

German grapes and French style combine to make fine wines in Alsace

By Joseph Ward

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The vineyards of Alsace rise along the eastern slopes of the Vosges Mountains, a ribbon of green stretching more than 100 miles from north to south. The Wine Route, which begins just west of Strasbourg, meanders through picturesque villages little changed for centuries and ends at Thann, near the Swiss border. A center of gastronomy as well as wine, it is a favorite destination of Germans and Swiss but seldom on American wine lovers' itineraries. I find that puzzling, because the wine, the food and the scenery make it an ideal wine region. It is certainly in my top three, but perhaps it has an identity problem.

Alsace is a region apart. German in appearance and character but French in spirit and fact, it has captured the best of both. The wines reflect that duality. Two of the three most important grapes, Riesling and Gewurztraminer, are German, while the third, pinot gris, is little planted elsewhere in France. The grapes may be German, but the wine styles lean toward French. Most are vinified dry to partner with food. Riesling is king, and Alsace produces some of the world's greatest, while the full-flavored pinot gris are radically different from the mostly bland pinot grigio being cranked out in northern Italy.

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No better place

Trimbach, the most-recognized Alsace name in the United States, is in Ribeauville, a few miles north of Riquewihr. This is another great traditional house making particularly fine dry Rieslings. Time to come clean: I like pinot gris and Gewurztraminer, though I find it difficult to pair the latter with food, but I come to Alsace to drink Riesling. And there is no better place for that than Trimbach.

Like Hugel, Trimbach is both domaine and negociant, and there is another striking similarity: Jean Trimbach and Etienne Hugel are both the 12th generation in these venerable family firms. Jean's brother, Pierre, is the winemaker, but "we don't have titles," Jean says. "We do everything."

The basic Riesling 2007 is very good, if a bit firm at the moment. Bone-dry with citrus and mineral aromas and flavors, it needs more bottle age. The Riesling Reserve 2007, made entirely from Ribeauville fruit, is one of the best examples of this wine I've tasted.

Trimbach also prefers proprietary designations for its wines. The Riesling Cuvee Frederic-Emile is always made from Grand Cru fruit from the Geisberg and Osterberg vineyards. The 2004 is textbook Riesling, although probably too dry for some palates. This wine benefits from extended cellaring: The 1990 Cuvee Frederic-Emile is beautiful now. Clos Sainte Hune is Trimbach's, and arguably Alsace's, greatest Riesling. Produced in minute quantities from a 3 1/4 -acre vineyard in Hunnawihr, it is superb, long-lived and very minerally.

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Recommended Alsatian wines

Alsace has had a string of very good vintages, and 2007 might be the best since the twin vintages of 2000 and 2001. The basic wines from 2007 are on the market now; the Grands Crus and Reserve bottlings will arrive over the next couple of years. The 2007 Rieslings will benefit from an extra year or two of bottle age. Here are some of my favorites:

Trimbach Riesling 2007

\$16, available at Total Wine.

Trimbach Riesling Cuvee Frederic Emile 2001

\$50, available at MacArthur Beverages.

Ward is senior wine correspondent at Conde Nast Traveler.