

Alsace 2007 and 2006

By [Stephen Tanzer](#)

Nov/Dec 08

At its finest, Alsace is all about juicy, pure white wines with intense fruit flavors, bright acidity, and—in the case of wines from Alsace's grand crus and next-best sites—complex underlying soil tones. By those standards, vintage 2007 is a year for your personal time capsule. Following the difficult harvest of 2006, the growing season of 2007 brought what one grower on my September tour described as “an early vintage with a late-ripening character”—and what most makers agreed is an excellent to outstanding year for this beautiful region. The best producers have made concentrated, firm wines with uncanny precision of flavor, fascinating transparency to site, and the structure for a long and graceful evolution in bottle. A suddenly surging dollar may even make these wines a bit more affordable to American wine lovers.

The 2007 growing season, and the wines. As in most of France, the flowering in the spring of '07 was much earlier than normal (the earliest ever, according to some producers), but the summer was a mostly mediocre affair, as it was across most of France, and the ripening process was drawn out. A hail storm on June 20 sharply reduced crop levels in many vineyards between Niedermorschwihr and Béblenheim, but elsewhere crop levels were mostly above-average to generous. Although the harvest officially started on September 5—even earlier than in the heatwave summer of 2003—the most serious estates picked at their leisure, under mostly superb conditions and often into mid or even late October.

The biggest mistake in 2007 was to pick too early. With the memory of the rain-plagued 2006 harvest fresh in their minds, when fruit not picked quickly often deteriorated rapidly, many risk-averse growers pulled their fruit before it was thoroughly ripe. Early picking in many instances resulted in clean but lean wines that lack pliancy and depth, not to mention complexity and intensity of flavor. For those who picked at their leisure, often stopping repeatedly for days at a time to wait for more perfect ripeness, the fruit was often able to take full advantage of unusually long hang time, developing great depth of flavor and complexity while retaining healthy acidity and snap. There were a couple of rainy days in September, but the last few days of the month and most of October brought beautiful Indian summer conditions. Many of the most patient producers watched their vines enjoy a leisurely accumulation of high-quality noble rot as summer turned to autumn, and some makers produced good quantities of remarkably rich vendanges tardives and sélection de grains nobles wines. Others reported that their fruit was so clean it was impossible to get a real concentration of noble rot at the end.

Some producers expressed the opinion that riesling and gewurztraminer were favored in 2007, but I

certainly tasted outstanding examples across the broad palette of Alsace's varieties. The best rieslings from the best sites are likely to enjoy a slow and glorious evolution in bottle: it occurs to me, by the way, that a top grand cru Alsace riesling at age ten is a better bet to impress with its freshness and complex soil tones these days than a typical white Burgundy. The '07 vintage has also given me a new appreciation for gewurztraminer, as so many of these wines are a bit less exaggerated than usual owing to their bright acidity. It was similarly a year for healthy pinot gris skins. In some recent vintages, pinot gris has had a tendency to be a bit blowsy, tropical or exotic, but in 2007 various wines reminded me of riesling in terms of their vibrancy and structure. Needless to say, this is the formula for a superb wine at the dinner table.

On the other hand, 2006. Following sunny, hot weather in June and July that speeded up the ripening process and led to predictions of a very early harvest, August turned cool and rainy and the ripening slowed considerably. Warm, dry weather in early September brought the fruit close to maturity and raised growers' hopes for another very good harvest. In many sites, the crop was virtually ready to harvest by mid-September. But then an inch or two of warm rain on Sunday, September 17 (a day when it was dry in Burgundy, by the way) triggered an early outbreak of botrytis, including widespread grey rot in vineyards with heavy crop loads and those on flatter, lower land, where the humid summer and some incidence of mildew had already weakened the grape skins. The following Sunday and Monday brought another stormy spell, and the ten days after that were also punctuated with heavy rains, with more than an inch falling on September 30 and two to three inches on October 3 and 4. Finally, Indian summer conditions set in, but the return to clement weather came too late for most vines. With the fruit, especially the pinots, deteriorating rapidly, it was essential to pick quickly and sort carefully on all but the most moisture-resistant sites. Production levels were often low in 2006, mostly a function of strict selection. Only the luckiest, and most carefully farmed vineyards, were able to benefit from a quick spread of noble rot at the end.

Many producers sold off or declassified a significant portion of their '06 production. The 2006s are hardly deficient in ripeness, but they tend to be fruity, creamy and rather soft in structure, more about varietal fruit than site-driven soil complexity. Many wines show varying degrees of earth and mushroom character—or suggestions of honey or exotic fruits—due to damaged grape skins, with pinot gris being the most problematic variety. Next to the 2007s they often lack purity and lift. Still, there are many very good wines in '06, including a number of rieslings and gewurztraminers in particular that are more or less clean, but most of them will be best suited for drinking over the next five to eight years.

I should mention that on my September tour I tasted many '07s within a few weeks after they had been bottled, so it's possible that some of these wines are even better than my current scores indicate. Although some of the estates I visited have already released their basic 2007 bottlings and will start shipping their more important items this fall, others will hold back their grand crus and their limited-quantity late-harvest wines for a year or two—and sometimes longer. But owing to the difficult and often hard-to-sell 2006 vintage, and to a build-up of demand for the wonderfully pure '07s, I fully expect to see many of these wines available sooner rather than later. It remains to be seen how eager U.S. importers are to tie up their limited cash in a category that can be a slow sell in this market, but I am hopeful that a new generation of younger wine drinkers may take advantage of the exciting 2007 vintage to discover these utterly delicious and food-friendly wines. Although prices for Alsace wines can be high—especially for grand crus and late-harvest wines from a handful of renowned estates—I was pleasantly surprised by the number of values on offer in 2007. Incidentally, for a few producers who bottle and ship their wines very late, I have published notes on currently available 2005s that I was unable to taste on my last visit to Alsace two years ago.

A few final notes: First, all grand cru vineyard names in the Alsace wines reviewed in this issue are denoted in italic type. Also, acidity figures provided are expressed in tartaric acidity (normally used

in Alsace as well as in Germany), which is roughly 1.5 times acidity expressed as sulfuric (the scale normally used in Burgundy). With very few exceptions, the wine notes are presented in the order in which the wines were shown to me. And please note that 2007s listed as VT or SGN are not yet "official": to be entitled to these label designations, the wines must be submitted to, and approved by, the INAO during the second spring and summer after the vintage.

Hugel et Fils, Riquewihr

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Marc Hugel reminded me that the ban de vendange in 2007 was September 5 for the still wines, which was even earlier than in 2003. The Hugels started picking five days after that but then took their time. Following a flowering that began almost a month earlier than the long-term average (on May 20) and then finished in a quick week, there was a minimum of 110 days between the flowering and the harvest-and much more in the case of botrytized fruit picked into mid-October. That was largely due to the very cool summer. "Between June 21 and July 11, the maximum afternoon temperatures here only reached about 72 degrees," Hugel told me. "In the end it was an early vintage with a late-ripening character." The family sold off about a third of their 2006 production in bulk and sharply reduced the quantities of their top bottlings. "Too many of the wines have an earthy, flinty taste," noted Hugel, who added that the vintage was best for gewurztraminer, as well as for muscat, whose big berries made it easy to reject grapes with damaged skins. (Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York, NY)
Also recommended: 2007 Gentil (86), 2006 Pinot Gris (86).
Other wines tasted: 2007 Pinot Blanc*.



Marc Hugel
Photo Credit: [Stephen Tanzer](#)

2007 Hugel et Fils Pinot Blanc Cuvee Les Amours

(\$18) Pure aromas of stone and citrus fruits and flowers. Then ripe and dense in the mouth, with very good lift to the apple and pear flavors. Strong, pure pinot blanc with a solid kernel of fruit nicely framed by lively acidity (half of the wine went through malolactic fermentation).

87

2006 Hugel et Fils Muscat Tradition

(\$24) Subtle aromas of mint and flowers. Fresh and bright, with lovely inner-mouth lift to the lime blossom and mint flavors. Clean and lively for the vintage.

87

2007 Hugel et Fils Muscat Tradition

(\$24) Bright, pale color. Subtle aromas of quinine, mint and lily of the valley. Ripe, fresh and aromatic, with good acid spine giving cut to the finish. Firmly structured for tradition; this will get mintier with a few years of bottle aging.

88

2006 Hugel et Fils Pinot Noir Jubilee

(\$42) Pale red. Cherry, raspberry, spices and a hint of earth on the nose. Leanish and penetrating, with juicy acidity enlivening the maraschino cherry flavor. Finishes with dusty tannins and a slight dryness. Note that this is 12.7% alcohol, vs. 13.8% for the '07.

2007 Hugel et Fils Pinot Noir Jubilee

(\$42) Good medium red. Riper and deeper but less open and fruity on the nose than the 2006, showing a medicinal aspect to the smoky plum and red cherry aromas. Broad, rich, dense and sweet, with an enticing pliant texture and a mineral undertone to its black cherry flavors. A fairly large-scaled and impressive Alsace pinot noir that finishes with sweet, smooth tannins. This may well merit a 90+ rating with four or five years of bottle aging.

89(+?)

2006 Hugel et Fils Riesling

(\$24) Pale, bright yellow. Pineapple, crushed stone and a whiff of exotic flowers on the nose, along with a fusel nuance. Then juicy and lively in the mouth, with good intensity to the pineapple and stone flavors. This wine included fully 95% of the house's riesling fruit in '06, including a good bit of Schoenenbourg, which has contributed minerality and depth.

88

2007 Hugel et Fils Riesling

(\$24) Pale, bright color. Reticent, pure nose hints at citrus peel and mint. Quite tight in the mouth, with strong acidity keeping the grapefruit and stone flavors in check today. But this juicy wine finishes with plenty of verve and length. I wouldn't broach this until at least the summer of 2009. This has 7.8 grams of acidity after about 20% of the wine went through malolactic fermentation.

88(+?)

2007 Hugel et Fils Riesling Jubilee

(\$63) Pale color. Ineffable aromas of lime blossom, powdered stone and violet sea salt, with a hint of the Schoenenbourg's grapefruit bitterness. Dense and spicy, with distinctly high-pitched flavors of grapefruit, lemon pith, crushed stone and minerals. This actually enters the mouth with a suggestion of sweetness (it has 6.5 g/l r.s.) but finishes firm, dry and almost painfully backward. Outstanding for this bottling, and doubtless built for a long and graceful evolution. (In comparison to this wine, the '05 comes across as fuller and a bit more evolved, and in more of a hot-year style.)

92(+?)

2007 Hugel et Fils Pinot Gris Tradition

(\$27) Pale color. Sexy aromas of peach, honey, flowers, butter and fresh herbs. Sweetly spicy in the mouth, with lovely ripe acidity giving firmness to the rather creamy mid-palate. This makes the '06 version seem dry-edged in comparison. This wine's 4.5 grams of residual sugar are masked by lively acids.

88

2007 Hugel et Fils Pinot Gris Jubilee

(\$39) Pale straw-yellow color. Aromas of quince, pear, mirabelle, flowers and minerals. Very ripe but sappy, with a slightly glyceric texture leavened by harmonious acidity. Finishes with a bit of youthful aggressiveness but plenty of energy. Very young today.

89(+?)

2007 Hugel et Fils Gewurztraminer

(\$26) Bright, pale yellow. Pure, perfumed nose offers yellow fruits, flowers, smoked meat and a hint of banana: this couldn't be anything but gewurztraminer. Then supple, broad and just off-dry, with lovely freshness to its rich yellow fruit and spice flavors. A very good tradition bottling.

87

2006 Hugel et Fils Gewurztraminer Jubilee

(\$53) Good bright yellow. Open nose offers exotic pineapple and a lightly roasted character; I might have picked this as a riesling affected by botrytis. Sweet, broad and full; less complex than usual for this bottling but clean and concentrated. Finishes with a lightly bitter edge.

88

2007 Hugel et Fils Gewurztraminer Jubilee

(\$53) Deep straw-yellow. Subtle, reticent nose hints at smoked meat and dusty brown spices. Fat, dense and deep, with an enticing deep sweetness currently masking the wine's inherent complexity. With time in the glass, this exploded with spices. An extremely young wine with impressive power and length. This clocks in at 14.5% alcohol, the highest ever for this bottling.

91(+?)

2006 Hugel et Fils Gewurztraminer Vendanges Tardives

(\$75) Pear, honey and spices on the nose, along with hints of resin and earth. Supersweet-verging-on-confectionery, with a honeyed noble rot character currently dominating the middle palate. Showing less nuance today than the 2007 Jubilee, but finishes with good juicy grip. A rather high 108 g/l r.s. here. (Incidentally, I raised my score on the '05 VT to a solid 92 points. The earlier vintage shows exotic but clean and complex aromas; a wonderfully suave entry and lovely inner-

mouth perfume; and the grip, structure and sheer concentration to gain in bottle for many years. But it's also a taste treat today.)

89

2007 Hugel et Fils Gewurztraminer Selection de Grains Nobles

(\$193) Bright yellow-gold. Pungent, pristine aromas of citrus fruits, flowers and lichee; wonderfully elegant on the nose. Utterly brilliant in the mouth, with great purity and intensity to its yellow fruits and flowers, all sharpened by firm (7.7 grams per liter) acidity. A saline element and some honey in the background just add to the complexity of this essence of gewurztraminer. Wonderfully racy for a wine with 172 g/l r.s., and incredibly long on the aftertaste. It's premature to compare this to Hugel's epic 1976 Gewurztraminer SGN bottlings, but this wine may be even finer.

97(+?)

2007 Hugel et Fils Pinot Gris Selection de Grains Nobles

(\$172; with 28% potential alcohol, these were the most sugar-laden grapes in pinot gris since the 1989 vintage; 212 g/l r.s. with 11 grams of acidity) Full medium gold. Pure, high-toned botrytis notes of fruit salad, honey and earth. Then penetrating and almost painfully gripping, with huge acidity leavening the wine's glycerol texture and giving the apricot and saline flavors an almost brutal quality today. This extremely young wine is all extract and power today. Finishes with explosive, building length.

95+