

The Vine Guy: The magic of Trimbach wines

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If wine is truly poetry in a bottle, then the Trimbach family qualifies for a literature prize. Scions of a winemaking tradition that goes back 12 generations, current owners and brothers Jean and Pierre have maintained the characteristic Trimbach style of expressive, dry, food-friendly wines that often approach the profound, while grooming their children to continue the legacy. Easily among the top tier of Alsatian wines, Trimbach whites are also some of the world's greatest, as recently recognized with Pierre's award as one of the 10 best winemakers on Earth.

Bordering Germany along the west bank of the Rhine, Alsace is France's easternmost province. Its turbulent history includes wars, annexations and reannexations, which explains the very German-sounding names in this very French region. With the sheltering Vosges mountain range as its western shoulder, the terroir is ideal for growing superb riesling, pinot gris, pinot blanc and gewurztraminer. Picturesque villages with half-timbered houses dot the towns aligned along the "route du Vin" that stretches from Marlenheim in the north toward Thann in the south. Trimbach is located nearly in the middle of the region, in the town of Ribeauville, surrounded by some of Alsace's most prized vineyards.

Alsace's serene beauty belies some underlying conflicts. The designation of several vineyards as "Grand Cru" a few years back was met with derision by many of the more prominent winemakers, including Trimbach.

"While some of the Grand Cru vineyards are as small as three hectares, others are much too big at almost 90 hectares," Jean, the winery's current president, said at a recent lunch. "What is more important than a designation is the way that a producer handles those vineyards."

Trimbach will not include "Grand Cru" on its qualifying wines because of the inconsistent quality of others made by different winemakers.

"Why should our wines be a locomotive for poor Grand Crus?" Jean said.

Retail prices are approximate.

During a meal of superb Belgian fare at Capitol Hill's Belga Cafe, Jean shared his most recent releases, starting with the Trimbach Riesling 2007 (\$17).

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"Our house style is to achieve balance with the correct acidity so there is no reason not to drink one of our wines," he said. "The goal is to allow the terroir and the specific varietal to become fully expressed in the glass."

This is certainly the underlying characteristic of this "entry-level" riesling and is a perfect introduction to the Trimbach winemaking approach. With remarkably bright pineapple, lemon and peach flavors, crisp acidity and limestone minerality, it is a great accompaniment to seafood and lightly sauced dishes.

A blend of 60 percent pinot auxerrois and 40 percent pinot blanc harvested in late September and early October, the **Trimbach Pinot Blanc 2006 (\$17)** was fermented completely in stainless steel. A bit softer in the mouth than the riesling, it exhibits lemon and floral aromas leading into tropical fruit, orange peel and grapefruit notes with hints of sweetness but a completely dry, nicely balanced and slightly mineral finish. A marvelous sushi wine.

Absolutely gorgeous was the **Trimbach Cuvee Frederic Emile 2002 (\$59)**. Named after Jean and Pierre's great-great-grandfather, this riesling is only produced when the grapes meet the Trimbach's high standards. The wines are aged in the bottle on their property, tasted frequently and released when deemed appropriate. In fact, the '02 was released after the '03 because the younger wine was felt to be ready sooner. Concentrated and complex, the '02 version shows intense minerality and acidity that balances the vivid lemon, grapefruit, apple and honeyed-pear flavors. The finish is rich, earthy and long, with perfect finesse and balance. It is drinking well now and will only continue to improve over the next decade. If you can resist opening the bottle.

The **Trimbach Gewurztraminer 2006 (\$20)** has everything that you would expect from this varietal combined with some exotic accents. Classic lychee aromas, white flowers, orange-peel and a noticeable nuttiness are first encountered, followed by grapefruit, Asian spices, lemon and green apple flavors. The finish is dry and long with apricots, cinnamon and spice. A terrific summer wine for sipping on the deck or enjoying with spicy foods.

As good as their regular "gerwurtz" is, the **Trimbach Gewurztraminer Cuvee des Seigneurs de Ribeaupierre 2001 (\$35)** is even better and a relative bargain considering its high quality. A wine of remarkable finesse and potential longevity, it is named for the rulers of Alsace during the Middle Ages and only produced when the grapes are perfect. Wonderfully multifaceted with layers of flavors, it has a deceptive sweetness despite the absence of any significant residual sugar. It opens with alluring truffle- and smoke-accented clove and floral aromas that flow seamlessly into exotic spicy lychee, rose petal, cardamom, cinnamon and pepper notes and an elegant, lingering and finely balanced finish.