

## Extreme Alsace

The 2015 harvest yields highs and lows for France's celebrated white wine region

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On the northeastern edge of France lies Alsace, one of the country's great regions for white wine. Known for its structured whites made from aromatic varieties as well as luscious, ageable dessert wines, Alsace takes its place in France's top tier alongside the whites of Burgundy and the dessert wines of Sauternes and the Loire Valley.

Since my previous tasting report on the wines of Alsace ("Taking It Easy," Nov. 15, 2016), I have reviewed more than 225 wines from the region in blind tastings conducted at Wine Spectator's New York office. Alsace exports comparatively little of its production, so I ultimately focus my tastings on producers with historically strong track records for quality. As a result, about half of the wines I reviewed received outstanding ratings of 90 points or higher on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Yet statistics don't always tell the full story. My initial tastings for this report were not particularly impressive. These early samplings of bottlings from 2015 were largely made up of higher-volume producers from Alsace, sources that in better vintages can deliver well-priced wines that make good introductions to the region or to a particular grape variety. But within this group from 2015, I found Rieslings and Pinot Blancs that were short and crisp, lacking character, along with bottlings from

Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris that were overripe, soft and unbalanced.

For subsequent tastings, comprising wines that were released later, I shifted gears, limiting my focus to bottlings from Alsace's top names. They delivered some stunning examples. Rieslings were firm yet inviting, with an expressive flavor range; Gewürztraminers stood out for their grace and definition; Pinot Gris were rich and creamy, but without excessive weight. Overall, these bottlings were structured yet finely balanced, with a lot of ripe flavor and personality to draw you into the glass. This exuberance probably means that most of the 2015s are not set up to be long-agers, but the general balance suggests good drinking over the next decade or so.

The marked qualitative differences I experienced are due to the ability (or lack thereof) of area producers to respond to the conditions during the 2015 growing season and harvest. Compared with recent vintages, Alsace's easy spring in 2015 and the lack of disease through the growing season - typically one of the region's major concerns - could have resulted in the type of year where consumers can largely buy with confidence across the board. But temperatures increased dramatically in June and into July, topping 100° F. Drought conditions prevailed for most of the season, and rainfall totaled only about an inch through mid-August. At the conclusion of the 2015 harvest, the Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace (CIVA) announced it would legally allow acidification for the first time since 2003, although most quality producers utilized other measures to preserve acidity in their grapes and resulting wines.

« Anything to protect moisture, shade, humidity-you did it in '15, » says Olivier Humbrecht of Zind- Humbrecht, explaining the winery's varied canopy management for rows of different orientations, including the full-on, umbrella-like branches the team developed for southwest-facing vines. « Sunburn was the issue more so than the drought. It wasn't just hydric stress, it was sunburn, » says Humbrecht. « Rows planted west to east had less sun damage, because it was the evening sun that inflicted the most damage. »

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Despite the extremely warm conditions resulting in ripe grapes harvested with high potential alcohol levels, many bottlings show fine acidity and good balance. Technical analyses of many '15s show unusually high proportions of tartaric acidity and lower pH levels, a combination that can create the perception of greater overall acidity and structure.

« 2015 is quite an outstanding vintage, » says Trimbach. « But where did the acidity come from? It's the mystery of this vintage. It's a vintage we will have to talk about and explain, because of the [higher levels of] residual sugar. But it's so balanced that it's not an issue in the resulting wines. »

Producers like Zind-Humbrecht and Trimbach, whose vineyards include significant acreage of older and/or hillside vines, and whose teams did extra work in the vineyards to react to the extreme conditions, are the success stories of 2015. Producers with younger vines and/or acreage on the valley floor fared worse. Their vines suffered, and grapes were harvested with low acidity levels or remained physiologically immature after the vines had shut down. Many of the resulting wines are insipid and weak.

Overall, I rate the 2015 vintage 91 points. Considering the high proportion of outstanding wines in my tastings, as well as my general enthusiasm for the lovely examples I enjoyed from top producers, I would typically suggest a higher overall rating. But I believe that due to the disparity in quality among the region's broader offerings, the short- to mid-term ageability of the whites and the fact that the vintage will deliver very few dessert wines (conditions did not support the development of botrytis), it's not a year that merits placement among the crème de la crème from Alsace.

However, it is a unique vintage from the region, and if you seek out some of Alsace's esteemed names, you can start enjoying the year's best releases right now. Consumers need to do their homework when it comes to the 2015s, but the effort will reward with vibrant, expressive bottlings.

## 2015 BY VARIETY

### Riesling

Among the 2015 Rieslings are two of the most highly rated wines of this report, both earning classic scores.

(...) Trimbach's Riesling Alsace Grand Cru Schlossberg 2015 (95, \$75), which won't be released for another year, marries power and grace, offering ripe white fruit, slate and citrus. In both cases, vineyard sites that often result in an austere style for Riesling are more approachable due to the fruit forward character of the vintage.

#### Other Vintages

At 95 points, Trimbach's iconic Riesling Clos Ste.-Hune 2008 (\$239) is a prime example of a late-release bottling that you don't want to miss, assuming you can find it. With 10 years of bottle age, this is still a baby. It's a classic example of steely Alsace Riesling, featuring lots of petrol and mineral flavors layered with peach, citrus and pine notes; it will easily age well for another 15 years.