

Trimbach embrace grands crus

Jancis Robinson, 5 Apr 2018



Two days after the outstanding Alsace Crus et Terroirs tasting described yesterday, the wine trade calendar served up icing on the cake in the form of a Trimbach tasting.

Trimbach is the Riesling specialist par excellence. Riesling is (just) the most-planted grape variety in Alsace, representing 22% of vines planted but a full 45% of Trimbach's annual production of 1,200,000 bottles is Riesling. Their most famous examples are the revered Clos Ste Hune and Cuvée Frédéric Émile, but even their most basic bottling has the same slow-burning pungency and thrilling vibrancy. Trimbach Riesling ages admirably slowly. You can safely stick a bottle in your wine rack.

Like many of Alsace's top producers, Trimbach has for centuries been a close-knit family affair. The first records of the Ribeauvillé farmers date back to 1626. Pierre Trimbach is current winemaker, with 38 vintages under his belt; his brother Jean the exceptionally forthright front man. Jean's 26 year-old son Julien will be next winemaker. Jean described him as 'impatient to get the cellar keys, full of new ideas, but we need to calm

him down'. Pierre's 33-year-old daughter Anne is on the sales side. All very neat and cosy. And they are already into their fourteenth generation. Below are, left to right, Jean, Pierre, Anne and uncle Hubert, whom older wine professionals may remember as the counterpart to Johnny Hugel in ye olden days.

Introducing an array of 18 marvels, Jean described the last decade of Alsace vintages – 2007 to 2017 – as unparalleled. 'My 85-year-old father Bernard says he has never seen anything like it. Our last tricky vintage was 2006 when we had grey rot. Since then we have not chaptalised at all.' He is particularly keen on the 2015s, made in a warm but not damagingly hot year. The first half of August saw record temperatures and the same sort of drought as 2003 but acidities are apparently exceptional. The 2014 growing season was much cooler but, like 2015, there was, most unusually, no need to sort Riesling grapes. Trimbach's yields are generally 45–50 hl/ha – even in vineyards they don't own.

Jean Trimbach is clearly proud of the fact that these bought-in grapes depend on handshakes rather than contracts, some of them over four generations, so presumably spanning the troubled times of the Second World War for this unusual region on the Franco-German border.

Trimbach have been on a buying spree. Ten years ago their total vineyard holdings were just 35 ha (86 acres) but they now own 55 ha, of which 80% are in the prime villages of Ribeauvillé, Bergheim and Hunawihr. This makes them Alsace's fourth largest vineyard owner and all 55 ha have apparently been farmed organically for the last 12 years, though are not certified. Jean Trimbach noted that 'the next generation will want to go biodynamic'.

He also boasted that 35% of their vineyards are grands crus, including their new acquisitions in Geisberg (pictured above) and Schlossberg, even though the 51 Alsace Grands Crus represent only 4.5% of total Alsace vineyard. But thereby hangs a tale.

Trimbach's Clos Ste Hune, the most admired Alsace Riesling of all, is grown in an enclave within the Rosacker Grand Cru on limestone bedrock but has never had any mention of Rosacker on the label. The Trimbach family, like their great rivals the Hugels, were initially fiercely opposed to the grand cru system. They felt that too much land was classified as grand cru when the Alsace map was being redrawn at the end of the last century, and that the production regulations were too lax.

But in 2009, Trimbach started to embrace the grand cru system, and now produce Rieslings labelled with the names of the grands crus Geisberg and the famous Schlossberg. According to Jean Trimbach, they knew then that the rules would be tightened up in 2011 on what he calls 'a beautiful day', with a suitably demanding minimum ripeness level and maximum yield. Hugel have also been edging towards a geographical system of labelling with their Schoelhammer Riesling from a marly enclave within the Schoenenbourg vineyard.

After acquiring Geisberg vines from the local convent, Trimbach eventually bought 2 ha of Schlossberg that had come up for sale. According to Jean T, they waited for wine producers based close to this famous vineyard to express interest but it didn't happen. 'The Fallers and Albert Mann both passed on this, so we asked, do you mind if we buy it?'. All very far from, for example, the cut and thrust of the London property market.

Then in 2016 they bought another 2 ha of vineyard in the highly distinctive granite-based Brand vineyard on little terraces, but are yet to release a wine from here. I can't wait.

The 18 wines below are presented in the order tasted, but you can change this.

Trimbach Riesling 2015 Alsace

16.5

Mainly made from fruit sourced from the many growers with whom Maison Trimbach has contract agreements. 360,000 bottles made of this signature wine.

TA 7.82 g/l, RS 2.4 g/l, pH 3.09.

This is exactly how Alsace Riesling should taste, says Jean Trimbach. Rich, floral nose with tension. They had never seen such acid in such a hot season. Still quite youthful and very racy. I may even be underscoring it... 2015 was clearly an outstanding vintage. 13.95%

Drink 2018-2024

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Réserve Riesling 2015 Alsace

17

Mostly from vineyards in Ribeauvillé, Hunawirh and Bergheim (all limestone). The Réserve range is described as 'more complex wines destined for a longer laying down'. Grapes are largely from Trimbach's own estate – vines 40–50 years old, organically farmed and worked the same way as Clos Ste Hune and the grand crus that make up Cuvée Frédéric Émile. 10,000 bottles.

TA 8.27 g/l, RS 7.4 g/l, pH 3.06.

Much less expressive on the nose than the regular bottling but much more expressive on the palate. Really very dense and rich and as good as many grand crus. Very long and delicious! 13.85%

Drink 2020-2028

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Sél. de Vieilles Vignes Riesling 2015 Alsace

17

The vines are 50 years old from the Ribeauvillé area, from parcels of marl and limestone soil. Made from the local convent's vineyards, which added 8 ha (19.8 acres) in total to Maison Trimbach's own holdings. This includes Muehlforst, a south-facing vineyard that Jean Trimbach claims should have been grand cru. Made almost every year since 2009. Up to 24,000 bottles.

TA 7.71 g/l, RS 5.5 g/l, pH 3.17.

Very rich nose. Very assertive, dense and long but it tastes dry. Lots of juiciness. Less austere and more approachable than Riesling Réserve. Vibrating finish. 14.4%

Drink 2018-2025

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Cuvée M Riesling 2013 Alsace

16.5

Produced from >40-year-old vines planted on south-facing slopes within the Mandelberg Grand Cru vineyard – one of the region's warmest sites – in the village of Mittelwihr. Mandelberg is further from the Vosges than most grand crus. Rarely seen in UK until now. They could label this a grand cru but their Danish importer loves it being called Cuvée M, and takes most of the production.

TA 7.59 g/l, RS 4.9 g/l, pH 3.06.

Perceptible noble rot influence: 20–30%. Rich, almost oily nose. Very different, smoother texture compared with the less-expensive Rieslings. Very obvious warmth and ripeness here. Lemon syrup. A little shorter than some. 12.5%

Drink 2017-2025

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Schlossberg Riesling 2015 Alsace Grand Cru

17.5

In 2012, two hectares (nearly five acres) of the Grand Cru Schlossberg were acquired by the Trimbach family. First vintage 2014. Vines by the château are cooled by the forest and a local spring. With global warming this is particularly interesting: Trimbach's first granite vineyard.

TA 8.65 g/l, RS 8.4 g/l, pH 3.19.

Deep greenish straw. Already some creamy evolution on the nose. Extremely bright fruit and really healthy glow. High acid but masses of fruit. Really accessible and glorious already. 13.8%

Drink 2018-2030

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Geisberg, Vignobles du Couvent de Ribeauvillé, Riesling 2013 Alsace Grand Cru

17

A 2.6 ha (6.4 acre) portion of the vineyards leased from the Convent of Ribeauvillé since 2008 are in the Geisberg Grand Cru. First vintage of this wine 2009 (then 2011, 2012 and now 2013). Limestone, muschelkalk and a little bit of sandstone. Geisberg also goes into Cuvée Frédéric Émile (made from vines on the eastern part of the vineyard). This is from the western part just behind the Trimbach winery. Vines 70 years old, 45 hl/ha.

TA 8.56 g/l, RS 6 g/l, pH 3.1.

Pale greenish gold. Introvert on the nose initially but it opened out into exotic tropical flowers. Chalky finish and lots of texture here. 13.3%

Drink 2019-2030

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Cuvée Frédéric Emile Riesling 2008 Alsace

17+

A blend of two grand cru sites – Geisberg and Osterberg – produced by Trimbach since the 1960s. The soils here – clay and limestone over sandstone – are described as 'not only stony, they are strongly alkaline, producing a wine of intense minerality and powerful acidity'. Very cold August in 2008.

TA 9.06 g/l, RS 1 g/l, pH 3.09.

Light nose needs coaxing out of the glass. Absolutely bone dry and SO youthful! Tension and too austere to charm at present. You have to take this on trust for the moment. 13%

Drink 2022-2034

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Clos Ste Hune Riesling 2012 Alsace

18.5

The Clos Ste Hune vineyard, owned by the Trimbach family for more than 200 years, is 1.67 ha (4.13 acres) in Rosacker Grand Cru in Hunawir. Vines 50 years old, on predominantly muschelkalk subsoil. Back to earth with 2012 – not as crazy hot as 2011 and not as high acid as 2010. Good growing season. Decent crop. TA 7.7 g/l, RS 7.59 g/l, pH 3.08.

Greenish straw. Great balance! Higher residual sugar than usual and super-easy to love. A very flattering vintage of Clos Ste Hune. Just perfection of Riesling balance. No shortage of fruit but extremely tense too. Wonderful breadth and length on a modest, non-flashy frame. Very long. 12.54%

Drink 2018-2035

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Trimbach, Cuvée Frédéric Emile Riesling 1985 Alsace

18

Jean Trimbach joined the family business in 1985 and this was released in 1990/1. Etienne Hugel and Jean Trimbach were a bit scared when the 1985s were launched because they were so tight.

Deep straw. Honeyed, pungent nose. Dry finish, racy. Very slightly drying out on the palate. But gorgeous on the nose. Spreads out on the end. This would be a great food partner.

Drink 1995-2016

Trimbach, Cuvée Frédéric Emile Riesling 2007 Alsace

18

Driest Cuvée Frédéric Émile ever: RS 0.7 g/l. Quite a cold season but very dry September for harvest.

Bony. A callow youth! Light and fresh and with masses of acidity. Chewy.

Drink 2022-2035

Trimbach, Cuvée Frédéric Emile Riesling 2000 Alsace

18

Vintage a little like 2012: RS 5g/l. Magnum.

Tobacco leaf aroma – most unusual! Good tension. Still a little chewy. Incredibly youthful for an 18-year-old wine! Some very slight petrol aroma but with great excitement and richness. Long.

Drink 2012-2025

Trimbach, Clos Ste Hune Riesling 1993 Alsace 18

This was originally dismissed as a weak vintage.

Orange gold. Very toasty nose. Really very mature nose! Racy and green-tasting somehow. As pure as a mountain stream. Masses of juicy acidity. Dry, slightly sudden finish.

Drink 2003-2023

Trimbach, Clos Ste Hune Riesling 2005 Alsace 18

'Good classic vintage – crystal clear'.

Pale greenish gold. Lively, full of beans, not rich and not dense but beautifully balanced. Not showy. Lighter than some vintages. Very racy. But not amazingly persistent – it's the balance that does it. 12.5%

Drink 2015-2030

Trimbach, Clos Ste Hune Riesling 1998 Alsace 18

Deep copper. Rich nose – and the evidence of 20–30% botrytis. Almost heavy – needs to be drunk with food. Big and muscular! Pungent.

Drink 2008-2024

Trimbach, Réserve Personnelle Pinot Gris 2013 Alsace 17.5

From six different old vineyards of which three are Grand Cru Osterberg. RS 10–15 g/l.

Quite a rich wine with some explosion of floral notes on the palate. Nervy – not fat. Clean and racy finish.

Drink 2017-2025

Trimbach, Réserve Personnelle Pinot Gris 2007 Alsace 17.5

Magnum.

Seems amazingly youthful and fresh! Lots of acidity covers the residual sugar.

Drink 2015-2025

Trimbach, Clos Ste Hune Hors Choix Riesling Vendange Tardive 1989 Alsace 19

RS 37 g/l. Fabulous vintage, especially for noble rot (like 2001). They did a green harvest in July in the Clos Ste Hune vineyard in morning. On the same day there was a hailstorm so this was another shrinkage. But it recuperated very nicely. Generous vintage. The Hors Choix is the heart of Clos Ste Hune – the grapes here are always picked separately, as late as possible, but this Vendange Tardive cuvée is only produced when the fruit is exceptionally fine. The last one of these produced !

Bright orange. Racy raisined Riesling notes. Very clean and fresh. Very much classic Riesling plus lots of botrytis. Dry finish, which is what differentiates it from a German Riesling. Super-clean and pure. Lovely balance! Not a matter of power and richness but transparency of the finesse of noble rot. It's so Riesling! Pure with a beautiful satin texture. 12.6%

Drink 1994-2030

Trimbach, Cuvée Frédéric Emile Riesling Sélection de Grains Nobles 1989 Alsace 18.5

RS 119 g/l.

Similar orange tawny to the Clos Ste Hune Hors Choix Vendange Tardive 1989. Very obvious Riesling. Dry finish. Transparent and sweet but so fresh! Very pure and sweet and lower acid than a similar German wine would have. Lightly raisiny, and with a thick texture that somehow reminds me of chenille. Lightly and agreeably bitter on the end. This wine broadcasts Sélection de Grains Nobles most loudly (as opposed to the Riesling broadcast so eloquently by the Clos Ste Hune Hors Choix Vendange Tardive 1989). 12.5%

Drink 2000-2049

<https://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/Trimbach-embrace-grands-crus>