

Riesling Report

A man in a dark suit and glasses is looking at a tablet in a wine cellar. The cellar is filled with large wooden barrels, and the lighting is dim and warm, creating a cozy atmosphere. The man is standing in the center of the frame, looking down at the tablet he is holding. The background shows rows of barrels stretching into the distance.

An online magazine for Riesling fanatics

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2000

Alluring Alsace

*Picturesque medieval villages, friendly folk
and wines that will blow your mind!*

IN THIS ISSUE:

**Alsace's
1998 vintage**

Estate Reviews:

Léon Beyer
Domaine Weinbach

Traveling in Alsace

www.rieslingreport.com

Riesling Reporter
Peter Liem nearly
loses his mind in
the cellars of Alsace.

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Eating Alsace

If you want to learn how to eat, take a trip to Alsace. There, eating is no rarified "haute cuisine" art form (though it often is quite artistic), it's one of the essential, genuinely gut-level pleasures of life. And you don't need to drop a week's pay at one of the three-stars to find great cooking.

One day in April, when we had ample time between winery visits, we opted to take our midday meal in one of Alsace's many fine village restaurants. As I have learned to do in France, I ordered the menu of the day, in this case, *le menu d'affaires* — not a recommendation for infidelity, but "the business lunch." This turned out to be a two-hour affair that included an *amuse bouche* (demi-tasse servings of three stunning soups), an *entrée* (*terrines de viande*), and a main course (roasted chicken). All accompanied brilliantly by a delightful pair of Alsace Rieslings. Then followed dessert (three sorbets). It was truly a grand dining experience.

The next day, a bit more pressed for time, we grabbed toaster-oven *tartes flambées* from the nearest *charcuterie* and wolfed them down out on the street. Delicious! In Alsace, eating is always grand.

—Kirk Wille, editor & publisher

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- Web sites mentioned in this publication are linked to their Internet addresses. If you click on one, your default browser will be activated.

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Everything Alsace

TOM STEVENSON'S LENGTHY TOME ON ALSACE is simply the definitive reference to the diverse and captivating wines of this region. Impressively comprehensive and extremely well-researched, this is compulsory reading for anybody seriously interested in the wines of Alsace.

The book is divided into informative sections on history, viticulture, wine villages, vineyards, styles of wine and producers. The organization maintains readability yet allows specific details to be easily accessed — no small feat, as the sheer amount of data contained in this book is staggering. For example, all 118 wine-producing villages of Alsace have an entry, as do the 50 grands crus, 84 lieux-dits, 28 clos and four wine-producing châteaux. Over 300 producers are profiled, and Stevenson's vintage chart stretches from 1992 back to 585! Want to know the soil composition of Schlossberg? How about the vineyard holdings of René Muré? Need the figures for the minimum ripeness levels of Vendanges Tardives, or the phone number of Bernard Schoffit? It's all right here in one concise, portable format.

Yet this is far from being merely an encyclopedia of Alsace. As one of the world's foremost experts on the region, Stevenson offers us a glimpse into his unique insights and vast experiences. He does not focus on notes for specific wines (with the exception of Clos Ste.-Hune), though he does discuss general characteristics of various cuvées when he details individual producers, as well as cite those that he feels are the top examples of each style of wine. His opinions on various vineyard sites and soil types are also intriguing, as well as his discussion on the delimitation of the grands crus, perhaps the most controversial subject concerning Alsace wines.

The scope of this book is monumental, and Stevenson delivers with authority, erudition and style. His passion for Alsace and its wines is infectious, and deliberately so: in Stevenson's own words, he aims for his book to inspire as much as edify. At the end of his introduction, he offers a challenge: "I dare you to convert just one person a year to Alsace wine and to pass the dare on to each of your converts." With the aid of this book, that dare is not so difficult to fulfill. We here at the Riesling Report accept it wholeheartedly, and would encourage each of you to do the same.



The Wines of Alsace

by Tom Stevenson

Faber and Faber

Paperback 601 pp.

First published in 1993

"I dare you to convert just one person a year to Alsace wine and to pass the dare on to each of your converts."

— Challenge issued to wine lovers by Tom Stevenson in the introduction to *The Wines of Alsace*

Alluring Alsace

GIVEN ITS HISTORY AS A FRANCO-GERMAN ping-pong ball (with the Rhine for a net), it's no great surprise that Alsace is a region of contrasts and contradictions. Snugly back under the French wing since World War I, Alsace remains a land between — neither French nor German, but decidedly both.

There is no identity crisis in Alsace, but the region, its people and its wines are intriguingly multi-faceted and complex. In most tasting rooms you will hear conversations flowing back and forth between French and German — both are at home in Alsace. The people of Alsace are proud, but never pompous or imperious. They've learned how to roll with the historical punches and just enjoy life while they can. That makes for a very enjoyable time when you're on a wine tour.

Terroir — from the ground up

There was a time when the Rhine River flowed south to the Mediterranean Sea. But about 50 million years ago, a huge rift opened up between the Vosges Mountains and the Black Forest, redirecting the river and exposing a bewildering array of soil types. The astonishing range of wine styles and winemaker personalities in Alsace today is as varied as the remarkable geology of the region.

Alsace is a long, narrow area bounded on the west by the Vosges Mountains, which protect the region from harsh Atlantic weather, and by the Rhine to the east. This mountain-to-river descent creates three main categories of vineyard: steep slopes at the base of the Vosges, moderate slopes in the foothills, and the alluvial plains between the river and the foothills.

The mountain vineyards have mostly poor, rocky granite and volcanic soils that produce racy, elegant wines, especially from Riesling. The foothills tend toward calcareous, marly or sandstone soils, which, depending on their composition, produce bigger, more powerful and perfumed wines. The water-deposited silt and gravel of the plains produces heavier, less interesting wines with lower acidity.

Centuries of experimentation have shown winemakers which varieties work best in each of these terroirs. The problem is that of the six white varieties in Alsace (see sidebars), all have at least some ability to shine in a multiplicity of soils. That is why Alsace has such a long history of field blends — the different varieties often grow well side by side. Riesling, of course, is the king chameleon, and can be good from almost anywhere in Alsace. But to be great, Riesling needs a terroir that allows it plenty of time to ripen without losing acidity. This happens mostly in the granitic mountain vineyards and the sandstone or limestone vineyards of the foothills.



Perhaps even more so than the wines, Alsace is renowned for its classic, ultra-picturesque half-timbered architecture. This is the original house at the Albert Boxler winery in Niedermorschwihr.

The four Grand Cru grapes of Alsace

Riesling

Always the most refined and elegant, even when it's massive and powerful. Accounts for 23% of annual production.

Gewurztraminer

Considered by many to be the classic Alsace variety. The best are intense but seductively floral. 18% of production.

Tokay Pinot Gris

Rich, complex and full-bodied. Often with a smoky, burnished quality that seems uniquely Alsatian. 10% of production.

Muscat d'Alsace

Almost never sweet, Alsace Muscat is delicate, freshly aromatic and rather hard to find. Only 2.5% of production.

The style spectrum

To the incredibly diverse palette of styles that is already possible from the various terroir/variety combinations, we must now add another complicating factor: the personality of the winemaker. Differences in winemaking style are certainly not unique to Alsace, but somehow it seems more pronounced here. Perhaps it's the compactness of the region that brings everything into tighter focus.

One end of the style spectrum is firmly anchored by the anti-residual sweetness camp. For producers such as Léon Beyer, Trimbach and Josmeyer, a wine's first duty is to be dry. Absolutely dry (excepting of course the rare VTs and SGNs). At the other end you'll find producers such as Marcel Deiss and Zind-Humbrecht who have no quarrel with sweetness in the wine. They just want to harvest the ripest fruit that they can and ferment it until the alcohol, acid and sweetness are in balance.

They all agree that terroir is everything, but how they decide to express it is where the stylistic differences really show. Some harvest a whole plot at once, believing that's the best way to capture the essence of the terroir. Others pick in successive *tries* to achieve uniform ripeness. Some are forsaking the modern world's infatuation with single-variety wines and are making at least one traditional field blend. Still others won't even blend different barrels of the same wine! Some use scientific precision in the vineyard and cellar, while others work totally by instinct.

Making sense of it all

Fifty million years ago, in the Tertiary period of the Cenozoic era, Alsace was a shifting wasteland ripped asunder by a cataclysmic geological event. Now it is a vinous wonderland that defies neat and tidy categorization. Alsace wines are dry, but they're not. They're not at all about fruit, but they're all about fruit. Terroir is of supreme importance, but so is grape variety.

While the world of Alsace wine may seem hopelessly and dauntingly complicated, it's the kind of complexity that only makes the whole thing more fascinating. It's like visiting a great bookstore or art gallery — you can browse endlessly and never lose interest. There's always something new and exciting around the next corner. Walking the forking path of discovery is one of the truly wonderful things about being sentient, so revel in the complexity, celebrate the diversity, throw yourself headlong into the glittering pool of Alsace!



The view from the mountain slopes of Grand Cru Sommerberg looks over the foothills and beyond to the plains of the Rhine Valley.

The other major grapes of Alsace

Pinot Blanc

Usually fairly round and soft, though quite enjoyable. Often blended with the broader Pinot Auxerrois and called simply "Pinot d'Alsace." 21% of annual production.

Sylvaner

Light and fresh, Sylvaner from Alsace is an easy-drinking everyday wine. From old vines, however, it can be quite interesting. 14% of production.

Pinot Noir

The only red variety in Alsace, it also has the ability to transmit vineyard character like the whites. That's why most Riesling fanatics are also Burgundy lovers. 8.5% of production, much of which is used to make sparkling Crémant d'Alsace.

Touring Alsace



THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT ALSACE THAT immediately makes you feel comfortable, welcome and right at home. Recently, after 15 hours of airports and planes, followed by a three-hour drive, I arrived in Turckheim, frazzled and frayed, only to

find that the hotel I thought I had booked was closed for remodeling. No matter. The angel of Alsace was watching over me. I simply walked around the corner and found another charming little hotel with a friendly host and a comfortable, if oddly designed, room available.

As I unloaded my stuff from the car, I swear I could hear a whole host of angels singing their blessings from on high. I soon realized that I was parked next to the church and a choral performance was underway. A free performance, as it turned out, and, being a long-time devotee of the Euterpean muse, I ventured inside. A few minutes, or possibly a lifetime, later I emerged feeling totally refreshed and renewed. There's nothing like a well-sung 16th century motet to revitalize the spirit.

Setting up camp

Most travel books suggest using Colmar as a base of operations for exploring Alsace. That's not a bad suggestion. Colmar is big and sprawling by Alsace standards, but the old center is quite interesting. There are lots of delightful shops and plenty of great places to eat and drink.

But for really exploring the wines of Alsace, you need to be out in the villages where the grape-stomping action is. Peter and I have found **Eguisheim** to be a good central location from which to strike out into the Haut-Rhin, the upstream part of Alsace from Thann to Bergheim, where most of the greatest wines are made. Eguisheim is a delightful Medieval village close to Colmar. It has a very helpful tourist office and there are many lodging choices. Best of all, there is *Caveau d'Eguisheim*, one of the finest of many splendid restaurants in Alsace. No Michelin stars, just superb service and excellent cooking. I had the most perfectly roasted small chicken (*volaille*) in a glorious morel cream sauce.

There are many other very inviting villages as well, nearly 120 of them. I don't like to think of myself as a hillbilly, but growing up in the foothills of the Oregon Cascades apparently is the cause of my preference for hill towns. I just love the way a little village like Nieder-morschwihr nestles into a narrow cleft in the mountains. And I don't think there can be a more picturesque place than Kaysersberg, complete with babbling brook below and towering castle above. These are sleepy little towns, however. You won't find any Studio 54 action — just a genuine immerse-yourself-in-the-culture experience that can't be beat.

A few restaurants and hotels we liked

BERGHEIM

Winstub du Sommelier

51 Grand Rue
T (+33) 389-73-6966
F (+33) 389-73-3658

EGUISHEIM

Caveau d'Eguisheim

3 Place du Château St. Léon IX
T (+33) 389-41-0889
F (+33) 389-23-7999

La Grangelière

59 Rue du Rempart Sud
T (+33) 389-23-0030
F (+33) 389-23-6162

Auberge du Rempart

3 Rue de Rempart Sud
T (+33) 389-41-1687
F (+33) 389-41-0650

COLMAR

Winstub Brenner

1 Rue Turenne
T (+33) 389-41-4233
F (+33) 389-41-3799

KAYSERSBERG

Hôtel-Restaurant l'Arbre Vert

1 Rue Haute du Rempart
T (+33) 389-47-1151
F (+33) 389-78-1340

Chambard (one Michelin star)

9 Rue du Général de Gaulle
T (+33) 389-47-1017
F (+33) 389-47-3503



After a long day of tasting wine and trekking through the steep vineyards, you'll want a satisfying meal and a comfortable place to collapse so you can be rested and ready for the next day's eating and drinking. This part is easy. It's almost impossible to get a bad meal in Alsace — just follow your nose. Lodging is plentiful and well documented. (The French take their human creature comforts very seriously.) The *Logis de France* guide to hotel-restaurant choices in Alsace is very helpful. You can request a printed copy by sending a fax to (+33) 8815-4580, or you can browse the guide online at www.logis-de-france.fr.

If you want an even more down-home French countryside experience, consider one of the many bed and breakfasts (*chambres d'hôtes*) in the area. We were well-tended guests of M. et Mme Pascal Colaianni in Beblenheim (at the corner of Riesling and Muscat!), and really enjoyed the personal attention. Information on most of the *chambres d'hôtes* in France is available online at www.gites-de-france.fr, where you can also order a printed copy of the complete guide for 140 francs (about \$20) plus postage.

Communication skills

Language is not too much of a problem in Alsace these days. If you speak a little French or German, even if it's just enough to order a glass of wine, you will get along famously with the locals. English is becoming more and more common, especially among the younger folk, but the smaller the town, the less likely it is you'll be able to find an accommodating Alsatian anglophone to translate for you.

Taking the time to learn a few basic phrases is well worth the effort so you can order intelligently in a restaurant and book a room without ending up sleeping in a van down by the river. Everyone loves it when a visitor shows a genuine interest in learning about the culture, not just stomping through just to check a few tourist sights off of a list and then move on.

Because you're an intelligent, dedicated Riesling fanatic, I can guarantee that you will have a wonderful time in Alsace, and I hope you get the chance to go sometime very soon. Your enthusiasm for fine wine and your love of great cooking will be greeted with equal love and enthusiasm (I believe that's Newton's second law of winodynamics). Unlike the jaded, cloistered wine princes in Burgundy and Bordeaux, the *vignerons* of Alsace are eager to meet you and show you their best. You see, they too are Riesling fanatics!

La Route des Vins d'Alsace



This map is from a booklet called "Guide to the wines of Alsace," published by the Alsace Information Centre, part of CIVA (Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace) in Colmar. They have many helpful booklets that you can request, and lots of information on their Web site: www.vinsalsace.com

Other information sources on the Web

www.visit-alsace.com (Lodging, restaurants, history)
www.logis-de-france.fr (Hotels with restaurants)
www.gites-de-france.fr (B&Bs, longer visits)
www.ot-colmar.fr (Colmar's tourism office)

The Grands Crus of Alsace

ALSACE HAS AN EXTREMELY LONG HISTORY as a fine wine region. As far back as the Middle Ages, the wines of Alsace were hot commodities in the Western world and growers imposed strict quality controls on themselves to preserve their market share. Unfortunately, Alsace is right at the center of the European chess board, and centuries of feudal aggression created an unstable environment for wine growing. Yet, in spite of it all, Alsace produced more than twice as much wine in the late 16th century than it does today.

In the 17th century, the bitterly fought Thirty Years' War between the kings of France and the Holy Roman Empire destroyed nearly all of the vineyards and decimated the population of Alsace. King Louis XIV could barely give land away in an effort to attract farmers back to the region.

For Alsace, the Renaissance came a few centuries later than for the rest of Europe. Since returning to French hands after World War I, Alsace has regained its status as a high-quality wine region. In 1962 the French government established the first official Alsace AOC. Then, in 1975, after much political wrangling, the AOC "Alsace Grand Cru" was devised, followed by AOC "Crémant d'Alsace" in 1976.

There are now 50 grand cru vineyards, representing just three percent of annual production. Even with this low figure, there is still some grumbling that the grand cru delineations were more political than practical. Every village, it seems, wanted a grand cru to call its own. Another complaint about the grand cru system is that it forced Alsace into the world of strict varietal purity. Whereas varietal blends were a popular tradition in the old days, they are now the exception. Aside from a few producers (like Marcel Deiss) who are trying to revive the tradition, most of the blended wine in Alsace today is cheap bulk wine marketed locally as Edelzwicker. Even if it is a great wine from a grand cru site, a varietal blend cannot be labeled as grand cru.

And then there are the long-standing wine houses that already had established a solid reputation for their wines. It makes no sense for a producer like Trimbach to give up the wholly owned Clos Ste-Hune and call it grand cru Rosacker. In their estimation, all that would do is help out lesser producers who benefited from Rosacker being classified, but have done nothing to improve the quality of their wines. Hugel and Léon Beyer are of the same mind.

While it's still not perfect, Alsace's grand cru classification does give you a framework for assimilating the various terroirs. There's a very interesting article in *La Revue du Vin de France* that groups the grands crus in 10 distinct classes of terroir (see box). Learning what effect the different terroirs have on the wines gives you some practical tools for sorting out the incredible range of wines in Alsace.



When traveling in Alsace, you will have no trouble spotting the Grand Cru Goldert vineyard outside the village of Guebenschwihr.

The Grands Crus of Alsace

MOUNTAIN SLOPES

Granitic

- Brand (Turckheim)
- Frankstein (Dambach-la-Ville)
- Praelatenberg (Kintzheim)
- Schlossberg (Kintzheim)
- Sommerberg (Niedermorschwihr)
- Wineck Schlossberg (Katzenthal, Ammerschwihir)

Schistous

- Kastelberg (Andlau)

Volcanic sandstone

- Muenchberg (Nothalten)
- Rangén de Thann

Sandstone

- Kessler (Guebwiller)
- Kitterlé (Guebwiller)
- Wiebelsberg (Andlau)

This classification of the terroirs of Alsace Grands Crus comes from the March 2000 issue of *La Revue du Vin de France*. Phone (+33) 344-03-2617

[continues on page 9]

Alsace 1998: A vintage of purity and finesse

LIKE MANY OTHER GROWING REGIONS IN EUROPE, Alsace experienced extreme weather conditions in 1998, most notably during a heat wave in August that posed the threats of sun-burned grapes and water stress. September, in contrast, saw a great deal of rain, but most grapes were harvested during a sunny period in October. The humid conditions provoked widespread botrytis and some grey rot, as well, but in the cases where the rot was of the noble variety, the resulting concentration was beneficial, combating the threat of dilution from so much rain.

Despite the difficulties involved, 1998 proved once again that it is not always the perfectly clement vintages that give top-quality wines. Francis Burn of Maison Ernest Burn, who made a tremendous set of wines in 1998, clearly preferred these to the '97s, saying, "It was a very good year, '97, but there were no extraordinary wines." Great wines, he believes, come from the years where both the vines and the vigneron must struggle a bit.

The best 1998 wines from Alsace demonstrate an exquisite detail and harmony. They may not always have the most power or overt body, but there is a sleek depth and racy balance characterizing many of these wines that seem to provide completeness and expression for all the various components, like a well-cut jewel set into a perfectly elegant binding.

Admittedly, it is a vintage that produced my style of wine, emphasizing finesse and complexity over sheer brawn, but I believe that quality is also very much present. Acidity levels are good, and more importantly, acids are ripe and in balance with the fruit. The late-harvested wines from '98 pack a lot of power and richness, amplified by plenty of botrytis, but they generally combine this with a fine, harmonious acid structure to preserve the overall sense of elegance. This is a vintage that will reward keeping, and one that offers plenty of choices for anyone seriously interested in the wines of Alsace.

Tasting Notes

The following wines were tasted in Alsace in April of 2000. I have also included notes on a few late-harvest wines from 1997 that have recently been released. For notes on Muscat, please see our accompanying article on [page 32](#) of this issue.

Albert Boxler, Niedermorschwir

Few producers in the world can consistently match the quality of Boxler, and I feel that 1998 in particular is a style of vintage that suits their wines well. "Ninety-eight is a good vintage for Riesling," said Sylvie Boxler modestly. "They are dry, with a lot of character, very typical." As usual, they have bottled separate cuvées of different wines, all marked by a small lot number printed in the upper left portion of the label, included below. Sometimes these may carry different capsules as well, but

The Grands Crus of Alsace [continued]

FOOTHILL SLOPES

Calcareous

- Bruderthal (Molsheim)
- Rosacker (Hunawir)
- Steinert (Pfaffenheim)

Calcareous marl

- Florimont (Ingersheim)
- Goldert (Gueberschwihr)
- Hatschbourg (Hattstatt)
- Hengst (Wintzenheim)
- Kirchberg de Barr
- Mambourg (Sigolsheim)
- Mandelberg (Mittelwihr)
- Marckrain (Bennwihr)
- Moenchberg (Andlau)
- Sonnenglanz (Bebenheim)
- Steingrubler (Wettolsheim)

Calcareous marl/sandstone

- Altenberg de Bergheim
- Altenberg de Wolxheim
- Engelberg (Dahlheim)
- Furstentum (Kientzheim)
- Geisberg (Ribeauvillé)
- Kirchberg de Ribeauvillé

Calcareous sandstone

- Osterberg (Ribeauvillé)
- Pflingstberg (Orschwihr)
- Zinnkoepflé (Soultzmatt)

Marl/sandstone

- Eichberg (Eguisheim)
- Pfersigberg (Eguisheim)
- Saering (Guebwiller)
- Spiegel (Bergholtz)
- Vorbourg (Rouffach)

Marl/clay

- Altenberg de Bergbieten
- Froehn (Zellenberg)
- Kanzlerberg (Bergheim)
- Schoenenbourg (Riquewihr)
- Sporen (Riquewihr)

check the lot numbers if you're looking for a particular wine. And don't miss the incredible late-harvest wines from 1997 which have also been released this year.

Sylvaner 1998 - \$21

L10. Slightly chalky, cleanly fragrant nose, with impressive richness. Apricot peel and aromas of sweet herbs emerge on the palate, showing deep concentration and a ripe, firmly structured build. **87**

Pinot Blanc 1998 - \$NA

L20. This cuvée comes from a flat vineyard near Colmar. Delicately floral perfumes of grapefruit rind and red currant, fresh and ripe but just a little bit weighty, finishing with a twist of herbalness not unlike tarragon. This hasn't got the real grip of the other two, but it's delicious. **86**

Pinot Blanc 1998 - \$NA

L20R. From a granite plot near Brand. Deep, baritone richness, with altogether more character and complexity than the L20. Aromas of orange-peel, apricot, red plum, grilled almonds and mineral stoniness, tightly wound but with exuberant power and perfume that really burrows down your throat. Finishes dense, aromatic and long. **91**

Pinot Blanc 1998 - \$24

L20B. From 35-year vines in Brand. Intense, richly pungent and aristocratic. Is there better Pinot Blanc in Alsace than this? Tightly-structured, geologically-driven nose, candied tangerine and pear skin floralness with a mango-like tropical note lurking in the background. Ripe, velvety texture on the palate, subtly and seamlessly knit, racing back to a tightly-wound core on the long, expansively fragrant finish. This will need some time in bottle to really put itself together. **93**

Riesling 1998 - \$NA

L30E. This cuvée is declassified Sommerberg, from a parcel on the very top of the slope called Eckberg. Dried orange and orange candy aromas, ripe in profile but with good acidity and a sleek balance. High-toned, playful fruitiness, finishing with crunchy acids and sneaky length. **87**

Riesling Sommerberg 1998 - \$NA

L31E. This is also from the Eckberg sub-plot, but from a portion lower down the slope. Deeper than the L30E, showing the same desiccated orange tone, but this has true grand cru intensity and dimension. An array of densely wound, richly expressive aromas of Turkish apricots, figs and passionfruit, building in a crescendo of brooding depth to a gripping, silkily refined back end that is long, subtle, elegantly tilting. **92**

Riesling Sommerberg 1998 - \$NA

L31. From 25-year vines in the middle of the slope. Fairly dense in body, with broad, creamy dimension and a black fruit fragrance like cassis or black plums. Rich and brooding, with notes of peach-pit, pear and cured meat, bigger and more overtly powerful than the L31E. Palate-staining finish, expanding in multi-dimensional complexity. Masterly Riesling. **94**

Riesling Brand 1998 - \$NA

L32. Broad girth, with dried pear and apricot skin aromas and a slightly earthy stoniness. Ripely citrusy and high-toned in the mouth, but underlined with an intensely mineral component, finishing aromatic and long, with hidden nuance. **90**



Home to Albert Boxler, Niedermorschwihr nestles snugly in a little valley at the base of the grand cru Sommerberg, to the right.



The budding 2000 vintage on one of the 50-year-old Duttonstein vines in the grand cru Sommerberg.

Riesling Brand 1998 - \$60

L32K. The 'K' stands for Kirchberg, a sandy and granitic plot with 35-year-old vines. A little more firmly buttressed than the L32, very focused and finely-toned, with honeyed apricot, grapefruit and cassis notes backed by a nearly salty minerality. Really sings in the mouth, with focused and precise harmonics, dancing with crystalline clarity and complexity across the palate. Pure finesse. **93**

Riesling Sommerberg 1998 - \$60

L31D. This comes from 50-year-old vines in a plot called Duttenstein, located at the eastern end of Sommerberg near Katzenthal. Powerful intensity, redolent of black fruits, poached pear, orange peel and cured ham, tightly-wound. with a heady, knock-you-on-your-ass pungency. Head-spinning richness in the mouth, deeply concentrated and marvelously balanced, with the finely-grained character of the vintage. Piercing focus on the back end, with kaleidoscopically intense complexity and grip. Tremendous wine, built for the long haul.

This cuvée is essentially a vendange tardive and is never completely dry, as the late-picking and old vines contribute to a very high physiological maturity and plenty of natural sugars. However, this very ably demonstrates the character of the vintage, quietly insistent, introverted and a little mysterious, rather than the trumpeting richness and opulent power of the (equally profound) 1997. **95**

Tokay Pinot Gris Brand 1998 - \$67.50

L52. Spicy, meaty aromas, richly round with expansive depth, but very tightly focused by brilliant acidity, very harmonious and more overtly minerally than the Rieslings from Brand. Extremely concentrated in the mouth, painfully beautiful, with a hint of syrupy late-harvest decadence glinting around the edges. Plenty of focus as it moves back to a sleekly gripping, truly grand cru finish, long, expansive and aristocratic. **94**

The Pinot Gris from Sommerberg was produced entirely as vendange tardive in 1998, and was still too early to show at the time of our visit.

Gewurztraminer Brand 1998 - \$67.50

L62. Ripe mandarin orange and citrus perfume, more floral than spicy, with a hauntingly high-toned fragrance and beautifully elegant build. Cured meat and rose petal aromas emerge in the mouth, light-footed and succulent. Finishes a little bit short, but this is very pretty and extremely well-made. **88**

Ernest Burn, Gueberschwir

Francis Burn describes '98 as a difficult year, but easier than '99. Burn uses two designations of Clos St.-Imer: the 'normale', fermented dry and packaged in a green bottle; and the Cuvée la Chapelle, which appears in a clear bottle and is made only in the best vintages from very late-harvested grapes, thus retaining some residual sugar. Due to the extreme concentration and ripeness in 1998 and 1999, only the Cuvées la Chapelle were made from the Clos in these two vintages, for all four varieties. There were a few late-harvest wines, but curiously enough, Burn downplayed these, saying, "1994 was the last great year for SGN. 1998 wasn't as good, not as concentrated."

Sylvaner 1998 - \$13

From vines in the Clos St.-Imer, which undoubtedly explains this Sylvaner's uncommon richness and depth. Smoky, nearly reminiscent of Grüner Veltliner in its green bean and apple skin fruitiness, opening on the palate with huge depth and presence. A slightly exotic spiciness appears on the back end, along with some bread dough-like yeastiness: Burn says that this needs another year of age in the bottle to show its best. **89(+?)**



Pinot Blanc 1998 - \$17

A little botrytis gives this a spicy complexity, with rounded peach-pit and apricot flavors backed by a slightly grassy herbaceousness. Lively acidity supports everything quite nicely, keeping it fresh and appealing. **86**

Riesling 1998 - \$23

Intriguing aromatics of cured meat, bay leaf, lemon pith and meat broth that lead to more straightforward citrus and floral notes on the palate, with firmly buttressing acidity. **87**

Tokay Pinot-Gris 1998 - \$NA

Creamy, coconutty botrytis and a confectionary ripeness, definitely showing off Burn's rich, high-impact style. Quite a bit of sweetness, but this is held together very nicely and should provide delicious early drinking. **86**

Riesling Goldert Clos St.-Imer Cuvée la Chapelle 1998 - \$34

Pure, clearly defined aromas of litchi, grapefruit and passionfruit on the nose, high in extract but carried very well. Lusciously apricotty in the mouth, gaining in nuance and complexity as it expands effortlessly on a richly fragrant and finely wound finish. **93**

Tokay Pinot-Gris Goldert Clos St.-Imer Cuvée la Chapelle 1998 - \$34

Honeyed and tropical, with thickly concentrated flavors of dried pineapple, mango and passionfruit. Sweetly rich, botrytized and exuberantly VT-like, balanced by just enough acidity to hold this together perfectly, resonating on a dense, opulent finish in a thundering core of intensity. The beauty of this is the way it maintains a clarity and sense of delicate complexity despite the unctuous masses of extract – something that can easily be missed in the face of its sheer power. Not a wine for the timid. **93(+?)**

Gewurztraminer Goldert Clos St.-Imer Cuvée la Chapelle 1998 - \$38

Opulently ripe, with concentration magnifying the intensity of aroma: rose petal, cinnamon, white pepper, tangerine peel. Syrupy and quite sweet, but with marvelous balance and dimension. Opulence, after all, is relatively easy to obtain – what makes these wines remarkable is the way they use their lushness to express the complexity and multi-dimensional facets of the grand cru. This is more citrusy-floral than spicy, lingering in dense folds of perfume on a long, orchestral finish. **94**

Marcel Deiss, Bergheim

The iconoclastic Jean-Michel Deiss has unsurprisingly turned out yet another tremendous lineup of wines in 1998. Tasting through the '98s, I was struck by how the natural richness, from both the vintage and the practice of very late harvesting, is consistently balanced by brightly clean acidity and a focused structure, bringing all the components together in harmony. Deiss is not at all shy about leaving considerable amounts of residual sugar in his wines, saying, "Sugar is a natural expression of the vineyard and the vintage." To tinker with it destroys the manifestation of terroir. Balance is sought, and above all, expression of site.

Pinot Blanc Bennwihr 1998

Despite its label, this is in fact 100% Auxerrois, grown on alluvial soils. Sleekly compact ripeness, with broad, slightly earthy flavors of apricot, papaya, lime and fresh herbs. Creamy texture and taut acidity hold this all together. **88**

Pinot Blanc Bergheim 1998

Pineapple and lemon zest, exuberantly aromatic and tropical. Richer and deeper than the Bennwihr, with a velvety texture and smooth, fruity depth, finishing with firmly insistent acidity and quietly fragrant length. **90**



Jean-Michel Deiss at work in the vineyards.

Riesling Bennwihr 1998

A lot of puppy fat is showing right now, with late-harvested ripeness and very fleshy aromatics. Nicely harmonious, with fine texture and grace. **88**

Riesling St.-Hippolyte 1998

Pungent, spicy intensity, very focused and sharply delineated, with fruit here purely a vehicle for delivering granitic, geological splendor. Finely-knit and very, very racy. **90(+?)**

Riesling Engelgarten 1998

Very quietly powerful, with an expansive perfume of nectarine, orange, fresh pear and a hint of strawberries. The emphasis here is on intensity rather than weight, with ripely forceful fruit delicately encased in a tightly-coiled and vise-like grip of crunchy acidity. Real breed and finesse, very expressive of the gravel soils from which it comes. **91**

Riesling Grasberg 1998

Very citrusy in fragrance, bigger and denser than the Engelgarten but perhaps without quite the dimension. Richly concentrated tangerine, passionfruit, mango and red currant aromas on the palate, vibrant and juicily compelling, with perfumed, subtle length. This impeccably balances its 46 g/l of residual sugar with fine acidity. Superbly built. **92**

Gentil Burg 1998

This is a field blend of 60% Gewurztraminer and 40% Riesling. Richly perfumed, with finely detailed, floral fragrances of lime peel, rambutan and grapefruit bursting joyfully in silky-smooth, seamlessly-wound depth. Like the Riesling Grasberg, this packs quite a bit of residual sugar (35 g/l) but remains tautly balanced and well-defined. **92**

Riesling Altenberg de Bergheim 1998

Ultra-silky finesse, subtly velvety layers of Meyer lemon, poached pear and mango aromas, along with a cinnamon-like spiciness. Utterly and effortlessly grand cru. Multi-dimensional finish, long and quietly grandiose, tethering its opulence with smoothly-integrated, magnificently balanced acidity. This just oozes class. **94**

Riesling Schoenenbourg 1998

Passionfruit, lime, mandarin orange, black licorice. Bigger and broader than the Altenberg, with richly concentrated depth, but maintains a harmonious and racy dimension, really kinetic and complex. Slowly expands with unctuous and perfectly balanced richness, ethereally nuanced perfumes lingering succulently on the palate for a long, long time. **93(+?)**

Tokay Pinot Gris Beblenheim 1998

Really tactile and finely fragrant, with delicately creamy aromas of apricot and orange. Firm acidity and plenty of class. **88**

Tokay Pinot Gris Bergheim 1998

Honeyed, late-picked ripeness, expressively fragrant peach-pit, clove and tobacco components. Sugar makes itself felt here, but firm structure reins everything in. This may be bottled as vendange tardive. **90**

Tokay Pinot Gris Altenberg de Bergheim 1998

This was harvested with about 80% botrytized grapes, and spent 18 months in 100% new oak. Piercing, baritone intensity, powerful aromas of burnt caramel, smoke and roasted coffee. Creamy, SGN-like richness and opulence remains superbly balanced all the way through a gloriously decadent finish, expanding with multi-dimensional presence and complexity. **94**



"This wine is good for a rainy day when you need some sun in your glass."

— Clarisse Deiss,
describing their 1998
Altenberg Gewurztraminer SGN

Mambourg 1998

A field blend of Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Beurot and Pinot Gris (Deiss makes a distinction between these last two). Smoky, savory intensity, cured meat, toffee, butter sauces. Creamy and powerfully concentrated, this thunders through an aristocratically complex, expansively three-dimensional back end, long and tightly-wound. Intriguing. **94?**

Altenberg Grand Vin 1998

A field blend of 70% Riesling, 15% Pinot Gris, and 15% Gewurztraminer, harvested and pressed together. Intensely focused grapefruit, papaya, passionfruit, lime and candied citrus aromas, very sleek and tightly-wound – a poignant trumpet solo rather than the choral grandeur of some previous vintages of this wine. Breathtaking, and reserving most of its profundity for the long haul. **96(+?)**

Gewurztraminer St.-Hippolyte 1998

Smoothly supple, subtle nose, intense presence but very quiet in tone. Dried apricot, clove, garrigue, and I actually wrote ‘betel nut’ in my notes! Creamy, smoky, poached pear aromas in the mouth, with a spicy, nearly salty minerality, finishing fragrant and intense. **88(+?)**

Gewurztraminer Bergheim 1998

Higher-toned than the St.-Hippolyte and with more overt tones of stone fruits, paired with papaya and lime tropicality. This really shows off the texture and finesse given by limestone soils. Very aromatic and brightly appealing, terrifically focused, with the edges rounded out by a touch of botrytis. Very persistent and dynamic wine. **90**

Gewurztraminer Steingassel 1998

Densely rich core of orange syrup and peach candy aromas, expansively fragrant and expressively ripe. High-toned tangerine and lime blossom scents lead to a discreetly honeyed botrytis on the back end, finishing with harmonious length and depth. Subtle in tone, perhaps a touch finer in dimension than the Bergheim. **92**

Gewurztraminer Burg 1998

Darkly toned, broad and subtly spicy in profile. This is fascinating to compare with the Steingassel, echoing the same dimension and subtlety but in the lower ranges, the tenor to the Stengassel’s soprano. Lovely texture, silky and fine, with penetrating depth. This and Steingassel might be labeled as vendange tardive. **92**

Gewurztraminer Altenberg de Bergheim 1998

This wine qualifies for SGN, and may be labeled as such. Choral, concert hall dimension and opulence, paired with finely-tuned balance and a superb sense of breed. An array of orange peel, lime, litchi and floral fragrances race with powerfully kinetic energy across the palate. Creamy, velvety and ultra-fine, building slowly to a long, subtly shifting finish. Boldly and emphatically grand cru. **96**

Dirler, Bergholtz

Dirler is another producer whose style I feel suits the vintage very well, with their emphasis on finesse and terroir. Jean-Pierre Dirler commented that the vintage is “a little lighter than usual,” but the wines he showed us demonstrated plenty of richness, allied with the typically refined delicacy and breed that we have come to expect from this outstanding producer. The late-harvest wines from 1997 have also recently been released, and they are superb, especially the Riesling vendange tardive and the Gewurztraminers from Spiegel.

Pinot Noir 1998

L98700. This cuvée was fermented and aged in neutral wood. Fresh aromas of ripe red berries, with good aroma and juicy texture. Delicious. **85**

Alsace facts & figures**1999 production**

14,449 hectares in production
85% AOC Alsace
3% AOC Alsace Grand Cru
12% AOC Crémant d’Alsace

Production by variety**THE BIG FOUR WHITES**

Riesling 23%
Pinot Blanc 21%
Gewurztraminer 18%
Muscat 2.5%

OTHER WHITES

Sylvaner 14%
Tokay Pinot Gris 10%
Mélon 2%
Chasselas 1%

RED

Pinot Noir 8.5%

Winegrowing

- 118 winegrowing villages
- 6,000 growers, only 2,000 of whom own more than two hectares
- 1,100 growers bottle their own wine, ut 230 of these account for 85% of total sales

Export markets

- 25% of total production in Alsace is exported
- Germany is the leading export market despite a 5% drop in sales last year
- The United States ranks fifth, after the Netherlands, Belgium/Luxemburg, and Denmark(!)
- The United Kingdom is sixth

These figures are from CIVA, Alsace’s umbrella trade group for wine growers. For more information, visit the CIVA Web site at www.vinsalsace.com

Pinot Noir 1998

L98730. This cuvée was fermented and aged in oak barrels, and states this on the label. Deeper and darker than the 'normale', more tannic but with more depth of fruit to compensate. Plenty of interest here – it's very well-made. **86**

Sylvaner 1998

The Dirlers are big fans of Sylvaner: the two cuvées combine to form 15% of their total production. Quietly minerally and slightly grassy, but ripe and well-defined, cleanly fresh and appealing. **85**

Sylvaner Cuvée Vieilles Vignes 1998

This comes from 30-60 year old vines, a portion of which are located in the grand cru Kessler. Deeply concentrated, spicy aromas of pear and baked apple, really vibrant and a little floral. A big step up from the last wine. Packed with depth in the mouth and paired with a sweetly herbal note like chervil, continuing with delicately fragrant length and surprising expansion of aroma. Wonderful. **90(+?)**

Pinot Réserve 1998

50% Pinot Blanc, 50% Auxerrois. Fragrant, honeyed ripeness, classic Dirlers in style, with a nicely concentrated depth of appley fruit but all emphasis on balance and finesse. Sleekly finished, with length, style and presence. **88**

Riesling Spiegel 1998

Intensely floral and perfumed nose, delicately refined and harmonious aromas of pear, red currant, white peach, mandarin orange and a hint of aniseed. Lovely finesse and elegance on the palate, with a silky-smooth texture and great intensity yet the impression of light weight. A pleasant twist of citrusy acidity on the back end precedes a long, discreetly perfumed finish. **92**

Riesling Kessler 1998

Deeper in tone than the Spiegel, with a pronounced stoniness, and quite tropical: pineapple, mandarin orange, tangerine sorbet. Expansive, silky texture and fragrance, opening to a multi-faceted and subtly complex finish that demonstrates marvelous harmony and length. **93**

Riesling Bollenberg Cuvée Luc-Antoine 1998

Dirler's plot on the great hill of Bollenberg contains primarily limestone, and it is immediately evident in this wine's silky finesse and lemony raciness. Harvested very late, this retains a little residual sugar, impeccably balanced with well-integrated acidity. It sparkles on the palate like a well-cut diamond, expanding with grand cru dimension and length on the finish. **93**

Tokay Pinot Gris Schwarzberg 1998

Litchi, lime-blossom and orange-citrus notes, quite delicate and very refined, with subtle depth and a spicy, minerally nuance. Discreetly ripe and quietly powerful – a very thoughtful and introspective wine, finishing with long, graceful presence. **91**

Gewurztraminer Bux 1998

Subtly but insistently spicy, showing notes of cardamom and pine. Compared to the aristocratic, nearly haughty breed of Dirler's other '98s, this seems almost rustic, but it's very well-built, with a harmoniously fragrant core of pure litchi fruitiness. **88**

Gewurztraminer Saering 1998

Deeply intense, not weighty, but very fragrantly insistent, exploding on the palate with exotically perfumed aromas and powerful depth. Very backwards and structured right now, but demonstrates some compelling components and should develop very well. **91(+?)**



A Preview of the 1999 Vintage

Nineteen ninety-nine, much like 1998, was marked by rather dramatic shifts in weather. A warm, wet spring brought early flowering, but also the threat of mildew. A heat wave at the end of the summer allowed healthy maturation and rapid ripening. At the end of September the rains came again, swelling the grapes and causing some concern of dilution. A sunny October rewarded those who waited, drying out the vineyards and concentrating sugars. There was some botrytis, but it was not as widespread as in 1998.

At this stage, it appears that the wines have plenty of ripeness and good acidity levels. The greatest potential danger in '99 was overcropping: "Like all of France, the yields were quite high in Alsace," warns Jean Trimbach. "People should be very selective." But Jean Meyer of JosMeyer clearly prefers his '99s, indicating that they possess better structure and potential for aging.

From our preliminary tastings in barrel, the '99s appear very promising. They have some of the upfront charm of the '97s, but often with better acid structure. For many this may offer more appeal and accessibility than the often reticent and intellectual '98s.

Gewurztraminer Spiegel 1998

Soprano in profile versus the baritone Saering. Delicately floral tangerine peel, mango and rose petal aromas, succulently vibrant harmonics above a creamy texture, with a touch of botrytis adding complexity and mouthfeel. Finishes with ethereal dimension, perfume and length, truly grand cru. **93**

Josmeyer, Wintzenheim

Jean Meyer was a little reluctant to show his '98s, preferring both '99 and '97. He calls '98 "a vintage to drink in the coming five years, not wines to keep." That's a strong statement from someone who focuses on structure above all things, carefully crafting wines for long, slow evolution. He went on to say, "We did a lot of declassification of grands crus in 1998 – they didn't have the structure we are looking for." However, he was happy to show us a range of exciting 1999s from tank and barrel, including some very promising Rieslings from Hengst and Brand.

Riesling 1998 (tank sample)

Good richness on the mid-palate, very stone-fruit in profile. A bit broad and easy, but this shows nice flavors and harmony. A sample from the 'Dragon' plot, located near Brand and usually bottled separately, showed a little more structure and complexity – the '98 Dragon will be sold simply as the 'classic' Riesling, though whether these will be blended or not is unclear. **85-87**

Riesling Herrenweg 1998

Broad aromas of lemon and tangerine peel, with reasonably firm grip and acidity. Should drink well early. **86**

Albert Mann, Wettolsheim

"Ninety-eight rewarded those who worked in the vines," said Jacky and Marie-Thérèse Barthelmé, who were very pleased overall with the '98s. "The '98 harvest was very small, very ripe and rich, but also with balance. It is less 'flattering' than '97, but has better equilibrium." The rich, high-powered style of this excellent estate is tempered perfectly by the purity and harmony of this vintage, creating some of their best offerings of recent years.

Pinot Noir Cuvée 'PH' Vieilles Vignes 1998

The initials 'PH' stand for the top grands crus Pfersigberg and Hengst – as Pinot Noir is not permitted to carry the grand cru designation on the label, this is the compromise. The vines average 50 years of age, and the wine is bottled unfiltered. Excellent depth and ripeness backed by the slightly spicy and creamy tones of new oak. Perhaps one might wish for just a touch less wood, but there is plenty of fruit to balance, and this finishes with soft tannins and good length. Impressive. **88**

Pinot Auxerrois Vieilles Vignes 1998 - \$15

From 50-60 year vines. Litchi and passionfruit aromas are supported by a firmly mineral structure. This has 10g/l of residual sugar but carries it superbly, exhibiting a wonderful depth, clarity and grace. Classy wine. **89**

Riesling Cuvée Albert 1998

This cuvée comes from the Altenbourg lieux-dit, just under the Furstentum grand cru. Concentrated presence on the nose, with the rich intensity of the site. Dried orange and floral fragrances pair with a pungent, nearly spicy minerality, held together by lively and deftly elegant acidity. **91**

Riesling Schlossberg 1998

Bosc pear, sweet herbs, *tilleul*, citron, ripe and very alluring, with a rich presence and depth, yet such a sleekly racy structure that one feels this is ultimately a time-capsule reserving its real potential for later. Mineral-driven perfumes linger subtly on a long, truly grand cru finish. **92(+?)**



Riesling Furstentum 1998

Much more high-powered than the previous Rieslings, showing lots of late-picked density and a slightly syrupy unctuousness. But everything is carried superbly, with the clean acidity of the vintage really demonstrating its razor-like capacity for balance. This builds with mouthfilling presence to a spicy intensity and powerfully fragrant presence on the finish, with the firmly gripping structure reminding you that it's meant for the long haul. **93**

Tokay Pinot Gris Vieilles Vignes 1998 - \$25.50

From 45-year old vines. Slightly buttery texture on the nose, grapefruit skins, dried apple, fresh porcini mushrooms. Firm depth in the mouth, quite boldly built but with plenty of buttressing acidity and a subtly spicy fragrance on a persistent finish. **89**

Tokay Pinot Gris Hengst 1998

Mango and mandarin orange aromas, with a hint of orange peel and the characteristic spiciness of the vineyard. Full-throttle intensity in the mouth, packed with a densely-wound core of fruit and boasting a succulent 32 g/l of residual sugar, but this has raging acidity to more than compensate. Lingers effortlessly on a heady, tightly-built finish. **93**

Tokay Pinot Gris Furstentum 1998

Very expressive aromas of pear, apricot and lime, not as dense as the Hengst but still showing grand cru intensity and depth. Together these make an impressive pair of Pinot Gris, with the Furstentum the yin to the Hengst's yang. **92**

Gewurztraminer 1998 - \$20

Classic rose petal and brown spice fragrance, quite delicate in build but packs hidden depth on the back end. Very perfumed and floral. **87**

Gewurztraminer Furstentum 1998

Lovely presence on the nose, violet-floral Asian pear and apricot fragrances, and an intense spiciness. Really well-bred. Minerally and bass-driven in the mouth, exploding in multi-dimensional, finely nuanced aromatics. Superb. **93**

Gewurztraminer Steingrubler 1998

This shows a very late-picked profile, with slightly syrupy tones of pear and red currant backed by an almost peppery spiciness. Very expressive, more compact and concise than the wildly aromatic Furstentum, but this is distinctive and compelling, finishing long. **92(+?)**

René Muré, Rouffach

We were unable to visit Muré on this trip to Alsace, but fortunately we were able to meet in Portland during the International Pinot Noir Celebration. Monsieur Muré generously provided a few samples of his impressive '98s for our review. He views it as an excellent vintage for both red and white wines, characterized by a "good structure of acidity and power." In 1998, the Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer were vinified entirely as vendange tardive; however, there was no Riesling VT made.

Riesling Côte de Rouffach 1998

From purchased grapes. Bright aromas of tangerine and lime, with a pronounced stoniness. A hint of residual sugar (6-7 g/l) gives this a broadly rich feel, but fresh acidity keeps it lively and balanced. **86**

Riesling Vorbourg 1998

Beautifully structured, incisive and finely built. Perfumes of lemon curd and quince are underlined by a penetrating minerality, opening with long, subtle depth on the palate, thoroughly grand cru. **90**



Riesling Vorbourg Clos St.-Landelin 1998

Immediately riper nose than the previous wine, with more overt notes of orange and candied citrus, held together and expanded by the finely-knit acidic structure of the vintage. Very ripe but very clear in the mouth, with a round harmony and great length and presence. Still quite closed now, promising a slow and richly rewarding development. **91(+?)**

Bernard Schoffit, Colmar

Expectations are always high for Schoffit, but the 1998s are especially impressive, including an incredible set of late-harvest wines that must surely be counted among the best of the vintage, and indeed, of the decade. A note on the relevance of Schoffit's various cuvées: the Cuvée Tradition is always a dry wine; the Cuvée Caroline is one "with more structure and richness." Cuvée Alexandre, named for the son of Robert and Fabienne Schoffit, approaches vendange tardive levels of ripeness and intensity, and is emphatically a wine for long-aging. These are all barrel selections, selected in the cellar rather than in the vineyard.

Chasselas 1998

This superb example of high-quality Chasselas comes from a single hectare of 70-year-old vines. Fresh, peachy-floral scents linger crisply above a deep core of richness, showing real old-vine concentration. **87**

Pinot Auxerrois Cuvée Caroline 1998

Round depth of baked peach and floral pear aromas, quite weighty but carried well. Subtle intensity on the palate, with a discreet minerality and a surprisingly aromatic finish. Impressive Pinot Blanc, even better than the last couple releases of this consistently excellent cuvée. **91**

Riesling Harth Cuvée Tradition 1998

Finely-toned, with a peachy ripeness. The flavors are quite ripe and late-harvested, but there seems to be plenty of acidity to rein this all in. This needs time to integrate, but the components are promising. **88?**

Riesling Sommerberg 1998

This is the second release from Schoffit's newly-acquired plot in the great grand cru Sommerberg. Pungent, nearly spicy intensity, lots of dimension, with the slightly syrupy aromas of late-harvesting. High-toned perfumes of apple, Asian pear and floral blossoms, and very finely-balanced acidity. This lingers gracefully in the mouth for a long, long time, really showing off the breed of this site. **93**

Riesling Rangen Clos St.-Théobald Vendange Tardive 1998

There was no 'regular' cuvée of Riesling from the clos in 1998, as the entire lot was produced as vendange tardive. Concentrated and honeyed nose of baked peaches and marmalade, yet maintains a delicately aromatic structure and demonstrates the quiet, refined tone of the vintage. Lovely finesse and dimension. Great presence and coiled-up intensity paired with sleekly elegant raciness. True vin de garde. **94**

Riesling Rangen Clos St.-Théobald Sélection de Grains Nobles 1998

Tremendously harmonious density, with a finely-knit, ultra-velvety texture. Honeyed scents of marmalade, cocoa, orange peel and dried Turkish apricots, with razor-like but finely integrated acidity that holds this all together in taut, lithe focus. Subtly expansive and very long. Very, very classy wine. In time, this may surpass the superb 1994, which is just beginning to show its true potential. **95(+?)**



Tokay Pinot Gris Cuvée Alexandre Vieilles Vignes 1998

From 45-year vines. Richly concentrated aromas of sweet corn, candied orange and fresh peach, picking up a faint toffee or caramel-like component in the mouth. Explosively rich and opulent, with syrupy, VT-like ripeness, but very well-built, fine as well as dense. **93**

Tokay Pinot Gris Rangen Clos St-Théobald Sélection de Grains Nobles 1998

Smoky, slightly meaty nose, very complex array of honey, fennel and apricot coulis aromas inside an ever-shifting mass of density. Piercingly intense on the palate, super-concentrated and confectionary, but like Schoffit's other '98s, there is awesome acidity which not only balances the thick extract but focuses the flavors and aromas in a long tunnel of penetratingly sappy, palate-staining glory. Tremendous wine, only hinting at the great complexity which is sure to develop. **97**

Gewurztraminer Harth Cuvée Tradition 1998

Subtle and discreet, with rich and lively presence. Spicy and a little meaty in tone, with broad girth and sneaky length. **88**

Gewurztraminer Harth Cuvée Alexandre 1998

Almost a curry-like spiciness here, with slightly honeyed orange peel and apricot aromas and noticeable residual sugar but great balance and rigid structure. The sugar here serves to lift the aromatics of the fruit, making it more expressive and expansive, like a two-dimensional image rendered in three dimensions. Beautifully finished, long, perfumed, vertigo-inducing. This is lovely. **94**

Gewurztraminer Rangen Clos St-Théobald Sélection de Grains Nobles 1998

Pungently honeyed richness, superbly built in a densely-wound, crushingly brooding structure, with true grand cru breed. Dizzily opulent in the mouth, honeyed peach and mandarin orange paired with a clove-like spiciness, with acidity concentrated as well as the fruit. Aristocratic finish, long and multi-dimensional, with a superb balance between thick extract and racy focus. **96(+?)**

Bruno Sorg, Eguisheim

Bruno Sorg is a producer that deserves to be better known outside of Alsace. The production, alas, is tiny, but the wines are well worth seeking out. "We seek to preserve finesse and purity rather than create big wines with richness and sweetness," says François Sorg. Amen. Which is not to say that there isn't plenty of richness here. There are small holdings in two grands crus: Florimont and Pfersigberg, which contrast, and complement, each other superbly.

Riesling 1998

Ripe, apricotty nose, delicately fragrant and stylish. Light in body but very fresh and appealing. **87**

Riesling Florimont 1998

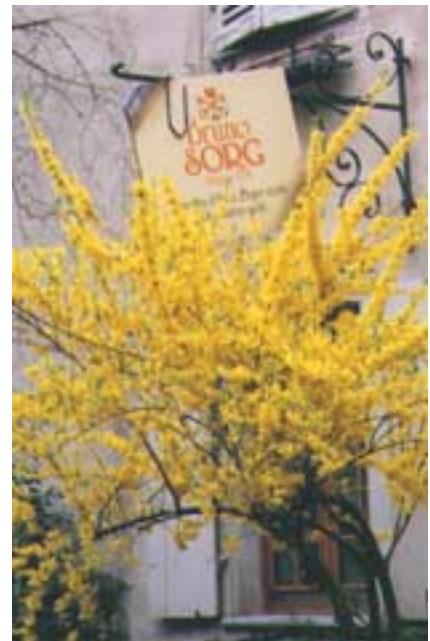
Discreet aromas of apple, cassis, mango, lime and pear jelly. Finely elegant, with lovely grace and clarity, finishing with pervasive floral aromatics and a spicy minerality. **91**

Riesling Pfersigberg 1998

Insistently smoky stoniness and finely-knit aromas of tangerine and lime. Darker in tone than the Florimont, with deeper thrust, but perhaps without quite the finesse or complexity. **90**

Tokay Pinot Gris 1998

Apricotty, slightly waxy pear and Asian spice components, delicate in body but with intense presence and a fragrant subtlety. **88**



Tokay Pinot Gris Florimont 1998

Spicy, floral fragrance, with richly complex depth and the soprano tonality of the site. Broad pear, cherry and marmalade aromas expand with quiet, sneaky subtlety, lingering effortlessly in deliciously fragrant perfume. **92**

Trimbach, Ribeauvillé

The name Trimbach is inextricably linked with Riesling in Alsace. Unfortunately, we were unable to sample the '98 Clos Ste.-Hune or Cuvée Frédéric Émile during our visit in April. We did, however get to taste several other vintages, including the very promising '99s. The currently released vintages are excellent: a rich, intensely structured 1996 Frédéric Émile, and a painfully beautiful 1995 Clos Ste.-Hune that will require much patience and a cool cellar.

Riesling 1998

Ripe depth, showing a slightly tropical ripeness. Clean and balanced, finishing with focused length and aroma. **87**

Zind-Humbrecht, Turckheim

The Humbrechts were in the United States at the time of our visit to Alsace, so we were unable to visit. However, we managed to taste a good number of the wines in Portland. There were quite a few late-harvest wines produced in '98, but they will not be shipped to the States until later this fall – watch for a report on these in the Members Area of our Web site.

Riesling Herrenweg 1998 - \$37

Quite thick and a bit grainy on the nose, with a *sur-maturité*, paired with apricot botrytis, that increases the ragged feel. Big, ripe and alcoholic, this has plenty of power but lacks a bit of style. Disappointing for this cuvée. **85**

Riesling Turckheim 1998

From younger vines in Brand, averaging 17 years. Floral, high-toned notes of pear and lemony citrus, very finely-tuned and admirably balanced. Delicately exuberant, with insistent length, really showing off the breed of the site. **90**

Riesling Clos Häuserer 1998 - \$42

Deep, clear and finely-knit, with smoky aromas of pear, lime zest and fennel. Really penetrating on the palate, expanding with thunderous presence, picking up notes of dried fruits, citrus skins and red plum, and encasing a mineral perfume nestling deeply underneath the sheer mass of it all. The Clos Häuserer is consistently excellent, but the '98 is particularly successful. **91(+?)**

Riesling Heimbouurg 1998

These young vines are located on the south side of Heimbouurg near Clos Jebsal, and it shows. Spicy, punching intensity, poached pear and crème brûlée decadence in a boldly presented package. Pronounced botrytis adds to its lusciousness, but overall this is held together quite well. **90**

Riesling Brand 1998 - \$68

Great intensity and focused resonance, balancing orange peel, dried banana and melon aromas with a deep, heavy-soil *gout de terroir*. This certainly has the power of the site, all iron-ore and geology on the throat-grabbing finish, with fine breed and grand cru intensity. **93**

Riesling Rangen Clos St.-Urbain 1998 - \$75

Powerful yet more amiable than expected from this wine, redolent of orange, fresh apricot and white raisin. Fleshy and very ripe depth on the palate reveals a surprising amount of sugar, held in check by high-toned notes of typically flinty Rangen minerality. Here I feel that the sugar is blurring this a little, as this seems to lack



The affable Jean Trimbach and some of his magnificent Rieslings.

the purity of the vintage's best examples. However, this certainly demonstrates Rangen's power and breed, resonating with sneaky dimension on a tightly-wound finish. This could just need time to settle down. **91(+?)**

Pinot Gris Herrenweg 1998

Buttery caramel and smoky, bacon-like aromas swirl under a VT-like *sur-maturité*. Finer-knit than the Riesling, this also has some residual sugar sticking out, but wraps it all up reasonably well in a pungently fragrant, minerally frame. The 14.2% alcohol makes it just a bit unwieldy. **88?**

Pinot Gris Herrenweg Vieilles Vignes 1998

Coconutty botrytis and pastry-like tones, with a slightly glassy texture, but overall this is much more toned-down than the dessert-like '97. Good intensity of orange zest and peach skin aromas, and showing much better structure and class than the other Herrenweg wines from this vintage. **89**

Pinot Gris Heimbouurg 1998

Tropical ripeness, thickly textured aromas of papaya, kumquat, pineapple. Botrytis gives a slightly bitter note on the back end, but this has lots of depth and richness, appealing to those who like big, boldly presented wines. **89**

Pinot Gris Rotenberg 1998

Finely-knit girth, holding together its massive proportions with nicely-wound restraint. Apple blossom and poached pear scents expand slowly on the palate with subtlety and a nutty, oily complexity. Perfumed and intense on a long finish. **91**

Pinot Gris Clos Windsbuhl 1998

Buttery and oily viscosity, sleekly wrapped in a floral and nearly racy package despite its girth. Powerfully wound up, bursting with potential energy and displaying a finely textured, multi-layered finish. Easily of grand cru dimension and breeding. **93**

Gewurztraminer Herrenweg 1998

Quiet aromas of clove, gingerbread, apricot and crushed flowers, slightly desiccated in tone. A bit alcoholic on the finish. **85?**

Gewurztraminer Heimbouurg 1998

Lemon rind, pink grapefruit and clove spice above a strongly pungent minerality – Heimbouurg is calcareous, but this presents itself as markedly granitic. Rich and sappy on the palate, expressing itself with intense, uncompromising insistence. Finishes spicy and very aromatic, with amazingly fresh acidity that helps to balance the sheer mass of this thing. Impressive. **91**

Gewurztraminer Hengst 1998

Powerfully wound and tightly structured, with a dense core of richness concealed in a stony, earthy build. Slowly expands in the mouth, building in quiet, self-assured intensity, classic Hengst in its spicy, minerally *gout de terroir*. Magnificently finished, powerful and penetratingly fragrant, spinning in a kaleidoscope of virtually unending glory. Superb. **95**

Gewurztraminer Clos Windsbuhl 1998

Perfumes of coconut, fresh peach, cream and roasted meat, capacious in presence and velvety-rich in texture. Sappy, fragrant density is held together in a mineral-driven structure, with great depth and length. **92(+?)**

Alsace defined

Calcareous. Alkaline soil with a lot of calcium and magnesium.

Clos. An enclosed vineyard, usually found around former monasteries, as in Burgundy.

Crémant d'Alsace. The sparkling wine of Alsace.

Lieu-dit. A "named place," these are vineyard sites that do not have grand cru status but are used by some estates because of their quality.

Marl. A cold calcareous clay.

Passerillage. A dehydration of the grapes that occurs after the vine has shut down for the winter. This process concentrates the juice without the influence of botrytis.

Sélection de Grains Nobles (SGN). A sweet wine made from individually selected, fully botrytis-affected grapes. Minimum ripeness is 16.5% potential alcohol for Gewurztraminer and Pinot Gris, 15.2% for Riesling and Muscat.

Sur-maturité. Over-ripeness.

Tries. [tree] Consecutive passes through a vineyard to select only the ripest, or botrytized fruit.

Vendange Tardive (VT). Means "late harvest." Only the four grand cru varieties can be labeled VT. Gewurztraminer and Pinot Gris must reach a natural potential alcohol of 14.3%. For Riesling and Muscat it is 13%. VTs are made with or without botrytis.

Vieilles Vignes. Old vines.

Léon Beyer: The new Count of Eguisheim

THE WINEMAKING PHILOSOPHY AT LÉON BEYER

is simple: the wines must be dry, they must work well with food and they must express their terroir. In fact, you can pretty easily sum up the Beyer style with the words “dry” and “goes with food.” Those have been the overriding stylistic requirements since Léon Beyer assumed control of the domaine from his father (also Léon) in 1959. The business is now in the capable hands of Léon’s son, Marc, the 13th generation of wine-makers in the Beyer family.

Marc Beyer is a warm and generous man with a soothingly deep and melodious voice that envelops you like a favorite old blanket. We met up with him where he is most in his element — in a fine restaurant. Marc and his father are legendary epicures who have long supported the notion that food and wine are inseparable. In their quest to prove this point (and sell some wine at the same time) they have traveled extensively, visiting top restaurants wherever they go to demonstrate how well dry Alsace wines marry with food. The result of this hands-on, personal approach has been the addition of Léon Beyer wines to most of the finer wine lists in the world, including nearly all of the Michelin three-star restaurants (*les triplétoilés*) in France.

“Our wines are made for food, not for competitions,” says Marc, when asked about the austere Beyer style. For them, the sweeter wines that you see coming out of Alsace these days are an abomination. Marc quite unequivocally says, “I hate residual sweetness in wine.” The rare late-harvest and botrytis wines are an exception to this rule, of course, but the Beyers are firm in their stance that normal wines with sweetness do not make good partners for food.

In his relentless pursuit of dryness, Beyer will often resort to additional, heartier yeasts to force the fermentation to complete if it stalls near the end when the alcohol starts to overwhelm the indigenous yeast. “But what about these guys who are harvesting late to get maximum ripeness?” I asked. “This stuff you can’t ferment totally dry.” Marc’s answer was calm and simple: “If you’re harvesting grapes with 17 percent potential alcohol, you made a mistake. You waited too long.” Thus have they solidly planted the Beyer flag at the “dry and traditional” end of the Alsace spectrum.

The range of wines

The Beyers own 20 hectares of vines around Eguisheim, including parcels in two grand cru vineyards: Eichberg and Pfersigberg. But you will never see these vineyard names, or even the words “grand cru,” on a Beyer label. Marc is not totally opposed to the idea of vineyard classification, but believes it only tells part of the story. Great terroir still requires a dedi-



The classically Alsatian Léon Beyer winery and estate house in the Medieval village of Eguisheim.

Léon Beyer

Total vineyard area

20 hectares/50 acres
50 hectares purchased grapes

Average production

780,000 bottles

Varieties

All seven Alsace varieties:
Riesling, Gewurztraminer,
Tokay Pinot Gris, Muscat,
Pinot Blanc, Sylvaner, Pinot Noir

Top wines

Riesling “Les Écaillers”
Cuvée Comtes d’Eguisheim

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cated and talented human to produce great wines. Plus he is troubled by the way in which the Alsace Grand Cru classification lumped different terroirs together in its attempt to appease everyone, rendering the original vineyard names meaningless.

In addition to the estate-owned vines, Léon Beyer purchases fruit from about 70 independent growers, representing some 50 hectares. Most of this is used for their basic, entry-level wines (“les génériques”). These wines are fresh and cleanly made, but can sometimes be disappointing in their lack of character and concentration. Perhaps this is because the Beyers choose not to dictate any vineyard or selection practices to their growers, beyond rewarding higher quality with higher prices.

Overall quality is higher in the Réserve wines, which are selected to be finer and more elegant, with excellent Alsace typicity for each variety, while still maintaining a good price/quality ratio.

A wine that will be especially interesting to Riesling lovers is Beyer’s Riesling “Les Écaillers.” This is a cuvée that was designed specifically to accompany oysters (the name means “the oyster shuckers”) for a high-end food and wine competition in 1951. It was so well received that they made it a permanent part of the Beyer line. Les Écaillers is made from a specific plot in the Grand Cru Pfersigberg vineyard, 80 percent of which is estate-owned. The rest is purchased under long-term contract.

The top of the line is the cuvée Comtes d’Eguisheim. These are the “grand cru” wines of Léon Beyer. The fruit comes primarily from estate-owned vines in officially delimited grand cru vineyards. But the Beyers have no use for the grand cru classification since they don’t agree with it and the reputation of the house was firmly established before the classification came about. For them, just like Trimbach and Hugel, the grand cru system only serves to enhance the reputations of lesser producers who happened to own vines within a grand cru delineation.

The only wines in which the Beyers can tolerate sweetness are the rare Vendanges Tardives and, even rarer, Sélections de Grains Nobles. These late-harvest and botrytis-selection wines are so ripe that not even Léon Beyer could ferment them to complete dryness. These wines achieve astonishing richness and concentration but, in the lean and muscular Beyer style, they are never fat or heavy.

Understanding Léon Beyer wines

The style of winemaking at Léon Beyer emphasizes dryness and expression of terroir over fruitiness. Indeed, as Beyer’s *caviste* Eric Schueller explained to us, at the winery they never use the standard fruit-derived flavor terms when discussing the wines. No “lemony acidity” or “ripe apricot.” They only talk about a wine in its own terms, as in, “The true character of Alsace Riesling really comes through from this terroir.”

It’s a more abstract approach that forces you to concentrate on the pure sensual experience of drinking the wine, not on how you’re going to describe it to the other wine fanatics in the room. And, hopefully, that room will be an excellent restaurant (or your own excellent dining room) where you’re enjoying Beyer wines with a well-prepared meal. That, after all, is their ultimate *raison d’être*.



The warm and congenial Marc Beyer outside the estate’s tasting room and wine shop in the center of Eguisheim.

“Riesling is complicated, like J.S. Bach. To fully appreciate great Riesling, you need to be involved intellectually.”

— Marc Beyer

Léon Beyer

Rather than presenting us with a collection of '98s, Marc Beyer opted to let us sample a range of his various Riesling cuvées from older vintages, demonstrating the complexity and depth that these can acquire with bottle-age.

The following wines were tasted in Eguisheim in April of 2000.

Riesling 1999 (barrel sample)

Fragrant and floral, delicately fruity with vibrant aromas of melon, nectarine and honeysuckle. **86**

Riesling 1998

Slightly honeyed in tone, with a bit more weight than the '99. Round and full, with internal richness, but perhaps not quite as sleek as the last wine. **85**

Riesling Les Ecaillers 1998

Tangerine peel, fresh apricot and lime blossom aromas, nicely rich yet retains a racy delicacy. This maintains a strongly mineral undertone throughout, finishing lithe and racy, with insistent presence and plenty of aroma. **89**

Riesling Les Ecaillers 1997

This shows a roundly ripe profile, but it is nicely focused and well-delineated for the vintage. There is a slight tone of dried orange and citrus skins, along with hints of fennel and verbena and a chalky minerality. Very graceful, with delicate complexity and finesse on the back end, finishing with compelling length and perfume. **90**

Riesling Les Ecaillers 1996

Roundly compact richness, with a lot of girth but also the crunchy, lime-like acidity of the vintage. Very tightly wound, hinting at almond and honey, lingering with very well-balanced and well-defined presence. **91**

Riesling Les Ecaillers 1995

Slightly oily in tone, broadly girthy and a little botrytized, with dried apricot and honey notes. Where the '96 emphasizes a lime-like citrusness, this returns to the orange aromas of the '97 and '98. Much more open and precocious than the 1996, and beginning to develop a matured complexity. **89**

Riesling Comtes d'Eguisheim 1997

Perfumed aromas of apple, lime, fresh flowers and a whiff of Cointreau, very floral and elegant, with a subtle dimension and breed. The ripe fruitiness of the vintage is apparent on the palate, but it is wrapped firmly in a tautly mineral and citrusy acidic structure for later savoring. Beautiful notes of honey and marmalade on a long and expansively fragrant finish. **92(+?)**



Léon Beyer's quietly intense caviste (cellarmaster) Eric Schueller was our tasting guide during our visit in April.

Riesling Comtes d'Eguisheim 1996

This shows more obvious notes of sur-maturité, but it's able to emphasize this as intensity rather than weight, thanks to piercing but finely-integrated acidity. A rich core of buttery, nearly confectionary fruit is accompanied by aromas of lemongrass, cocoa, toffee and fresh honey, tightly wound-up all the way through a sappy, juicy finish. This will take a long time to unwind. **92**

Riesling Comtes d'Eguisheim 1995

Quite big in body for Comtes d'Eguisheim, with a pronounced spiciness of botrytis. Honeyed flavors of pineapple, melon and apricot jam, and like the 1990, even a whiff of durian! Mouthfillingly fragrant, with good length, and much more overtly weighty than the '96 or '97. **90?**

Riesling Comtes d'Eguisheim 1989

Very graceful aromas of pear skins, citrus, almond and teriyaki. Smoothly, smokily mineral, beginning to acquire the perfumed secondaries of age and integrating into a subtly penetrating and harmonious depth. Lingers quietly in focused and exotic complexity, absolutely lovely for its sheer breed and finesse. **93**

Riesling Vendange Tardive 1995

Tightly-wound aromas of white raisin, apricot, cured meat, lime-leaf and tangerine. The late-picking here seems to increase intensity and impact but doesn't really increase weight at all, maintaining a superb delicacy and elegance all the way throughout. Taut and lively on the finish, building with beautifully perfumed expansion and aromatic length. Very subtle and very quiet, but very fine. With the increase in concentration, this gains a concomitant vivacity and elegance that the '95 Comtes seems to lack. **94**

Riesling Sélection de Grains Nobles 1989

Scintillatingly clear and focused, very pure and cleanly built. Confectionary tones of apricot, marmalade and pastry cream, velvety-rich in texture but maintaining a marvelous clarity. Very long and penetrating on the palate, expanding with concentrated and refined but nearly weightless intensity, incredibly delicate and ethereal. Gorgeous wine. **95**



Mold-encrusted stacks of past vintages inside the vaulted cellar of Léon Beyer, carved into the hillside beneath the vineyards surrounding the winery.

Domaine Weinbach

WHEN YOU MENTION THE NAME WEINBACH around avid Alsace lovers, especially if it's a bunch of guys, you will hear a collective sigh of longing and adulation. Because it is run by three lovely women — Madame Colette Faller (fa-lair) and her daughters, Catherine and Laurence — a beguiling mystique has developed around the estate. The fact that they happen to make some of the most enchanting and seductive wines in Alsace could, I suppose, also be a factor.

The estate was founded in 1612 by diligent and dedicated Capuchin monks, for whom the famous *Clos des Capucins* vineyard is named. But records show that wine grapes have been grown in the clos since at least 890. It was acquired by the Faller family in 1898, eventually passing to Théo Faller, Colette's husband. When Théo died in 1979, Madame Faller and her daughters took over operation of the wine estate.

The Weinbach style

The wines of Domaine Weinbach are characterized by a surpassing elegance. They are highly defined and focused, but still display a gentleness that is unapologetically feminine. This is by design, because, as Laurence says, "Wines are meant to be drunk, not just tasted." And they *are* a joy to drink. The flavors swell and recede ever so lovingly as each wine's class and complexity is revealed.

All of the wines at Domaine Weinbach are estate grown. The estate owns 23 hectares that include holdings in two grand cru vineyards: Schlossberg and Furstentum. Schlossberg is an impressive south-facing mountain slope with shallow, sandy soil on a granite base. It was the first vineyard to be named in the 1975 Alsace Grand Cru classification. Schlossberg is ideal for Riesling, producing wines with the finesse and elegance that is the hallmark of Weinbach. Grand Cru Furstentum is just to the east of Schlossberg, but is not as steep and has a limestone and clay soil that is more suited to Gewurztraminer, yielding aromatic and complex wines.

In addition, there are two important *lieux-dits*: Altenbourg and the clos itself. Altenbourg is even flatter, lying below Furstentum, and has a rich calcareous-clay soil, yielding weightier wines from Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer. The clos is the flattest of all, being situated on a small alluvial plain of the Weiss valley leading down to the larger plain of the Rhine valley. The sandy-silt soil produces especially nice Muscat, but Weinbach has a little of everything inside the clos, including the Riesling and Gewurztraminer used in the "Théo" cuvées, as well as the Pinot Gris for Cuvée Ste-Catherine.

The word "cuvée" is something of a misnomer at Weinbach, however,



The rock wall-enclosed Clos des Capucins vineyard surrounds the Domaine Weinbach estate at the foot of the Schlossberg.

Domaine Weinbach

Total vineyard area

23 hectares/57 acres

Average production

156,000 bottles

Varieties

All seven Alsace varieties:
Riesling, Gewurztraminer,
Tokay Pinot Gris, Muscat,
Pinot Blanc, Sylvaner, Pinot Noir

Top vineyards

Grand Cru Schlossberg
Grand Cru Furstentum
Altenbourg (lieu-dit)
Clos des Capucins (monopole)

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as almost nothing is ever blended. Laurence, who is now the estate's winemaker, prefers to harvest everything from a single plot at one time. "I really don't like making *trie* selections," she says, "because while you do get the richness, you don't get the balance." But then, after harvesting what is essentially a field blend, even if it is all the same variety, she cannot bring herself to blend the different barrels of wine in the cellar. It's as though each barrel becomes a favorite child that needs to be treated as an individual so it doesn't lose its own special personality. Thus, cuvées made in quantities larger than one barrel are still bottled separately, with no distinction made on the label. After one barrel's bottling is sold off, they move on to the next.

Every phase of production at Weinbach is done with a tender touch. Low yields are maintained in the vineyards, where no chemical fertilizers are allowed. All of the harvesting is done by hand and as late as possible. In the cellar, the grapes go through a gentle pressing before they are fermented with indigenous yeasts in old oak casks. "I prefer wood to stainless steel," says Laurence. "Riesling tends to be a little reductive in stainless steel."

Late harvesting also improves the chances of botrytis, which can be difficult to achieve in a region as dry as Alsace. But for Laurence it's worth the wait and the weather worries. "I like a bit of botrytis in the Rieslings," she says. "The grape can be too severe sometimes, and botrytis gives them more body and exotic notes. Tokay and Gewurztraminer are rich already, they don't need botrytis, but it helps the Riesling."

The Gewurztraminers have a spirited aroma that leaps out of the glass, but always in a very refined way. It's like a ballerina leaping, *jeté* and all, right out into the audience. And that is much like Laurence herself. She is gentle and soft-spoken, but she has a surprisingly hearty and genuine laugh that lets you know she's a real person.

That's one of the most wonderful things about Alsace — the people there are so unpretentious. As famous as they are across the world, the Fallers still welcome all visitors personally, even if it's an elderly tourist couple who just happen by while on holiday, unknowingly asking, "Do you make any wine here?" and then buying one or two bottles.

The magical mirror of Alsace

The wines of Domaine Weinbach are crystal clear reflections of the Faller family: charming but never coy, elegant and refined but not pretentious, sumptuous without being ostentatious. They are beautiful in a pure and unaffected way, not just made up to look glamorous. Their purity and gentle handling allow the essence of each terroir to shine through, but in a highly polished way that clearly, if ever so softly, says "Weinbach."

Then, intellectual analysis completed, the wines compel you to burst forth in joyous, contented laughter. Wine, you know, is made to be drunk, not just tasted.



Laurence Faller is the disarmingly sweet, yet totally unassuming, winemaker at Domaine Weinbach.

"Wines are meant to be drunk, not just tasted."

— Laurence Faller

Domaine Weinbach

The 1998 wines from Domaine Weinbach are focused, elegant and racy. In contrast to the muscular, full-throttle 1996s and the ripely fruity 1997s, the 1998s present for me a better transparency of terroir, demonstrating an incredible precision and sense of place. They are not the largest wines, but instead thrive on a quiet subtlety and multi-faceted brilliance: “It’s really a year that’s special for us,” says Laurence Faller.

The following wines were tasted in Kaysersberg in April 2000, except where indicated.

Sylvaner Réserve 1998

Quietly ripe and balanced, with a good depth of apple and lemon-rind fruitiness, finely-tuned in a discreet and elegant package. This wonderful Sylvaner comes from soil that’s a blend of sand, limestone and clay at the bottom of the grand cru Furstentum. **89**

Pinot Réserve 1998

A blend of 80% Pinot Auxerrois and 20% Pinot Blanc. “In riper years I prefer to have more Pinot Blanc,” says Mlle. Faller, “in cooler years, more Auxerrois.” Cleanly racy and mineral-driven, very well-focused, with a tightly-knit core of ripely perfumed apricot and pear aromas. Long and aromatic. **90**

Muscat Réserve 1998

Ethereally fragrant perfume, absolutely lovely as it expands in a cloud of apricot, orange-peel, and nearly violet floralness, intense yet nearly weightless. Freshly vibrant and elegantly discreet, picking up mineral-spicy notes as it settles into the lingering, thoroughly refined finish. **91**

Riesling Réserve 1998

This cuvée is labeled Réserve Personnelle outside of France; it comes from various plots on the valley floor within the Clos des Capucins and around Kaysersberg. Ripe, intensely concentrated nose, with a core of late-harvested apricot and grapefruit aromas and a mango-like tropical note. Richly ripe on the palate, brightly focused thanks to a hit of grapefruity acidity that carries all the way to the back of your mouth. **88**

Riesling Cuvée Théo 1998

The Cuvée Théo is all from the Clos des Capucins. This takes the Réserve and amplifies it in every way: depth, complexity, finesse, structure, class. Beautifully built on the nose, with a touch of *sur-maturité*, perfectly balanced in a super-racy profile. Elegantly ripe in the mouth, but unlike the fruit-driven 1997, this is much more about terroir than about fruit. Sleekly kinetic mouthfeel, with a hauntingly fragrant and stony perfume that lingers on a gracefully long finish, with superbly balanced acidity. Classic Cuvée Théo, and certainly of grand cru quality. **93**



The River Weiss runs through the village of Kaysersberg, making it all the more charming and picturesque.



Riesling Schlossberg 1998

This cuvée is from 20-year-old vines at the top of the Schlossberg hill, where the soil is a little more shallow. Sleekly honeyed, vibrantly racy nose, apricot jam, orange blossom, mandarin orange, toasted almond. Wonderful sense of site, with firm grip and racy finesse, balancing its depth superbly. Comparing this to the Théo, which is equally as transparent and precise in its expression of terroir, one clearly sees the difference in character between the granitic soils of Schlossberg and Clos des Capucins on the alluvial plain. Firmly packed in the mouth, ripe orange and stone fruits spun into a dense core of geological profundity. Searing acidity keeps this lively and kinetic, streaking back towards an ethereal cloud of whispering thunder. Dense, baritone and profound. My kind of wine. **93**

**Riesling Cuvée Ste.-Catherine 1998**

The Cuvée Ste.-Catherine is named both for Laurence's sister Catherine and for Ste.-Catherine's Day (25 November), the harvesting date of the first production of this cuvée. It comes from a single plot at the foot of the Schlossberg hill, and cannot be called Schlossberg as one-third of the plot lies outside the delimited grand cru area. The lower altitude here causes the fruit to mature earlier and botrytis to develop sooner, making it ideal for a high-powered, richly flamboyant style of Riesling. "We look for great ripeness in this cuvée," says Faller. "We try to pick it as ripe as possible, as late as mid-November." Deep, bass-driven nose, with late-picking showing in intensity rather than mass. Really finely balanced, sleekly cat-like, with papaya and grapefruity ripeness backed by an earthy, *savage* component like smoked meat. Richly opulent, mouthfilling depth encased in a racy, focused structure – acidity is concentrated as well as fruit, keeping this firmly coiled like a spring. Finishes with perfumed expansion and marvelously layered depth, longer than the Schlossberg but perhaps not quite as detailed. **92**

Riesling Schlossberg Cuvée Ste.-Catherine 1998

This comes from 50-60 year-old vines in the middle of the slope – the most favored plot. The clarity of this is immediately apparent next to the 'regular' Ste.-Catherine, tighter-grained, finer and with more dimension. Perfumed floralness and tangerine fragrance, lemon meringue, fresh cream and a rosemary herbalness. Terroir really shows – this relates very well to the other Schlossberg, showing the character of the site and increasing in density and concentration but gaining finesse and breed as well. Slightly honeyed *passerillage* flavors, gloriously regal. Apricot and intensely powerful in the mouth, more tenor in pitch than the Ste.-Catherine but equally complete and even finer in tone. Perfumed, unending finish, with a stony, intensely gripping profile reminiscent of Nigl's Piri Privat. Aristocratic wine. **95**

Riesling Schlossberg Cuvée Ste.-Catherine 'L'Inédit' 1998

One portion of the juice destined for the Schlossberg Cuvée Ste.-Catherine did not ferment completely to dryness, and was separated into a unique cuvée entitled L'Inédit, a word that refers to long-completed manuscript being published for the first time. Harvested at 15.1% potential alcohol, this finished with 13.7% alcohol and 22 g/l residual sugar. The aromas shift in constant complexity, showing nuances of mandarin orange, white peach, fresh coconut, vanilla bean and toffee. Despite its great concentration, this comes off as utterly sleek, without a hint of excess weight, very much built in the style of the vintage. Superbly refined, more opulent than its sibling, the 'regular' Schlossberg Cuvée Ste.-Catherine (as if!), but demonstrating the same piercing finesse and harmony. Shines in multi-faceted glory. **95**

Tokay Pinot Gris Cuvée Ste.-Catherine 1998

Richly uncompromising intensity on the nose, honeyed peach and orange aromas, poached pear, marmalade, baked apples, a touch of strawberry. As with the Rieslings, the densely compacted mass is encased in a brilliantly focused, structural sheath of blazing acidity. Viscous and velvety in the mouth, with a spicily stony minerality that reveals this wine's origins in the Clos des Capucins. Dried stone fruit and pear compote decadence lounges longingly in a perfume that refuses to die down. **91**

Tokay Pinot Gris Cuvée Laurence 1998

This cuvée, from a limestone and clay plot at the bottom of Furstentum, was harvested at 16.4% potential alcohol, approaching SGN levels, and finished with 48 g/l of residual sugar. Richly heady and opulent in profile, very VT-like, with a honeyed core of almond, peach and orange essences. Confectionary and tropical but balanced by racy acidity, finishing with dense presence and greater length and grip than the Ste.-Catherine. **92**

Tokay Pinot Gris Altenbourg Cuvée Laurence 1998

(Tasted in Portland.) The '98 Pinot Gris has very expressive aromas of white raisin, honey, lavender and apricot jelly, gorgeous refinement and class, with grand cru expansiveness. Again I marvel here at the transparency of terroir, as this expresses superbly the heavier clay and marl soils of the site but without losing any finesse or elegance. Velvety, supple mouthfeel, really vibrant and penetrating, with a gloriously late-picked intensity, tropical, honeyed, and painfully fine, a brilliant gem set in a binding of intensely focused and harmonious acidity. Unending length on the finish, firmly in the realm of dessert, but positively lovely wine. Definitely a step up in fine-ness over the previous two wines. **96**

Gewurztraminer Réserve Personnelle 1998

(Tasted in Portland.) All of Weinbach's Gewurztraminers in 1998 were technically at vendange tardive levels of ripeness, with the least rich boasting 15.5% potential alcohol! The Réserve is very floral and mineral, quite high-toned, with an apricot, late-picked perfume. Honeyed in the mouth, with syrupy peach and apricot flavors, strongly floral in tone. This finishes a bit short, but it's well-built, with typical class and grace. **87**

Gewurztraminer Cuvée Théo 1998

From the Clos des Capucins, this massive wine was harvested at a VT level of ripeness, and retains 45 g/l of residual sugar. Deeply pungent fragrances of rose petal, cured meat, sweet herbs and lemon rind. Powerfully built, more floral than spicy, though there is an intense core of *Würze* hidden under the fruity clothing here. Thickly honeyed, apricot and floral in the mouth, with a piercingly rich mid-palate and a headily full-throttle finish, overlaid by a pervasive orange-citrus perfume. This would be a good accompaniment to food, as its girth seems to call for a counterpoint. **90**



A well-tended vine in the walled Clos des Capucins vineyard.

Gewurztraminer Cuvée Laurence 1998

This cuvée comes from the same plot as the Tokay Pinot Gris Cuvée Laurence. Richly perfumed, with more dimension and breed than the Cuvée Théo. Soapy-floral fragrance, lavender, tangerine rind, fresh litchi, really silky and billowy aromatics, showing incredible finesse. Perfumed and elegantly decadent in the mouth, high-toned in profile but not incomplete, showing rich, late-harvested depth. Tightly-knit on the back end, creamy and nearly pastry-like in tone, finishing with plenty of length and fragrance. **92**

Gewurztraminer Altenbourg Cuvée Laurence 1998

Of the Altenbourg lieu-dit, Laurence says, “It is lower in altitude and ripens earlier, producing more forward, explosive wines. The Furstentum wines are a little more spicy, with tighter structure, and not quite as opulent.” Super-sleek nose, ‘cool’ in tone versus the regular Laurence, and more constricted in build, with heavy-soil intensity. This is perhaps not quite as expressive right now, but seems just a touch finer and tighter in grain. Floral apricot, cassis and marmalade aromas are backed by a tarragon-like herbalness, piercingly beautiful and intense without a trace of excess weight. Very, very refined on the palate, darkly toned pear, blood orange and dark berry flavors building slowly to an intensely spicy, baritone richness on the back end with plenty of acidity to buffer the velvety opulence. Subtly nuanced kaleidoscope of a finish, going on for miles; thoroughly grand cru wine, and dizzyingly pleasurable to experience. **94**

Gewurztraminer Furstentum Vendanges Tardives 1997

This was not made as a *trie* selection, as the entire plot was harvested as vendange tardive. Richly fragrant nose, very meaty, like mortadella. Concentrated and gloriously high-octane yet not at all top-heavy, with an array of strawberry, passion-fruit, guava, poached pear and nutmeg aromas. Unctuous, slightly glassy texture in the mouth, hugely SGN-like mass, but somehow still racy and sleekly defined. Finishes with spicy, subtly gripping intensity, engulfing your entire being with its presence. Phenomenal. **96 (+?)**

Tokay Pinot Gris Vendanges Tardives 1997

This is from a blend of various plots, as there was high ripeness but not a lot of botrytis in 1997: “We took a little bit from everywhere,” says Faller. Honeyed passionfruit and baked peach notes above a smoothly chalky, minerally undertone. Thickly glossy in the mouth, honeyed orange, Turkish apricot, peach pie: this doesn’t seem to have the subtlety of the Gewurztraminer VT, appearing to be more about sheer power, but it does maintain a sense of purity and focus. Finishes very long, baritone and densely compacted, like a thousand tons packed into a square inch. **93**

Gewurztraminer Sélection de Grains Nobles 1997

Thickly wound litchi, dried apricot and desiccated orange aromas, intensely concentrated but very sleek and vibrant. Expands with creamy richness on the palate, with densely perfumed opulence – really takes off on the finish in energetic and nearly unending length, totally spatial in profile, three-dimensional. **96**

Tokay Pinot Gris Quintessence de Grains Nobles 1997

(Tasted in Portland.) Opulent density on the nose, cured meat, clover honey, pastry cream, poached pear, apricot, cinnamon. Sappy, tropical and thickly honeyed in the mouth, but with a smoky, minerally undertone and plenty of nicely bright acidity for support. Compared to the VT, this seems even more dense in mass, but comes off as finer and better balanced thanks to the lively acids. Finishes richly perfumed, with piercing brilliance. Very sexy wine, should live forever. **96**



This is the castle above Kaysersberg that put the “Schloss” in Schlossberg.

Muscat madness

PERFUMED, EXOTIC AND INTENSE, Muscat is for most people the least-known and the least-appreciated of the four grand cru grapes of Alsace. There are two types of Muscat that are widely planted in Alsace: Muscat d'Alsace (a synonym for Muscat à Petit Grains, both Blanc and Rosé) and Muscat Ottonel. Growers argue about the merits and faults of each, but it is generally assumed that a blend of the two is the preferred option. Muscat in Alsace is most famous as an accompaniment to the local asparagus, but is also recommended with spicy cuisine and, most commonly, as an aperitif. "I think that Muscat is the best aperitif in the world," says Laurence Faller of Domaine Weinbach, who makes one of the finest Muscats in Alsace. "I cannot think of a better wine."

To further explore this intriguing grape, we assembled a tasting of about a dozen Muscats, including some of the most renowned examples in Alsace. There is not a lot of Muscat from Alsace that is widely available in the United States, and naturally our friends and colleagues here, many of whom are great lovers of Alsace wines, were very curious to taste a broad range of them together. However, many of these wines did not show as well as anticipated, even to a receptive audience.

Oftentimes the wines appeared aggressively herbal and muted in aroma, and appeared stunted by their dryness. "Now we know why more of these aren't brought over here," joked Eric Pottmeyer, a local wine merchant. But there was plenty to like about many of the wines. The overall consensus was that the most successful wines involved a touch of residual sugar, which seemed to brighten and expand the flavors, allowing them to express themselves with greater intensity and depth. Purists (ourselves not entirely excluded) may bemoan the increasing sugar levels in today's Alsace wines, but in this very limited instance, the Muscats that retained a little sugar simply appeared more focused, better balanced and more appealing. Considering that Muscat is most widely used as an aperitif, shouldn't the focus be on its drinkability?

Tasting Notes

The following wines were tasted in Portland, Oregon, in August of 2000. Also tasted: *Léon Beyer Muscat NV*, *Léon Beyer Muscat Réserve 1998*, *Marcel Deiss Muscat Bergheim 1998*.

Joseph Cattin Muscat 1997

Broadly fragrant, with a cinnamon spice component. This shows the softness of the vintage but it's pleasant, with a lingering floralness. **85**

Jean Becker Muscat 1998

Savory notes on the nose, sweet carrot, vegetable broth, kumquat, not entirely unlike Grüner Veltliner. Well-balanced and quietly aromatic in the mouth, with a citrusy delicacy. **86**

Bott-Frères Muscat Cuvée Exceptionnelle 1998

Richly peachy, slightly tropical perfume. Noticeable residual sugar is balanced by good acidity and fresh appeal. **85**

Zind-Humbrecht Muscat Herrenweg 1998

Slightly earthy, with hints of dried orange peel and an exotic spiciness. A bit compressed, and like the other wines from Herrenweg in this vintage, comes off as just a little flat, but there are nice flavors and good ripeness. **87?**

Jean Becker Muscat Froehn 1997

Very perfumed, very minerally, with grapefruit and lime citrusness and a soapy-floral fragrance. Good length and pervasive stoniness, showing grand cru depth. Well-made. **88**



Bruno Sorg Muscat Pfersigberg 1998

Intense aromas of dried orange, cured meat and violets, underlined by deeply stony bass notes. Wonderful presence on the palate, demonstrating grand cru intensity and depth, and far more expansive than any of the previous wines in the tasting. Finishes with fragrant, incisive length. **90(+?)**

Rolly Gassmann Muscat Moenchreben 1998

Spicy pear and maraschino cherry, with nice depth and dimension. Noticeable residual sugar, but here it serves to expand and brighten the flavors. It hasn't got a lot of complexity, but this is well-carried, with depth, aroma and class. **89**

Jean Becker Muscat Vendange Tardive 1997

Intense, mineral-driven nose. Compared to the Froehn, this expands depth and intensity rather than sweetness, sitting richly on the palate with subtle delicacy and aristocratic bearing. Superbly built. **92(+?)**

Ernest Burn Muscat Goldert Clos St.-Imer Sélection de Grains Nobles 1989

Smooth, lusciously peachy intensity on the nose, concentrated aromas of grapefruit, apple candy, maraschino cherry, fruit cocktail and cinnamon. Surprisingly delicate in the mouth, airy and fluffy. Perhaps this needs a bit more middle-palate depth to be truly great, but there are a lot of things going on, with a delicately floral, intensely spicy fragrance that lingers in layered clouds of perfume, long and compellingly decadent. **92**

I include here some notes on a few other 1998 Muscats tasted in Alsace:

Ernest Burn Muscat Goldert Clos St.-Imer Cuvée la Chapelle 1998 - \$34

Of Muscat, Burn says: "It's a difficult grape. You need old vines, low yields and then a good vintage as well." The tightly-knit texture and fineness of the vintage are readily apparent here, focusing the perfumed, delicately fragrant and floral aromatics. Notes of candied orange peel, honeysuckle and apricot jam, explosively fragrant on the palate and impossibly seductive. The 18 g/l of residual sugar are balanced by plenty of acidity, but as with many German Rieslings, the sugar here seems to expand and intensify the aromas. **92**

Schoffit Muscat Cuvée Tradition 1998

Beautifully fragrant nose, slightly musky, with harmonious depth and concentration. Very penetrating in the mouth, expanding in floral, orange-peel fragrance as it moves further back across the palate with surprising length and dimension. Excellent Muscat. **90**

Weinbach Muscat Réserve 1998

Ethereally fragrant perfume, absolutely lovely as it expands in a cloud of apricot, orange-peel, and nearly violet floralness, intense yet nearly weightless. Freshly vibrant and elegantly discreet, picking up mineral-spicy notes as it settles into the lingering, thoroughly refined finish. **91(+?)**

And in the States:

Dirler Muscat Saering 1998

Super-floral and intensely perfumed, yet held together in a painfully elegant, incredibly discreet build. Expands in the mouth with aromas of tangerine peel, crushed flowers and a hint of melon; long, subtle and fine. **90**

Zind-Humbrecht Muscat Goldert 1998 - \$40

Powerfully rich and intensely pungent, this expresses the deep power and broad resonance of the site, with a thickly creamy texture and fine perfumes of orange sherbet, grapefruit and nut oils. Its girth is firmly supported by a tight structure, and the concentrated aromas linger on a powerful finish. **91**

Rating the wines

WINES ARE ASSESSED BASED ON THEIR perceived total potential lifespan. In an ideal world, prose would be the only language required, but of course we humans have a penchant for categorization and qualitative organization. Therefore, despite its flaws, we have chosen to include a numerical score in our notes, based on a hundred-point scale. We stress that the text of the tasting notes is the matter of importance, and that the score apart from the text is divested of meaning. A (+?) indicates the potential for an increased score.

Tasting notes are by individual tasters, and not composites of a panel. We document who is tasting the wine, where, and when the wine is being tasted, as all three of these elements are crucial to the contextual understanding of the notes. In addition, lot numbers are provided whenever possible, and especially AP numbers for German wines. In general, unless otherwise noted, all tasting notes are Peter's.

Prices quoted are the current average retail on the West Coast of the United States.

Next Issue

Germany's wine auctions

IN THE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER ISSUE OF RIESLING REPORT we'll give you a complete rundown on the annual high-end wine auctions in Germany. These auctions take place in mid-September, and we'll be there with cameras clicking and palates sipping. Then we'll report back to you with who's hot, who's not, and what you can do to get your hands on some of these incredible rarities.

We'll also be taking a look at the current status of dry Rieslings around the world. We will have an especially focused eye on recent developments in the dry Rieslings of Germany, where you almost can't sell a wine domestically that doesn't say *trocken* on the label.

Thanks

Special thanks to all of the producers in this issue for their generosity and hospitality. We give thanks daily that these dedicated and talented wine-makers are part of our world. A heartfelt *merci bien*, also, to the wonderfully warm and welcoming people of Alsace. Oh, and thanks for all the great cooking!

THE RIESLING REPORT RATING SCALE

- 95–100 Classic.** A perfect example of its type. The holy grail of all wine lovers, these are wines that stop time and transport you to a higher plane of existence.
- 90–94 Exceptional.** A superbly crafted wine with extraordinary attributes.
- 85–89 Above average.** Wines showing character, distinction and interest.
- 80–84 Average.** A drinkable wine, but without any special distinction.
- 75–79 Below average.** An underachiever.
- 75 or less Poor or flawed.**

Only wines rated 85 or better will appear in this magazine. These are our personal recommendations. More tasting notes can be found in Library within the **Members Only** area of the Riesling Report Web site: www.rieslingreport.com



The trading gets hot and heavy in the mosh pit at the VDP-Mosel auction in Trier. For information on how to bid in the upcoming auctions, please see page 34 of the May/June 2000 Riesling Report – available to subscribers in the Library of our Web site.