

Johnny Hugel (1924–2009)

by Tom Stevenson

I first met Johnny Hugel over 20 years ago while researching *The Wines of Alsace*. Having tasted with him earlier in the week, Johnny invited my wife and me to Sunday lunch with his family at their home. When we arrived, two elderly women were knitting in the corner; his mother and, I think, an aunt. Just as we were leaving, they finished knitting and insisted on giving my wife the result: a tiny baby's jacket! At the time we wondered whether she knew something we did not, but sadly this was not to be, and we still have the little jacket to this day. From stranger to a guest at the family table, receiving the most personal of gifts, all in a matter of a few days. Such was the warmth and generosity of Johnny Hugel and the family from which he came.

I don't know anyone who ever met Johnny Hugel who did not instantly have a genuine and long-lasting affection for the man. He spoke to all of us in exactly the same way, with an enthusiasm that seemed to catch his breath as the words burst out. He was larger than life, with so much humor and personality that it was impossible to imagine his presence could ever disappear. He was indestructible, or so we thought, until just before 8pm on Tuesday June 9, 2009, when he slipped away with Simone, his loving wife, by his side. He left two adopted daughters, Dominique and Judith, and four grandchildren, on whom he doted, taking them to the vineyards to see the tractors as often as he could.

Johnny may no longer be with us, but he has left so many people such happy, sometimes hilariously happy, memories that he will never be forgotten. He will not simply be remembered, he will be fondly remembered. Look at the tributes that started to pour in after only a few hours of Etienne Hugel setting up a blog at hugel.com and you will see that Johnny touched everyone, from the good and

the great of the global wine trade, to individual consumers he spoke to only once. Almost everyone he met has a story to tell, but the one person he opened up to was Nick Clarke MW, who had long imported Hugel wines. Anyone who knows Nick Clarke will understand why Johnny could tell him stories about his war years for the first time in 60 years. Johnny was like so many of his generation who had to face horrors that few could speak about. The only way to survive and remain sane was through a humor that made light of their terrible predicament, and one of the things that Johnny and Nick shared was a wicked sense of humor. I would like to extend my gratitude to Nick for revealing this side of Johnny's life. Too much is lost because we do not ask questions when we have the opportunity, then one day it's too late.

I have many memories of the great man, but the one that is just so typical of Johnny took place at Le Gavroche restaurant in London in 2001. He had retired, supposedly, in 1997, when his nephews Etienne, Jean-Philippe, and Marc became the 13th generation to run the company, but that did not stop him going to work every day. His retirement was announced again in 1998, and his nephews even created a cuvée to mark the event, *Homage à Jean Hugel*, but still Johnny did not take the hint. And here he was, four years into his retirement, representing Hugel at a *Maisons d'Alsace* tasting in London. I was tasting at the Schlumberger table when Johnny spotted me. He came over flourishing an open bottle of Gewurztraminer, sloshing a bit to his left and to his right in the process, apologizing to those in his wake, and cheekily tried to pour a glass in front of Eveline Schlumberger. You just do not do that sort of thing, but Johnny did and he was about the only person who could get away with it. I quickly covered the top of my glass, explaining that I was methodically tasting dry wines first, starting with Riesling, and going from producer to producer. He said, "If you want to taste dry Riesling, come over to the Hugel table. Apart from Vendange Tardive and SGN [*Sélection de Grains Nobles*], we make only dry wines. You

won't find any residual sugar in our wines." To cut a long story short, after I had finished at Schlumberger, I went over to Johnny and asked, "So where is this dry Riesling, then?" He poured a shot, and after a quick swirl around the mouth I exclaimed, "But this is sweet, Johnny!" He looked at me in disbelief, then checked the label and declared with a big grin, "Ah! That explains it. I thought we were showing the 1999, but this is 1997. A very ripe vintage. All our dry wines were sweet that year!"

Legal legacy: VT and SGN

I was quoted by Decanter.com as saying that "Johnny Hugel was the single most important person in the development of the Alsace wine industry throughout the 20th century." How true that is. Alsace is in enough of a mess as it is, but it would be in much deeper trouble if not for Johnny Hugel. He was one of two or three people responsible for establishing the post-war reputation of Alsace wines on the international market. For those of us weaned on Alsace wines in the 1970s or earlier, we knew Hugel, Trimbach, and maybe Beyer. If we dug a bit deeper, we discovered Schlumberger, Dopff, or Kuentz-Bas, but that was essentially it. This was the time when Alsace was the wine trade's best-kept secret, when merchants knowingly ordered far more wine than they could sell, and were happy to do so because they looked forward to drinking it! Never was the reputation of Alsace higher, albeit among a tiny elite.

Johnny Hugel was one of the most vocal guardians of that post-war reputation, an achievement he shared with the likes of Hubert Trimbach and Marc Beyer. But what elevated him to "the single most important person in the development of the Alsace wine industry throughout the 20th century," was the role he played in establishing the legislation for Vendange Tardive, SGN, and Alsace grands crus. Today's poor, downtrodden Alsace aficionados might find this hard to grasp. After all, isn't the root of this region's problems inextricably linked to the increasing sweetness of its wines and the tarnished image of its grand cru system? Well, yes,



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but without Johnny's commonsense contribution to these two controversial matters, the destination of Alsace would be a one-way road to the land of cru classé, medium-sweet mediocrity.

The problem with sweetness in Alsace has nothing to do with its small number of late-harvest gems, and everything to do with the increasing amount of sweetness that has crept into wines that loyal Alsace customers could once confidently anticipate to be dry to one degree or another. If and when the majority of Alsace producers realize just how difficult it will become to survive on a reputation for not just residual sugar, but for erratic and unpredictable levels of residual sugar, then they might come to understand the wisdom of restricting production to the designations devised by Johnny Hugel. He conceived Vendange Tardive and SGN as the French equivalents of Spätlese and Auslese or Beerenauslese, and forced through the toughest wine legislation in France to guarantee their quality. As highly desirable niche products they could live hand in glove with the traditional dry-wine image of Alsace, but flooding the market with cheaper sweet wines has not only devalued their specialness, it has also destroyed the image of Alsace as a traditionally dry wine region. If Alsace producers come to their senses and steer back most wines to the land of the genuinely dry, they will be grateful to Johnny Hugel's legal legacy ring-fencing Vendange Tardive and SGN for what they are: rare and special.

Grand cru contribution

Johnny's contribution to the Alsace grand cru system is often overlooked. Both Hugel and Trimbach are widely known to oppose the grands crus, yet both used the term grand cru on their labels in the past. Furthermore, Johnny Hugel was president of the first commission to advise INAO on grands crus. So how and why did he jump horses? The committee he presided over between 1975 and 1978 was the most prestigious and expert body to contemplate the concept of Alsace grands crus. In addition to Johnny and two extremely knowledgeable growers,



there was Robert Marocke, the eminent geological expert and co-author of *Terroirs et Vins d'Alsace*. At that time, Johnny believed that a grand cru system was inevitable. How could he not? As a believer in terroir and an inhabitant of one of the most terroir-complex regions, he knew certain individual sites were viticulturally superior to others, thus there had to be a collection of the *crème de la crème* that were, unquestionably, the greatest of all. But when no fewer than 94 *lieux-dits* were proffered by the growers in 1975 for consideration as potential grands crus, Johnny was shocked. He had not heard of half of them! He reckoned the only way to get things right was to be in the middle of it, arguing his case, but after three years he realized the impossibility of the task and resigned. Later in his life, he claimed he was sacked, but resigned or sacked, the last straw for Johnny was Schlossberg. This was the first grand cru to be delimited, and Johnny's committee classified 20ha (50 acres) as Grand Cru Schlossberg. But growers outside this area also wanted to be included; and if they were accepted, then there would be an almost endless line of growers waiting to make their case. The queue of growers refused to accept the committee's decision until it was disbanded, and to no one's surprise the replacement committee managed to find 80ha (198 acres) for Grand Cru Schlossberg. Johnny Hugel thought the

original 20ha to be on the generous side, and soon joked about the Hanging Gardens of Kientzheim, in which the vines are planted on top of each other. Alsace might have too many grands crus that are not true grands crus, and boundaries that are so bloated from their historic roots that they are a farce. But following the stand of Johnny Hugel and his committee, even the generous new committee felt constrained to classify only 25 of the 94 proffered sites as grands crus in 1982. The growers flexed their muscles, and another 23 grands crus were announced in 1985. But aware of Schlossberg's much criticized size, the new committee took nearly ten years to delimit their boundaries. So Alsace's much maligned grands crus could be a lot worse, but for Johnny Hugel.

Although theoretically retired since 1997, Johnny did not stop working until ordered to do so by his doctor in February this year. He still insisted on driving himself for blood tests every couple of days in his Hugel-yellow Peugeot. Even on March 11, the day he had to be rushed to intensive care, he agreed to be interviewed by a French author. According to his will, Johnny's ashes will be scattered over the Schoenenbourg. Why does this not surprise me? Because he was always saying that "cemeteries are full of people who thought they were irreplaceable." Well, that's one thing he got wrong.