling definitely fared best and will benefit from several years' bottle-age, but Gewurztraminer and

Muscat also performed well. The Gewurztraminers are very aromatic, with broad spice notes, whereas the Muscats are exceptionally fresh and floral. Pinot Gris was less successful. Some extraordinary SGNs have been produced.

2001

Vintage rating: Red: 88, White: 90

Most growers rate 2000 over 2001, but size is not everything, and this vintage has the finesse and freshness of fruit that is missing from most of the 2000 bruisers. The hallmark of the 2001 vintage is a spontaneous malolactic that endowed so many of the wines with a special balance. You hardly notice the malolactic in the wines – it is just a creaminess on the finish, more textural than taste, and certainly nothing that can be picked up on the nose. Although I'm an avid fan of non-malolactic Alsace wine, this particular phenomenon left the fruit crystal clear, with nice, crisp acidity.

2000

Vintage rating: Red: 90, White: 80

A generally overrated, oversized vintage, but with a few stunning nuggets. Lesser varieties, such as Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc, made delicious drinking in their first flush of life but have since tired. The classic varieties lack finesse, although some exceptional VTs were made. Excellent reds should have been made, but many were either overextracted or heavily oaked.

1999

Vintage rating: Red: 80, White: 80

An easy-drinking vintage that has started to tire.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 Domaine Zind-Humbrecht
- 2 Domaine Weinbach
- 3 Trimbach (Réserve and above)
- 4 Marcel Deiss
- 5 René Muré
- 6 JosMeyer
- 7 Hugel (Jubilée and above)
- 8 Ostertag
- 9 André Kientzler
- 10 Léon Beyer (Réserve and above)

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Jean Becker
- 3 Hugel
- 4 Ostertag
- 5 Lucien Albrecht
- 6 Paul Blanck
- 7 Albert Boxler
- 8 André Rieffel
- 9 Antoine Stoffel
- 10 Albert Mann

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Lucien Albrecht
- 2 André & Rémy Gresser
- 3 J-P & J-F Becker
(Jean Becker's organic range)
- 4 Bruno Sorg
- 5 Albert Boxler
- 6 Albert Mann
- 7 Antoine Stoffel
- 8 Nicolas Simmler
- 9 Louis Freyburger
- 10 Cave Vinicole de Hunawihr

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Jean Becker
- 3 Lucien Albrecht
- 4 René Muré
- 5 Rolly Gassmann
- 6 Schoffit
- 7 Meyer-Fonné
- 8 Jean-Luc Mader
- 9 Paul Blanck
- 10 Hugel

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 ***Riesling Clos Ste-Hune 2003** Trimbach (€120; not yet released)
- 2 ***Riesling Cuvée Frédéric-Emile 2003** Trimbach (€30; not yet released)
- 3 ***Gewurztraminer Cuvée des Seigneurs de Ribeaupierre 2000** Trimbach (€26.50)
- 4 ***Pinot Noir "F" 2003** Paul Blanck (€22)

Grapevine

• **Planning a visit?** With 46 fêtes and foires every year, there is the opportunity to taste Alsace wines in one village or another almost every week. Make sure that your trip coincides with one of these

- 5 ***Pinot Noir Rorschwihr 2003** Rolly Gassmann (€25; not yet released)
- 6 **Riesling Grand Cru Hengst VT 1995** JosMeyer (€38)
- 7 **Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg SGN 1989** Robert Faller (€41)
- 8 **Engelgarten 2000** Marcel Deiss (€28)
- 9 **Riesling VT 1998** Hugel (€39)
- 10 ***Riesling Les Pierrets 1995** JosMeyer (€16.50)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 ***Gewurztraminer 2002** Trimbach (€15.30)
- 2 ****Gewurztraminer 2003** Léon Faller (€5.40)
- 3 **Riesling Bildstoeklé Cuvée Xavier SGN 1995** Serge Hartmann (€21.60)
- 4 ***Riesling Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim 1988** Georges et Claude Freyburger (€17)
- 5 ***Pinot Gris Barriques 2003** Ostertag (€13.50)
- 6 **Muscat Riquewihr 2003** Bott-Geyl (€8.50)
- 7 **Sylvaner Caprice 2002** René Simonis (€8.50)
- 8 ***Riesling Grand Cru Wineck-Schlossberg 2003** Meyer Fonné (€12.70)
- 9 **Gewurztraminer Bergheim 2003** Marcel Deiss (€30)
- 10 ***Riesling Clos de Château d'Isembourg 2003** Châteaux et Terroirs (€11)

festivities in the area of Alsace you will be visiting by downloading the most up-to-date calendar of events from http://www.vinsalsace.com/en/pdf/calendrier_manifestation.pdf

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 ***Riesling Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim 1988** Georges et Claude Freyburger (€17) *A classy, classic, genuinely dry (4.5 g/l) Riesling for those who are fed up with sweet Alsace grand cru; this mature, honeyed, intense wine is still vital and dancing on the palate after all these years.*
- 2 **Gewurztraminer SGN "S" 1997** Hugel (€77) *The spice is so dominant that it does not even seem sweet, despite 103 g/l of residual sugar.*
- 3 ***Pinot Noir 2003** Stentz-Buecher (€15) *A relatively rare restrained use of oak adds some class and gives the fruit a satisfying creaminess.*
- 4 ***Pinot Noir Jubilé 2003** Hugel (€18.64; not yet released) *The first vintage since 1990 that all three cuvées of Hugel's Pinot Noir were made, and the first vintage that I prefer Jubilé over Les Neveux.*
- 5 **Riesling Brumes Glaciales 2000** Jacques Maetz (€52) *Although not SGN, with a name like Brumes Glaciales ('Freezing Fogs') it is unlikely that anyone buying this stunning wine will be surprised by its 150 g/l of residual sugar.*

- 6 ***Gewurztraminer Cuvée des Comtes 2003** Léon Beyer (€22) *Powerful broad-spice aroma, precocious, with hints of mellow gingerbread complexity already starting to build.*
- 7 ***Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg 1990** André Kientzler (€30) *Wonderfully youthful honeyed richness, very elegant. Needs aerating in a carafe for one hour before serving.*
- 8 ***Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Goldert 2003** Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (€43) *So dry, it is absorbently dry, this gigantic Gewurztraminer uses a sledgehammer for its finish!*
- 9 ***Pinot Noir "F" 2003** Paul Blanck (€22) *A steadily improving wine in Paul Blanck's range, Pinot Noir "F" has come of age with this classy wine.*
- 10 **Muscat Riquewihr 2003** Bott-Geyl (€8.50) *Probably acidified, but well done, if it is, since it nicely balances the 25 g/l of residual sugar to provide full-throttle fruit. Drink as young as possible.*

Notes: * Dry, ** Off-dry

I try to recommend as many dry wines as I can find, but not all of the very best in their categories are indeed dry. Thus, I have started to asterisk those that are.

Grapevine

• **The 8th World Riesling Competition** was held in Strasbourg on 8 March 2005. Of the 569 wines entered from 11 countries, 65 received gold medals, and just five were awarded Premier gold medals, four of which were from Alsace (Riesling Weinberg 2003 Cave Vinicole d'Andlau, Vendanges Tardives Wiebelsberg 2001 Domaine des Marronniers, Grand Cru Schoenenbourg 2002 Domaine

Dopff & Irion, and Vendanges Tardives 2001 Louis Hauller).

• **Maison Jean Becker** joins the small but growing number of producers using the designation of "Gentil" for a classic dry wine made from an assemblage of varieties. The Jean Becker Gentil 2004 is an organic wine with a refreshingly low 2.4 g/l of residual sugar.