

The best phrase with which to start this article is: "The Alsace area is so UNIQUE." First of all Alsace is small. How could such a small area produce such terrific wine in so great a quantity as to yield world-wide distribution? To add to this we find that the vines survive quite satisfactorily north of latitude 48 degrees. This equates to vines planted north of Lake Superior or Nova Scotia.

Secondly, it has a political history that is confusing to most. The region has bounced back and forth between France and Germany many times in the past. It is presently in the capable hands of the French. The German and the French people from the Alsace area produce wines in their own style; i.e. the Germans will produce wines that are sweet and the French will produce wine that is dry.

The third unique factor that one will encounter is the language. I am not qualified to say much more; even though we are talking about a French area, the language spoken is a mixture of German and French.

Hugh Johnson, in his World Atlas of Wine, sums it all up for us. He says, "The wine of Alsace reflects the ambivalent situation of a border province. A traveler at the time of the French Revolution found it incredible that this land, so clearly intended by nature to be part of Germany, was actually annexed to France."

There is one item that has not changed at all for at least the last several million years and that is the Vosges. The Vosges is a mountain range that has affected the landscape, the climate, and the vineyards in Alsace. At an elevation of 3500 ft. Riesling is grown, and it peacefully co-exists with dairying and lumbering. Follow down the slopes to around 1200 ft. and the vineyards become more numerous. There is more Riesling, especially the Riesling of the Rhine, responsible here and in Germany for the best wine – Sylvaner, Muscat, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and the very fragrant Gewurztraminer.

Gewurztraminer is the perfect introduction to Alsace. ("Gewurz" means spice in German.) This wine has a place with very rich dishes. However, after the perfect introduction of Gewurztraminer, the Alsatians consider Riesling their true Grand Vin. It offers something more; and that is a balance of hard and gentle, flowery and strong, and a long finish. The Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris, and the Muscat are the only wines that can be used to make a

Grand Cru from the Alsace area under the new regulations. The Muscat is a very nice surprise. Normally it produces a sweet wine. Here in Alsace the wine produced is dry and makes an excellent Aperitif.

We are indeed fortunate here in the Lowcountry as most of the wines are available. The Trimbach and the Hugel labels are about the best. Should you ever have the opportunity to visit Alsace, try to add these two wineries to your itinerary. Make an appointment for a tour and a tasting and you will experience quite an unusual adventure.

There is a beautiful story from Alsace about La Cave Historique des Hospices de Strasbourg. This is one of the most unusual wine cellars in the world. Created in 1395 underneath the ancient Strasbourg hospital, it served as a place to store wine for the church's holy communion, as well as for patients, since it was believed that wine lessened pain and the side-effects of illnesses. At the same time it was common for patients to pay for treatment with wine, sometimes offering entire vineyards.

The wine cellar is 1200 square meters. Therein lie 40 ancient wine barrels, a 17th century wine press, and 25000 bottles of wine being stored. In 1995 the winemakers of Alsace formed an association. Select members from this organization are given the opportunity to age their wine in the barrels. Afterward the wine is bottled on site and a portion of the wine is sold at the hospital shop. (I bought Riesling from the shop and it was to die for!)

Cheers

Next Stop? A sparkler.

WINESPEAK

Of all the wines and grapes that we have talked about it would appear that Riesling is mentioned the most often. This is indicative of the fact that Riesling survives just about anywhere, and also reflects the popularity of this varietal. Let's take a closer look at Riesling in Alsace. It is grown primarily in the Rhine Valley in limestone and clay-limestone soil base. Production in Alsace alone is a whopping 36,000,000 + bottles. The target is to produce an elegant white wine which is usually achieved. You can age this wine up to 10 years. Enjoy with Fish, Shellfish, and Parmesan Cheese. Should you have a young Riesling in the wine cellar, open with a Morbier.

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