

## The allure of Alsace, JOHN WILSON, *The Irish Times* - August 2010

WRITING ABOUT wine, as I am sure you understand, can be an arduous and difficult task. However, there are occasional compensations. One such boon was when I received an invitation to a vertical tasting of eight vintages of the Trimbach Cuvée Frédéric Émile Riesling going back to 1997.

As regular readers will be aware, this is one of my all-time favourite wines. I had a spring in my step on my way to the tasting, and certainly was not disappointed. There were highlights, of course, but every wine (even the most difficult 2003 vintage) was, at the very least, good, and several were fantastic. I can think of few other white wines that would stand up to such scrutiny.

I am a big fan of Alsace wines and Riesling in particular. I love that firm backbone of acidity, the pure fruits (usually free of any oak flavours) and the crisp, dry finish. It is that acidity that allows the Cuvée Frédéric Émile and other wines to age so well. It also means they are great food wines, perfect with all of the great fish of sea and river (trout, salmon, turbot and black sole), as well as chicken, and a great many pork dishes.

In recent years, some growers have been harvesting later, making off-dry wines. I find it works with Pinot Gris, but otherwise the wines can be too alcoholic and lack focus. The Trimbach wines do not fall into this category; with the exception of their Pinot Gris, all of the wines are fermented dry.

A wide range of grape varieties is grown in Alsace, but Riesling is the undisputed king. And Trimbach is one of the very best exponents of this variety. At the very top of the tree is their Clos Ste Hune, a single vineyard wine made in tiny quantities (about 650 cases) from a parcel in the Grand Cru Rosacker site overlooking the village of Hunawihr. This is virtually impossible to find, and costs in excess of €100 a bottle.

The grapes for Cuvée Frédéric Émile are sourced from the south-facing slopes of the Grand Cru sites of Geisberg (Trimbach never use the Grand Cru designation on any of their wines) and Osterberg. The vines have an average age of 40 years. The wine is subtle but sublime, a glorious mix of crisp, austere minerals and complex, lean green fruits. As it ages, it takes on notes of honey and sometimes petrol, and the minerality often becomes more apparent. In good years it will continue to develop for 10-15 years.

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Cuvée Frédéric Émile is a food wine par excellence, a perfect foil for shellfish, white fish, either grilled or served with creamy sauces, pork, charcuterie, and, my own favourite, roast chicken. Can a wine that costs €35-40 be great value? I would argue that it can; the Frédéric Émile costs less than many great wines, such as premier cru white Burgundy, and is every bit as good and certainly more reliable.

The Trimbach family have been making wine in Alsace for 12 generations, and also produce a number of less expensive wines. You will be hard pushed to find a dud bottle in the entire range.

**Trimbach Pinot Blanc 2006, Alsace, 12.5%, €13.49** Probably the most widely available in the Trimbach range, this is a deceptive wine. On its own, some of you may find it a little austere. If so, try it with smoked salmon, seafood or white meats, chicken, veal or pork, to release the lovely pure quince and yellow fruits, which balance the lip-smacking, crisp acidity.

**Trimbach Riesling 2008, 12.5%, €15.99** The basic Trimbach Riesling is great value. Clean, bright, green and yellow fruits, with a long, dry finish. Some retailers will have the 2008 vintage, one of the best in recent years. Again, it will be at its best with food.

**Trimbach Pinot Gris Réserve 2006, 13% €18.99** This has a little residual sugar that rounds out the finish slightly, but it's balanced by excellent acidity, and succulent, slightly smoky fruits. Drink as an aperitif, with foie gras or lightly spicy fish and chicken dishes.

**Trimbach Riesling Cuvée Frédéric Emile 2004, Alsace, 12.5%, €36.99** This is the current vintage, although some retailers may still have bottles of 2002 or even 2001 on their shelves. All three are excellent wines, and will continue to develop further. The 2004 has a perfect balance of sophisticated green fruits, mineral acidity and a wonderful, lingering finish. On my last visit, Greenacres in Wexford had half-bottles on sale, perfect for two with a starter.