

The Rosengarten Report

THE FOODS AND WINES THAT MAKE ME SWOON



SPECIAL ALSACE ISSUE: GLORIOUS ALSATIAN GASTRONOMY!

WINE Crack the Code....and Drink Like a King!
FOOD Discover France's Most Regional Cuisine

Oh. For some unknown reason....well, I actually have quite a few thoughts about those reasons....wine and food from Alsace have not broken big-time into the American gastronomic consciousness. Oh, sure, most foodies know about an Alsatian dish or two....and most wine geeks have some vague idea of what's being grown and vinified in the region.

But....have these delicious things been embraced by the American gastronomic community? Have they found ways into the regular culinary life—dare I say, *la vie quotidienne*—of American gastro-types?

The answer is a resounding “No.” Our home-bred foodies

may pursue Provence, and Tuscany, and Catalonia, and Oaxaca.....but no one I know is obsessing about the food and wine of Alsace.

What a shame.

For a long time, the notion that this needs to change has danced on the edges of my consciousness. I've never spent great hunks of time in Alsace....but my 3 or 4 quick visits over the years have always made me say “Wow! This is great food and wine!” The last time I went was about 15 years ago....and, in the intervening years, not knowing how things are developing in Alsace from a first-hand perspective, and being tied up with so many other places....I admit I haven't too feverishly pushed the

Alsace button.

But Holy Bartholdi....am I pushing it now!

In late September/early October of this year....just last month....I spent ten days in Alsace, smack in the middle of the *vendange*, or grape harvest. I ate spectacular food....much of it easy to make in your home kitchen. I drank spectacular wine....much of it available throughout America. Food and wine both had a character, a local character, that is front-and-center identifiable—unlike the food and wine in many regions of the world today that is meandering towards “national,” or, worse, “international” character.

What goes on in Alsace, stays....the same!....in Alsace!

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And I am delighted beyond words by that happy condition.

So why aren't the gastro-nomic products and ideas of this connoisseur's mecca getting through over here? Why isn't there *baeckoffe* on a million tables every night during the winter? Why aren't Americans drinking dry Alsatian Riesling all the time, in restaurants and homes?

What follows is a two-part investigation of these issues....the wine part, and the food part.....with plenty of theories, plenty of current realities.....and plenty of wonderful things to eat and drink that you can start enjoying tomorrow!

WINE FROM ALSACE

Well, I'll come right out and say it: wines from Alsace are among my very favorite wines in the world, really at the tippy-top, with a few others, of my international wine mountain. Here's what I love about Alsatian wine:

1) Alsace is one of the few places in the world making crisp, dry white wine that goes brilliantly with food—but, unlike, say, Muscadet, or Vinho Verde, Alsatian wine also has a

very strong character of its own. Not all Alsatian wines do this.....but get the right Riesling next to your fish.....and wow! This stuff doesn't just slither politely into the background: it stands up to the food, *and* accommodates it!

2) That pronounced character—a special type of sensual fruit, with lots of steel and extract behind it—carries over into the richer Alsatian wines that are not bone-dry fish-mates. The Alsatian grape varieties—many of them grown elsewhere in the world—are brought to a distinct intensity and concentration here, without the sacrifice of elegance.

3) The richest and sweetest Alsatian wines, intended to be drunk on their own, or with dessert, are glorious—a little less acidic than some of their German brethren, but usually a little more structured. And with the same Alsatian signature concentration.

So why aren't we picking up on all this good stuff?

Well, first of all.....America as a wine-drinking nation is just starting to emerge from the Chardonnay Haze. While most wine professionals proudly proclaim membership in the ABC club (Anything But Chardonnay), most social wine-drinkers in America still think they're

supposed to be drinking Chardonnay.

Along comes Alsace.....where you'll find hardly any Chardonnay grapes.....and the marketing disadvantage begins. If Americans were to go ga-ga about Riesling....and they may, someday soon!.....then the wrongs would be righted. But it's a difficult path.

Secondly.....one thing that doesn't work in the American marketplace.....is confusion. Americans like to know what they're drinking, and where it's from. "This is a Chianti.....from Italy".....and the warm flow of positive, in-the-know Italian images begins, with the appropriate soundtrack, leading to.....a purchase! For most people, on the other hand, hearing "This is a Gewurztraminer.....from Alsace".....stimulates no flow at all. The grape variety sounds German....but....isn't Alsace in France? Or is it in Germany? "Too much to think about. Let's buy that Chardonnay from Napa Valley!"

There are good historical reasons for this confusion. The region of Alsace, from the Middle Ages on, was a German region. In the late 17th century, the French wrested it away.....and Alsace stayed in French hands for two hundred years, until about 1870.....when, in the Franco-Prussian War, Alsace reverted

to Germany.....until World War I, when France got it back. Since 1917.....ninety years now.....Alsace has been in France.

Confusion, yes. But splendid possibilities. Those German years, that German influence, have etched a character into Alsatian food and wine that appears nowhere else in France. Ironically, the food and wine have each responded differently to the German influence.....another confusing factor. The Alsatian food does have many variations on pork and cabbage—but these are exquisite variations, much lighter, much more elegant, much more “French” than what you normally see in Germany. Confusingly, things are the opposite when it comes to wine. Alsations clearly learned from the Germans to vinify wine from such vivid, fruity grape varieties as Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris—but, probably due to soil and climate differences, the wines of Germany are generally lighter, racier, more elegant! In the case of wine, it is the Alsatian ones, not the German ones, that have more heft, more weight, more structure! More elegant food, but heartier wines!

It is enough to make your head spin. And then comes the biggest opportunity of all for confusion: Alsatian labels. There is a general sense

among wine-drinkers that “Alsatian labels are easy to understand”—because they are the only traditional labels in France that highlight the wine’s grape variety. Alsace Riesling. Alsace Pinot Blanc. Alsace Pinot Gris (not, for example, “Nuits St.Georges, Les Boudots,” as in Burgundy). Wow! They seem to be talking our language, Americans say. But when you really get into it, and really try to use the label to select wine for food, things become very complicated.

Not *too* complicated, mind you—far from it. I spent most of my time in Alsace last month trying to figure out the language of the label, the things that these labels are really telling you, so that your job in selecting Alsatian wine would be easier—because no wine book or article was telling me the things I wanted to know. And, after a wrestle, I arrived at some conclusions. Once you know them, and devote just a little time to understanding them.....you will be able to rely on your label sense to pinpoint the wines that are in the bottles! You will be a master Alsatian sommelier!

Believe me.....the glorious wine of Alsace is so spectacular at the table.....that it’s worth a little attention to detail!

First of all, though.....what underlies the label troubles?

The glorious wine of Alsace is so spectacular at the table..... that it’s worth a little attention to detail!

To make a long story short.....they were caused, in large part, by a wave of new legislation that went into effect in 1983, creating new categories and possibilities for the Alsatian wine label. As always, these regulations were intended, ultimately, to help sell more wine. But not every winery had the same reaction to the changes, and to ensuing changes. So there is controversy in Alsace about regulations and labels.....not to mention wineries that bend the rules, or ignore the rules, creating labels that reflect the reality each individual winery subscribes to! All of which, of course, adds up to consumer confusion.

Before 1983, if you made a Riesling in Alsace, it was officially “Alsace Riesling.” There are thousands of vineyards in Alsace planted to Riesling, and everyone knew that some of them are special....yielding

grapes of higher quality than other vineyards. But in the eyes of the law, the vineyard didn't count: if I made a Riesling from a low-quality vineyard, or a high-quality vineyard, it was all, before 1983, "Alsace Riesling."

Owners of the better sites, however, wanted the government to recognize the quality of their sites....and, through that recognition, hoped to get higher prices for their wines. At their behest, the government acceded on November 23, 1983, and officially established Alsatian "Grand Cru" vineyards, to be indicated on the labels—echoing Burgundy where, since the establishment of AOC laws in the 1930s, Grand Cru vineyards were always officially on the label, commanding much higher prices.

Then the in-fighting began. Whose vineyard is Grand Cru? Whose is not? It makes a huge commercial difference! The original list of 25 Grand Cru vineyards was later expanded to include 50 Grand Cru vineyards (in 1985)....and, later, to 51 (which is how many Alsatian Grand Cru vineyards there are today). These 51 vineyards....which account for only 3-4% of all wine made in Alsace....command the lion's share of attention today among wine publications and wine drinkers....which, to me, is a big part of the confusion pat-

tern!

More on that momentarily; let's define Grand Cru wine first.

The law is quite precise about Grand Cru vineyards. Here are some conditions for Grand Cru indication on the label:

- Only four grape varieties are authorized for Grand Cru wines: Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Muscat (there is one exception; more on that later).
- Almost always, a Grand Cru wine is made entirely from a single one of these grape varieties, and the variety is indicated on the label. (Here, there are a few exceptions....more on that later, too.)
- A Grand Cru label must mention the specific Grand Cru vineyard, and the vintage.
- Grand Cru Riesling and Grand Cru Muscat must have a natural alcoholic potential of 11 degrees when harvested; Grand Cru Gewurztraminer and Grand Cru Pinot Gris must have a natural alcoholic potential of 12.5 degrees when harvested.

Now....here's the problem in a nutshell. Everyone wants to

make Grand Cru wine, because of all the attention it gets, and because of the higher price it brings. Not only that....everyone wants to make Grand Cru wine that gets 96 points in *The Wine Spectator*, and other mass-market American publications. But these kinds of chart-topping, expensive wines....don't really have the food-loving character of most Alsatian wines! They are thoroughbreds, yes....but they usually run right past the dinner table! They are the equivalent of the kinds of huge wines from around the world that always get the highest points. True, new oak is not as much of an intrusion here....but alcohol levels in touted Grand Cru wines are up, up, up.

And....most devastatingly....sweetness is often up, up, up as well. It all comes back to my usual problem: the kinds of wines that American wine publications are telling us to drink are *not* the kinds of wines that easily go well with a wide range of foods! These publications give faint praise to wines that are balanced, elegant, harmonious—but go bonkers for exaggerated elements such as alcohol and sweetness!

And the whole problem in Alsace is compounded by the label's inability to indicate to you very clearly whether you're getting a wine that's bone-dry, pretty dry, off-dry, a little sweet, or medium-sweet.

Knowing this is CRUCIAL in wine selection for food! This is especially tricky in the Grand Cru category—where lots of wines, with no label indication, turn out to be rather sweet!

Some Alsace producers have been toying with the idea of putting the exact level of residual sugar on the label of the wine. But there is a good deal of resistance to this on two fronts:

1) Some argue that the sugar level in the wine doesn't always make a wine taste "sweet;" if the sugar is perfectly balanced with high acidity, they say, a wine that may appear to be "sweet" from its residual sugar number won't really hit your palate as "sweet." So drinkers who might really enjoy a bottle of perfectly balanced Alsatian wine may stay away from bottles that are....despite their higher numbers.

2) It's very hard, they say in the trade, to figure out what it is exactly that Americans want....because, despite our perennial insistence on a preference for "dry" wines, when Americans speak with their pocketbooks they gravitate towards "sweet" wines. So....Alsatian producers know that if they indicate "medium-sweet" on a label....Americans who would LOVE that wine if they tasted it may avoid buying it.

So....how will you know?

How will you the consumer know? How will you find the Alsatian wine that cuts through an oyster perfectly with dry fruit and zesty acidity....or avoid the one that tastes like pineapple juice next to an oyster?

All right. Here we go. Here are the things I want you to consider when choosing Alsatian wines for food. This is the stuff you have to comprehend and memorize—for it will make all the difference!

FACTOR #1: GRAPE VARIETY

The seeming simplicity of Alsace labels comes from one indisputably simple fact: Alsace is the only place in France where the name of the grape variety, essentially, is the name of the wine. Chardonnay from Burgundy is called something like "Meursault, Les Genevrières." Sauvignon Blanc from the Loire is called something like "Menetou-Salon." Cabernet Sauvignon from Bordeaux is called something like "Chateau Haut-Brion."

Riesling from Alsace is called "Alsace Riesling."

So I want to give this labeling quirk its due. Though the grape variety does not tell the whole story in Alsatian wines, it is a fantastic head start, particularly for beginners, to know

up front what the grape variety is.

Here's a bunch of 'em, the most important ones, the ones you're most likely to see on labels at your wine shop. You'll need to know much after this to make the right choice for dinner—but it all starts here:

SYLVANER. A minor grape today. There used to be a LOT of Sylvaner planted in Alsace....a grape variety which usually makes a simple, flowery, pleasantly fruity wine....great picnic wine! If you see it on a label—with the exception of Sylvaner from producer Albert Seltz (see below)—you may assume the wine will be mostly dry, maybe slightly off-dry. Of course, you're not likely to see "Sylvaner" often on a label—because plantings of oh-so-simple Sylvaner have nose-dived in the last few decades, after the market has demonstrated a preference for other Alsatian grape varieties. There just ain't much of it anymore.

MUSCAT (also known as MUSCAT D'ALSACE). This grape is one of Alsace's great secrets—but, again, you won't see a lot of it. Normally, in Alsace, it produces a light, crisp wine, not at all a dessert wine, a wine highly fragrant with Muscat character—think something like Concord grapes, or Muscadine grapes,

plus an exotic flowery dimension. Sometimes, it gets citrusy—I smelled both orange confit and grapefruit on this trip. Interestingly, there can be another side to Muscat.....something green.....even, with age, something minty. A lot depends on the type of Muscat grapes used by the winemaker: in Alsace, either Muscat d’Alsace à Petits Grains or Muscat Ottonel can be used, usually blended together. Muscat has become the cocktail of choice in Alsace—just a chilled glass of it starts many a meal. That’s a good thing—because sometimes Muscat is quite dry, sometimes it’s off-dry; sometimes it’s crisp and elegant, sometimes it’s a bit hot and blunt. Those are all crucial things to know for menu selection—but, if you’re serving a Muscat aperitif, that information is less crucial. Alsace sommeliers do feel that any of those Muscat facets will work with asparagus.....so Muscat with asparagus has become a new classic. Producers are allowed to make late harvest wine from Muscat (Vendange Tardive, or Selection de Grains Nobles, see below)—but this type of sweeter Muscat is rarely made.

PINOT BLANC. Another minor player in American wine shops. Think Chardonnay Lite.....though this “Pinot” is not related to Chardonnay

(which used to be called, mistakenly, “Pinot Chardonnay.”) Its true relatives are Pinot Noir, which later developed a relation called Pinot Gris, which later developed a relation called Pinot Blanc. But Pinot Blanc is more like Chardonnay than it is like the other two—a fairly rich white wine, without a whole lot of varietal character (it is the winemakers who add much character to Chardonnay!). In Alsace, Pinot Blanc (sometimes called Klevner in the region) is often blended with another Burgundian variety, Auxerrois, and still labeled as “Pinot Blanc.” (In fact, just to confuse you, one producer bottles 100% Auxerrois.....and calls it “Pinot d’Alsace!”) Whatever you get, don’t expect Pinot Blanc or Auxerrois to have the same fruity interest as most other Alsace varietals. It is house wine, party wine. That said.....it can occasionally be crisp, dry, racy and lovely with food. More often I find it a little hot, a little clumsy, sometimes, surprisingly, on the sweet side. There is no official late-harvest Pinot Blanc, no dessert-wine Pinot Blanc.

RIESLING. Bingo. Riesling, truth be told, is my favorite white-wine grape in the world.....and my two favorite places for Riesling are Ger-

many and Alsace. So.....for me.....if you’re going to focus on only one wine from Alsace.....let it be Riesling! Wherever it’s grown in the world, Riesling has, in youth, a wonderfully appealing kind of fruit: often, peaches, nectarines and apricots are cited as olfactory images. In some places—Alsace being way up on that list of places—a kind of minerality is in the wine as well which, with time, develops into the Riesling-lover’s beloved “petrol” character, something like gasoline, but in a really sexy way. Other subtle and complicated flavors also emerge with age. Now Riesling, as grown in many parts of the world, can err on the side of flabbiness/simplicity.....or it can err on the side of bluntness/heat/no-charm. This doesn’t often happen in Germany, where Riesling is usually impossibly light and elegant. And it doesn’t often happen in Alsace.....where, at its best, Riesling wines combine a power with elegance with complexity that is unmatched anywhere. Of course, any Alsatian Riesling wine can be at any point on the continuum between bone-dry and syrupy-sweet—so just the word “Riesling” on the label doesn’t tell you what you’re getting in the bottle. Read on for more help in interpreting Riesling labels.

PINOT GRIS. The next two

varietals....Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer.....are often considered together in the pantheon of Alsace's great white-wine grapes. On many a slope, you will see Riesling and Muscat planted at the top.....and Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer planted at the bottom. Vignerons *want* the extra heat for these grapes—for they are destined to become two of Alsace's richest, fattest, most character-filled wines. Pinot Gris—one of the best-known mutations of Pinot Noir, and which in fact can *look* like Pinot Noir at harvest time—has nothing to do stylistically with the Pinot Gris grown in northeast Italy, where it is called Pinot Grigio (same grape variety!). In Alsace, Pinot Gris is usually a heavy white wine, loaded with exotic fruit character, which, with age, can morph into all kinds of smoky-buttery-earthy wonders. I do have a gripe with it, though. There's many a Pinot Gris out there that purports to be dry.....but.....in reality.....even if you buy the simplest Pinot Gris, it is very difficult to find bottles that are very dry. Crisp and graceful? Forget about that from the beginning. Alsatian Pinot Gris is wine for Alsatian Pinot Gris lovers, not wine to depend on in gastronomic situations across the board. Of course, at the sweeter end of the scale.....late-harvest Pinot Gris

can be glorious; I will never turn down a glass of Pinot Gris Vendange Tardive or Pinot Gris Selection de Grains Nobles (read on for explanations of those terms).

GEWURZTRAMINER. Like Pinot Gris, this is huge, flavor-loaded stuff, with practically no chance at all for lightness or delicacy. But you learn to love Gewurz for what it is. Many wine books call its character “spicy”—but I'm not sure I know what that means. What I normally perceive in Alsatian Gewurztraminer is tropical fruit—most particularly lychees, sometimes blended with the aroma of roses, most particularly dried roses. It is a lovely, emotional aroma. On the palate, the wine is often forceful, blunt, hot, even a little bitter. I have never tasted a bone-dry Gewurztraminer from Alsace; winemakers usually leave a little residual sugar in to balance the bitterness. So even at the basic, entry-level.....don't expect a dry wine. Gewurz is not a wine that goes easily with food (despite all the press it gets as the ideal wine for “spicy” food). On a regular basis, I only serve it with strong cheeses, such as Alsatian Muenster. Now, the much sweeter versions.....again, look below for Vendange Tardive and Selection de Grains Nobles explanations.....can be glorious,

and can pair well with not-too-sweet desserts.

THE BLENDS. Just so you know: when you're looking at Alsace white-wine labels, you're likely to see some local wine names that are not variety-specific.....particularly Gentil and Edelzwicker. Don't stress; these are blends of local white-wine varieties, an Alsace tradition. Usually they are light, simple, inexpensive, fruity wines, not meant to be aged. Good picnic wines. They may be very dry, or may be off-dry; unfortunately, the label doesn't tip the wine. You're going to have to experiment until you find a house style that you like. Some are discussed below in the “Producer” section.

PINOT NOIR. The last major grape in Alsace....is red! For years, everyone but Alsations ignored Alsatian Pinot Noir; the sense was that Alsace is white-wine country, not hot enough to acceptably ripen a red-wine grape. And, in fact, the many Alsatian Pinot Noirs I've tasted over the years have seemed like cold-climate reds: very light, in color and body, quite acidic, quite low in alcohol, quite unsatisfying if you're looking for a mouthful of velvety red. I am here to tell you, my friends: **THINGS ARE CHANGING!** The Vosges valley, where the Alsace vine-

yards lie, is actually quite warm—it experiences some of the warmest and driest harvest conditions in France—and, as they say, it ain't gettin' any cooler there. Alcohol levels are up, color is up, extraction is up.....to the point where I'm now downright excited about Alsatian Pinot Noir! I urge you to give it a try when looking for a light, graceful red. In the notes that follow, I will flag my favorites. (Can't wait to tell you this one right now: Pinot Noir from the winery called Hering..... is absolutely fantastic, a breakthrough wine!)

FACTOR #2: HARVEST RIPENESS

The Alsace laws allow two special designations to be placed on Alsatian labels: Vendange Tardive, and Selection de Grains Nobles. These wines are much more expensive than others, and quite rare. Both terms indicate late-harvest grapes and, theoretically, greater sweetness in the wine. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work out this way! You can, indubitably, count on greater concentration and richness in these wines.....but every once in a while their relative dryness will take you by surprise!

VENDANGE TARDIVE.
These wines may come from

non-Grand-Cru vineyards, or you can have Grand Cru Vendange Tardive. In either case.....the grape varieties used must be the only ones authorized for Grand Cru wines: Riesling, Muscat, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer. The harvesting of these grape bunches usually takes place several weeks after other grapes are picked. This leads to wines that are richer, more structured, more concentrated—usually more concentrated in the flavor of the grape variety that was used. You may get an additional flavor in there, however: the honey-like flavor of late-harvest grapes that have been affected by botrytis (the noble rot). Not all Vendange Tardive wines are botrytised; in some vintages, they are merely *passerillé*, as the French say.....shriveled but not affected by the noble rot.

Many people outside the region assume that Vendange Tardive wines are going to be dessert wines. It ain't always true. Very few of them are very sweet. Many of them are off-dry to medium-sweet. But you will also come upon lots of Vendange Tardive wines that are quite dry, even drier than some non-Vendange-Tardive wines. This is part of the difficulty of the Alsace wine label.

As I will show you soon.....having insight into the styles of individual producers is often your best safeguard!

SELECTION DE GRAINS NOBLES. These wines may come from non-Grand-Cru vineyards, or you can have Grand Cru Selection de Grains Nobles. In either case.....the grape varieties used must be the only ones authorized for Grand Cru wines: Riesling, Muscat, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer.

Selection de Grains Nobles wine differs from Vendange Tardive wine in several ways. First of all, the clichés are generally true: it is more expensive wine, rarer wine, richer wine, sweeter wine.

It gets its name from the harvest procedure: “noble grapes” (winespeak for grapes affected by botrytis) are *individually* picked from the vine, not picked by bunches; to do this, the pickers have to go through the vineyard many times, picking up a few “noble” grapes today, more tomorrow (as they ripen), more after that, etc.

This process takes place way after the regular harvest.

The Selection de Grains Nobles wines are even more concentrated than the Vendange Tardive wines.....but concentrated in a different way. Often, in my tasting experience, they don't show as much varietal character as the Vendange Tardive wines. There's more sugar, more power, and much more of that honey-like

botrytis taste.

Many people outside the region assume that Selection de Grains Nobles wines are going to be super-sweet, the equivalents of German Beere-nausleses. Often, they are. But not always. I had a number on this trip that were gorgeously concentrated, exhilaratingly honey-like in flavor.....but not much more than medium-sweet. Here's one thing you can count on: I have never tasted a *dry* Selection de Grains Nobles.

Once again.....as I will show you soon.....having insight into the styles of individual producers is often your best safeguard!

NOTE: Everyone makes a big deal about these two categories. Most textbooks will tell you things like “the greatest Alsatian wines carry the designations Vendange Tardive and Selection de Grains Nobles.” Rubbish.

They are the most expensive wines, yes, and they do have the most immediate palate impact. But I don't define “great” by sugar and power alone. I've tasted many beautiful dry Rieslings from Alsace, with astonishing elegance.....and more complexity of flavor than many “VT” or “SGN” wines. To me, these dry Rieslings are “greater” still.

Unfortunately, there seems to be some kind of glass ceil-

ing at our leading wine publications. A “great” dry Riesling almost never goes over, say, 90 points on the 100-point scale. For a “great” Selection de Grains Nobles, however, the sky's the limit—this particular sky being 100 points.

Why is the sky blue, Daddy?

FACTOR #3: APPELLATION AND CATEGORY

Now we come to considerations of extreme importance.....and you won't read this anywhere else.

Just as “Vendange Tardive” and “Selection de Grains Nobles” get way too much attention from American wine publications, and from those Americans who drink Alsatian wine.....so do big-deal labels, like those that say “Grand Cru” on them, get too much attention too.

Don't get me wrong. Serve me a brilliant Vendange Tardive Grand Cru Pinot Gris with a hunk of foie gras, and I will be one happy camper. But, to me, this would be a special-occasion moment. To continually think about Alsace wine in these terms is like thinking of music, and focusing only on Wagner's 16-hour Ring Cycle. Most days.....a Beatles song or two will do just fine!

Yes, the big sweeties are among my favorites from

Alsace, occasionally. But what I really want are the dry, tight, taut, crisp, steely, minerally ones for everyday drinking at the table!

And that's where the big problem comes in. For Alsatian labels don't really make any distinction between the wine described in the paragraph above, and the kind of Alsatian wine that's fruity, kinda sweet, kinda rich, kinda hot.

All of the material in this story, up until now, has been my attempt to immerse you in the issues of the Alsace label. Now I'm going to share with you some key information that is rarely expressed in the following terms.

If you buy an Alsace Riesling, there are four possible “levels” of the grapes behind that wine. (Remember....these are levels that I'm breaking out.....others don't talk about it this way.....but when you start talking about it this way, the sommelier, or the wine store salesman, will soon see exactly what you mean).

NO DESIGNATION. Most Alsatian wine has the appellation AOC Alsace. The label will say this, usually along with a single grape variety (like “Riesling”) that went into this bottle of wine. You'll see the vintage, and the producer's name.....and that's it. Many of the driest, crispest, leanest Alsace wines are in this category.

Even someone like me has to confess that sometimes it's nice to drink a dry wine with a little more power to it.

ry, with no extra designation.

An example: 2005 Leon Beyer Riesling, AOC Alsace.

There are only two problems with using this non-designation to seek Alsatian wines:

1) Not all of the wines in this category are dry. It is one of your *highest-odds* category for dry wine.....but it is by no means sugar-proof. And do keep in mind that Riesling and Pinot Blanc are likely to be drier, while Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer are more likely to rise in sugar.

2) In this category, you are getting, generally speaking, the least concentrated, and least structured, wines of all. For me, usually, that's just fine. However, even someone like me has to confess that sometimes it's nice to drink a dry wine with a little more power to it.

And that is why I'm telling you about the next category:

LIEU-DIT. Overall.....this may be the category of

choice.....for me.....for you.....when the hunt is on for great, dry Alsace wine for food.

First of all, the name: "lieu-dit" means "said place." And what this generally means in Alsace, in winespeak, is a named vineyard that's not a Grand Cru. Essentially, it's something like what they call "Premier Cru" in Burgundy (there is talk about establishing *Premier Cru* vineyards in Alsace.....but so far it's just talk).

Here's an example of a label with the "lieu-dit" designation on it:

2005 Neumeyer Riesling,
Les Pinsons, AOC Alsace

The wine is an AOC Alsace Riesling (you can see that the appellation is not "Grand Cru,"), from the winery called Neumeyer.....and it has a vineyard name on it. If it has a vineyard name, and is not a Grand Cru, it's a lieu-dit. There is no official apparatus that identifies a wine like this as a

"lieu-dit"—but that's what everyone in Alsace calls it. The grapes, in this case, come from a named non-Grand-Cru vineyard, and the name of the vineyard is "Les Pinsons."

So what does having a "lieu-dit" designation on the label mean to you?

Generally, speaking.....it means that the source of the Riesling grapes that went into this wine is finer than the source of the grapes that went into regular, non-lieu-dit wines (like labels that say 2005 Neumeyer Riesling, AOC Alsace).

In my experience....this is not the level at which a dry-oriented producer starts making his wine sweeter. In my experience.....this is the level at which a producer's wine starts picking up extra concentration. Usually, for me, that's a good thing!

So that's why I say.....if you're on the hunt for good, dry Alsace wine with a little extra interest.....the lieu-dit

category is a very promising one! And probably the one I'll go after in my future wine-shop Alsace shopping!

PROPRIETARY NAME.

Uh-oh. You thought it was confusing before?

There are some producers who love making wine at an intensity level above that of the usual AOC Alsace.....but don't love the concept of the Lieu-Dit. For many of these producers, the answer is "the proprietary name."

As you scan the Alsace labels in your wine shop, and see all the different grape varieties on the labels, along with their "AOC Alsace" designations.....you may also see names like these:

Réserve
Réserve Personelle
Réserve Particulière
Cuvée Particulière
Vieilles Vignes
.....and many more.

The good news is this: each of these names is telling you that the winemaker put some extra love into this bottle (usually in the form of grapes from better sources). But.....the bad news is.....the form that this "love" can take varies.

Usually, these "proprietary" wines have greater concentration than the regular "AOC Alsace" wines.

But do they have greater concentration than lieux-dits? There is no general rule.

And do they have higher residual sugar than the regular AOC Alsace wines, or lieu-dit wines? There is no general rule. I raise the issue, because at many houses I visited.....wines with proprietary names *did* seem to be a little higher in sugar than "regular" wines from the same house. But sometimes not.

So....my general response in a wine shop from now on when I come upon a "proprietary" wine, and I'm looking for a dry, steely one.....will be caution. I don't think a proprietary name gives you particularly high odds of finding the driest and the steeliest. I'd rather throw the dice at a lieu-dit, in that regard.

But the ultimate answer, once again....is.....Know Thy Producer! Here, for example, is the way that one of my favorite producers, Leon Beyer, uses some of these proprietary words in most vintages.

He has four Riesling labels:
Leon Beyer Riesling (very steely-dry)

Leon Beyer Riesling Réserve (a little richer, still dry)

Leon Beyer Riesling, Cuvée des Ecaillers (a little richer, still dry.....from Grand Cru grapes)

Leon Beyer Riesling, Cuvé des Comtes d'Eguisheim (richer still.....almost off-dry.....from Grand Cru grapes)

If you know the code, you're

in. Intriguingly, the grapes for the last two wines come mostly from Grand Cru vineyards—but Beyer doesn't like to designate his wines as "Grands Crus" (more on this in the Grand Cru section coming up). So....sometimes....this "cuvée" business can be your only indication that you're at Grand Cru level!

GRAND CRU. Welcome to the controversy.

Oh, I'm not talking about the usual controversies. Growers have been squabbling for years about which vineyards deserve Grand Cru status (Grand Cru wines have their own appellation: "Alsace Grand Cru"). Other producers own or get their grapes from Grand Cru vineyards.....but have refused to put the words "Grand Cru" on their labels! Why? As Marc Beyer of Leon Beyer said, "For the traditional houses the Grand Cru names don't make much sense. We have to stick with the cuvée names which we've invested so much time and money in building up. They represent just as effective a guarantee of high quality for the consumer as they ever have."

I'm going to let them duke all that out....but.....my controversy goes beyond.

As I look across the gorgeous foothills of the Vosges Mountains, and gaze upon the incredibly picturesque patch-

work of vineyards that is Alsace, I note the well-positioned sites that up and down the mountain chain, from Strasbourg to Mulhouse, have Grand Cru status.....and I think to myself.....isn't it a shame? Isn't it a shame that all of this great land is being used to make ever-heftier, ever-richer, ever-hotter, ever-sweeter, ever more food-difficult wines? And all for glory.....the glory of getting 98 points from Parker, or The Wine Spectator?

I posed that question to winemakers in Alsace whom I thought would be sympathetic.....and they were. "Who wants to drink these wines?" I asked. "What do they go well with? What value do they have behind the high scores and high prices they generate? Wouldn't we be better off if these same extraordinary vineyards were used to produce drier, less show-off-y, more accessible, more food-friendly wines?"

As you can imagine, no one wanted to be quoted in support of these ideas. But.....as in Piemonte, where I argue for well-sited Barbera over Nebbiolo.....and in Beaujolais, where I argue for light, fruity, traditional Beaujolais wine over Rhone-like wannabes.....and in Rioja, where I argue for traditional elegance over modern brute force.....I can well read the language of lighted eyes, sympathetic nods, and "if-only-

I-could-tell-you" hand gestures.

Now, let me contradict myself quickly, before anyone else can.

There are some Grand Cru wines, and Grand Cru-style wines, that I LOVE!!!! The venerable house of Trimbach makes my favorite Alsatian wine of all, Clos Ste. Hune.....which, by Trimbach's choice, is not designated Grand Cru, but could be, and should be, and, taste-wise, indubitably *is* a Grand Cru wine. On this trip, I discovered that some of the Grand Cru Rieslings of Gustave Lorentz are in this league. There are others: read below for further Grand Cru faves. But the point is.....when Grand Crus are right.....that is, dry or dry-ish, steely, elegant, packed with extract but still in exquisite balance....I flip out!

Unfortunately, most Grand Crus are not built this way. If you walk into a wine shop, and see a Grand Cru label, and don't know the wine.....chances are you're *not* getting something that will be cozy with dinner tonight. Chances are, frankly speaking, that you'll be getting something heading in a hot, rich, sweet direction....an extrovert, a braggart. True, there's lots to brag about.....but usually I prefer a modest dinner companion, and a modest match of food and wine.

FACTOR #4: AGE

Now it's time for a frustrating category.....because it's not always easy to buy wine that's at its optimum age. But age.....makes a huge difference in Alsace wine.

Well, frankly, the difference it makes in most of the grape varieties is not that huge. I'd recommend trying to find a very young Muscat or Sylvaner or Pinot Blanc (2006 are all good ideas right now). I'd worry less about freshness in Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer; they are vibrant when young, then do really interesting things as they start to age.

In Riesling, however—the king of Alsace varieties—age is essential. When Alsace Riesling is young—especially top-quality Alsace Riesling—there is a period of fruitiness, alongside a kind of hardness. Then the wine shuts down, as the fruitiness declines. For years (at least 3-5) it is wound up tight, unyielding, with its extract on display as unattractive firmness. With time, the wine softens.....and develops an incredible array of flavors, including minerality and petrol. If I could, I would want to drink great Alsace Rieslings, from great 10-15-year-old vintages, all the time with my food!

For one other miracle occurs with age, as well.....a wine's sweetness diminishes!

FACTOR #5: PRODUCER (THE BIG ONE!!!)

And now.....we are ready for the most important factor of all: who made this stuff?

When you're in the wine shop, and when you're considering the label of a specific producer, there is no better guide than some knowledge on your part of that producer's tendencies. Here are some of the many things that are great to know:

- Does this producer lean towards drier wines or less dry wines?
- Does this producer lean towards simpler, softer wines....or more structured, firmer, concentrated wines that take time to unfold?
- Is this house best for regular-harvest wines.....or for the late-harvest pair, Vendange Tardive and Selection de Grains Nobles.
- What are this producer's labeling quirks in proprietary names?
- Which of the Alsatian grape varieties are done most successfully at this house?

If you could know those things about every producer.....you'd be an Alsace expert.....and you could pinpoint your wine selections like nobody's business!

It is a goal for all of us to aspire to.

On my recent trip to Alsace, the French government office that set up my visits had a special desire to introduce some less-well known wineries to American writers. This was great!—for I learned the styles of many new wineries, and made some great discoveries. I also visited wineries I knew well, and emerged knowing them even better.

What follows is a list of the wineries I recently visited, in no particular order, along with general notes on each winery's tendencies, and specific notes on the current-release wines I like best. Memorize as much of this as you can.....or carry it around!

Next to each producer's name I have indicated the general quality of the winery by awarding anywhere from one to five stars. I urge you, implore you....walk into your wine shop tomorrow and, using this list as a guide, start experimenting with the incredibly rich range of Alsace wines just waiting for you!

★ **BRUNO HUNOLD (Rouffach)**

Not one to get excited about.....very ordinary, everyday wines, with sweet-ish tendencies. Some better wines made from Grand Cru Vor-

bourg....particularly the 2004 Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Vorbourg (stunning concentration, sweet but with great acid lift). My favorite wine of all here is the Pinot Noir; this winery has a southern site, so ripening the red grape is easier. I particularly like the 2005 Pinot Noir Cotes de Rouffach (a lieu-dit): cherry-bright, vinous, lean but fairly complex.

★★★★ **DIRLER-CADÉ (Bergholtz)**

Careful, beautiful, penetrating, differentiated wines. Most *not* in bone-dry style; even Rieslings have an off-dry character. But....these Rieslings are bolstered with spectacular acidity, and the total effect is gastronomic. I especially love here the lieu-dit Rieslings....such as the 2004 Belzbrunnen (with its gorgeous lime-leaf brightness), the 2005 Belzbrunnen (same flavors, a little sweeter), and the 2005 Bollenberg (a little sweeter/hotter still, but with wonderful concentration). Gewurztraminer—definitely in a sweet style—caught my eye here as well. My favorite wine of the tasting was the 2002 Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Kessler, Vendange Tardive (gorgeous textbook nose with botrytis, richness, balance, great acidity backing up considerable dessert-wine sweetness).



**BARMÈS BUECHER
(Wettolsheim)**

Wonderful biodynamic winery.....making some of the most balanced “big” wines I tasted, terrifically accessible Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer. And, across the board, I liked the lieux-dits best, despite the presence in the line-up of some applauded Grand Cru wines.

Both the 2004 Pinot Gris Rosenberg Silicis, and the 2004 Pinot Gris Rosenberg Calcaricus (lieu-dit Pinot Gris with an indication of soil type!) are ripe, rich, AND harmonious, with really good acid; I could work with these at dinner! I guess I’m into their Rosenberg vineyard, because the wine of the day for me was their 2005 Gewurztraminer Rosenberg: gorgeous Gewurz lychee mixed with citrus aromas, insanely perfect blend of sugar, acid, alcohol, bitterness, the whole package alive and lifted—a DEFINITE candidate for spicy food!

Another Rosenberg wine I liked a lot....is the 2004 Pinot Blanc Rosenberg.....one of my favorite Pinot Blancs of the whole Alsace visit! Slightly earthy nose, nice and crisp, with good length.

Most of the Rieslings seemed a little sharp, hot and blunt—except for the stand-out 2004 Riesling Clos Sand

(again, a lieu-dit!): gorgeous petrol-with-fruit nose, very crisp and electric, juicy mouth-watering acidity.



**ANDRÉ SCHERER
(Husseren-les-Chateaux)**

This winery too is not obsessed with dry-steely-taut—but in their range of off-dry wines I noted an absolutely lovely fruit character, above and beyond the norm; wine after wine seemed to have a highly appealing German-like peachiness, and a Viognier-like melon character.

At Scherer, I would focus on aged Riesling from the Pfersigberg Grand Cru. The 2002 Riesling Grand Cru Pfersigberg I tasted was extraordinary: gorgeous peachy nose, mixed with minerals and petrol. Just off-dry, but with great acidity. Great combo of young and old flavors. Beautifully balanced.

One more surprise awaited me here: one of the very best sparkling wines I tasted in Alsace! The Cremant d’Alsace Brut Rosé, a rich, deep pink, has tons of strawberry fruit on the nose, and a gorgeous off-dry/acid fit on the palate. Really alive!



GUSTAVE LORENTZ

I tasted a range of wines with George Lorentz, the

dynamic young Lorentz who’s steering the ship these days. Good wines overall.....but what really caught my eye.....and boosted this house into the upper stratosphere for me.....were fantastic Grand Cru Rieslings, with stunning concentration, extract and power.....that were bone-dry....and with great finesse! This is my favorite kind of Alsace Riesling of all....the kind you find in Trimbach’s Clos Ste. Hune.....the kind you rarely find elsewhere! I would urge you to do whatever you can to get a taste of either the 2002 Riesling Grand Cru Kanzlerberg, or the 1999 Riesling Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim.....to see how good Grand Cru can be when it’s really good.



**CLÉMENT KLUR
(Katzenthal)**

I put Klur in my top category as well—but not for power and concentration. Instead, this is one of the most exciting wineries I found in Alsace for light, crisp, acidic, racy wines, mostly bone-dry. And it’s biodynamic! Bravo! These are the kinds of gorgeous wines I could find reasons to open every day!

The first wine that grabbed me here was the Cremant d’Alsace....without question the greatest sparkling wine I tast-

ed on this trip, and one of the best Champagne ringers I've ever tasted! I loved the older flavors in it....and especially noticed how light, crisp, and tinglingly acidic it was.

Then, he got me with a Muscat....the 2005 Katz Muscat, one of the lightest, most delicate, most acid-etched Muscats I've ever tasted. Dry and evanescent. Could almost go with raw shellfish!

Of course, the best of all was on its way....Klur's touch with Riesling, both proprietary and Grand Cru. I loved both the 2005 and 2006 Katz Riesling—bone-dry, clean, pure, lime-y character, stunning acidity. Definitely shellfish wine! I even loved the somewhat fatter 2004 Riesling Grand Cru Wineck Schlossberg: nicely developed citrus and pineapple flavors, lovely complexity, great acid and elegance, almost bone-dry. Doesn't have the power of Clos Ste. Hune, or a Lorentz Grand Cru Riesling....but this Grand Cru is an essay in finesse.



DOMAINE DE L'ORIEL (Niedermorschwir)

This is a somewhat perplexing winery for me, because there are so many labels, and so many style changes from vintage to vintage....but, gener-

ally speaking, there's terrific high quality here.

I would recommend focusing on Riesling from this Domaine; the 2002 Riesling, with no further designation on the label, is simple, gorgeous and elegant, exactly what I'd like good drinkin' Riesling to be.

The trouble....and the opportunities!....begin when you step up to the Grand Crus....which jump back and forth between dry-ish, off-dry-ish, elegant and blunt. But there's gold in these hills, so it's worth paying attention.

The focus is on two Grand Crus, Brand and Sommerberg. The winemaker, Gerard Weinzorn, says that the Rieslings from Brand are "more supple, rounder, more feminine," and that they age more quickly. He calls Sommerberg Riesling "spicier, coarser, longer-lived."

In my tasting, the Brand Grand Cru Rieslings kept turning up a little blunt and a little sweet—though aging takes the edge off nicely. The Sommerbergs were often sweeter and blunter still!....but there were a few glorious exceptions. The best wine of all that I tasted here was a 1995 Riesling Grand Cru Sommerberg: very dry, quite mineral-y, with a lovely taste of major aged white wine from northern France. All of the Grands Crus across the board had tremendous extract and concentra-

tion.

Choose carefully here. Don't commit to a case until you've tasted a sample. And....I personally wouldn't buy any young Grand Cru wines from this winery unless I had the space and patience to age them for ten years!



ANDRÉ KIENTZLER (Ribeauvillé)

Situated next to the superstar Marcel Deiss, in the ravishing village of Ribeauvillé, Kientzler came as something of a surprise to me: "Why hadn't I focused before on these wonderful wines?" My bad.

Because these guys are good—and have been for six generations. In their drier wines—and there are quite a few—they find a lovely compromise between power and elegance, always with good acidity. And their very sweetest wines—the late-harvest ones—are spectacular.

Dry faves first. Wow! Was I surprised by their 2006 Chaselas....made from a grape that is totally out of fashion in Alsace today. But this wine, with its lively, pear-y, fermentation-type of aroma, is very, very dry, with striking acidity. A truly great everyday tippel! Their non-vintage Edelzwicker struck me in a similar way, though this one is not quite as dry.

Then came the Rieslings.

The simplest, their 2005 Riesling, is dry, crisp, acidic, elegant, seamless, not a scintilla of heat. Ratcheting up, the 2005 Riesling Reserve Particulière is a little peachier, but still bone-dry, steely, elegant, tart, with good intensity. Then there's the 2004 Riesling Cuvée François Alphonse, which is a blend of grapes from Kientzler's two Grand Cru vineyards, Osterberg and Geisberg (so it's not a Grand Cru itself); dry and chalky, mineral-y, fairly powerful, with great acid and a very balanced finish. I liked it better than the Grand Crus themselves, which seemed fatter and flabbier—though an aged Grand Cru, the 1996 Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg, even with a little sweetness, had gorgeous petrol-and-fruit flavors.

As if all this weren't good enough....I was also stunned by Kientzler's dry-side Pinot Gris....some of the very best wanna-be-graceful Pinot Gris that I tasted. The huge winner for me was the 2006 Pinot Gris (no further designation)....which has pretty stone-fruit aromas, not too deep and scary....with a gorgeous, fresh, crisp, lean, melon-y palate. The more complex 2004 Pinot Gris Grand Cru Kirchberg (from the Kirchberg Grand Cru in Ribeauvillé) leaves a sweeter impression—but, despite its

Pinot Gris-ness, has a similar kind of lightness and lambency. This house definitely goes on to my short list of Pinot Gris stars.

Then there's the stickies. If you've got a place for 'em in your life....this would be a winery to consider heavily.

The 2002 Gewurztraminer, Vendange Tardive is one of the least ambivalent VTs I tasted; this is luscious, light dessert wine, nothing dry about it. 2002 must have had lots of botrytis in the Ribeauvillé area, for the honey flavors in this wine overwhelm the Gewurz flavors. They are so delicious, I'm happy with that.

There's a similar varietal shyness in the 2001 Riesling Grand Cru Geisberg, Selection de Grains Nobles....but, once again....who cares? This is out-and-out gorgeous dessert wine, more like a German Trockenbeerenauslese than anything else. Very sweet, very raisin-y in flavor—though youthful and healthy—with good acidity and a very smooth finish.



**BOTT FRÈRES
(Ribeauvillé)**

I respected the winemaking at this venerable house, but it's not in my style; lots of off-dry, sweet-ish wines, with heat and rough edges.

Two exceptions:

1) Their dry Muscat is one

of the best I tasted in Alsace! The 2006 Muscat Cuvée Particulière has a very juicy-raisiny-fruity nose. Extremely grapy on the just off-dry palate, with wonderfully bright acidity and a harmonious finish. This is your Muscat aperitif!

2) Their late-harvest wines, to me, are head-and-shoulders beyond the medium-sweet wines in quality. I loved the velvety 2004 Gewurztraminer, Vendange Tardive, an amazingly sweet VT, with a wonderful set of flowery-citrus-y flavors. And I especially loved the 2003 Muscat, Selection de Grains Nobles (Muscat again!). This is a rather sweet, but not sticky, Selection de Grains Nobles, with an amazing orange-confit kind of flavor layered with hints of licorice and raisins. Sublime stuff.



**F.E. TRIMBACH
(Ribeauvillé)**

I didn't exactly pay a visit to Trimbach on this trip....because it wasn't on my schedule. However, I was on the look-out for Trimbach wines in restaurants....for Trimbach has long been a flagship winery in Alsace, and has long been among my personal favorites. So I really hit the jackpot when I had lunch at the wonderful Relais des Ménétriers in Ribeauvillé: Trimbachs were sitting right near me, and they most gener-

ously poured wines for us during the lunch!

The famous Trimbach style, to me, is THE style for Alsace: tight, lean, taut, tart, powerful, unfolding with the years into gorgeous complexity and elegance. No wine in all of Alsace better expresses this style than Trimbach's heralded Riesling wine Clos Ste. Hune, which is to Alsace what Romanée-Conti is to Burgundy: *the* iconic wine that every wine-lover knows. Intriguingly—as if to spotlight Alsace's labeling “challenges”—Romanée-Conti is every bit a Burgundy Grand Cru, but Clos Ste. Hune is not an Alsace Grand Cru. Why not? The Trimbach family felt, in 1983, and still feels today, that Clos Ste. Hune needs no extra designation to boost its importance. It is Clos Ste. Hune. It is a small parcel of a Grand Cru vineyard—the Grand Cru is Rosacker, in Hunahwihr—but you will never see the words “Grand Cru” on the label. If you do see the wine at a restaurant, and if it has ten years or so of bottle age, and if you're in position for a splurge (like the low three figures).....snap it up! You will never have a chance to better understand the beauty of Alsatian wine.

At the restaurant last month, I didn't get the chance to taste widely through the Trimbach line.....but everything I tasted showed the Trimbach breed. I

was lucky to have with my main course my second-favorite Trimbach wine, the one I buy when I can't afford Clos Ste. Hune. Cuvée Frédéric Emile is a Riesling in a similarly taut, compressed, elegant style; the 2001 we drank was crisp, dry, elegant, powerful, balanced, and quite mineral-y already (it will pick up more stony-petrol notes over the next 5-10 years).

Trimbach's wines are as reliably dry as anyone's in Alsace.....with the exception, of course, of their wines meant to be sweet. Such a one was the delicious 2001 Gewurztraminer, Vendange Tardive we had with dessert: decidedly sweet, with a luxuriant feel, and a great combo of Gewurz and botrytis flavors.

★
**CAVE VINICOLE DE
KIETNZHEIM-KAY-
SERSBERG**

This is one of the many co-ops in Alsace, where farmers bring their grapes to make a communal wine of the region. To me, the guys at this co-op are thinking too much about America. They have created a line called “The Furst”.....and I can taste the boardroom Americanizing all over it. I like the straight 2005 Riesling the best, but I still wouldn't go out of my way for it.



**ALBERT SELTZ
(Mittelbergheim)**

Let's start here: this is one of the wackiest wineries in Alsace....which, to me, makes it very endearing. The Seltz family of winemakers decided long ago to go against the flow; they wanted to make Alsace wines that taste like no one else's. And they have been able to do so, largely because of a key holding they have: the vineyard of Zotzenberg, which has long been considered the greatest site in the world for growing the Sylvaner grape. No one else gives Sylvaner this kind of attention.....hence, the uniqueness of Albert Seltz wines.

However, these guys weren't content to merely be *making* Alsace's best Sylvaner—they wanted the world to know about it, too! So they initiated a legal process to change the Alsace regulations! Zotzenberg was one of the 50 Grands Crus, at least those parts of it planted to the legally permissible “noble” varieties. But Zotzenberg Sylvaner could never be designated Grand Cru, because it wasn't Riesling, Muscat, Pinot Gris or Gewurztraminer. That didn't stop Seltz! They kept pushing.....and finally got the rules changed. There is now a 51st Grand Cru possibility.....Grand Cru Sylvaner from Zotzenberg.....the only exception in all of Alsace to the Riesling-Muscat-Pinot Gris-

Gewurztraminer Grand Cru requirement! The 2005 vintage, to be released soon, will be the first to say “Grand Cru Zotzenberg.” Quirkily.....the label will not indicate a grape variety.....and that’s how you know it’s from Sylvaner! Get it?

So here’s my deal with Seltz Sylvaner: I find it really “interesting.” Everything they do at this winery is different and interesting! But.....I find myself respecting the Sylvaner.....and wanting to taste it, always.....but not exactly loving it.....except in its sweetest incarnations. The 2001 Sylvaner Vieilles Vignes, La Colline aux Poiriers, for example, is a lovely, unusual sweet wine, loaded with flowers, oranges and cedar, great for light desserts. Do remember its proprietary designation, La Colline aux Poiriers—for the unconventional Seltz is going to put that name on the back label of sweet Grand Cru Zotzenbergs to indicate the wine is sweet (and he will put “Sono Contento” on the back label of Grand Cru Zotzenbergs that are dry.)

Intriguingly, for me, the best wines at Seltz were not Sylvaner at all.....but Riesling! I LOVED the 2000 Riesling Grand Cru Zotzenberg, with its Meursault-like toasted-nut nose. It is a touch off-dry, but beautifully balanced with excellent acidity. And I was even more taken with the 1998 Ries-

ling Brandluft (a lieu-dit): quite dry, lots of acid, long but not hot, with lots of mineral-petrol flavors. These are both great, category-escaping aged wines.....not just aged Rieslings.



DOMAINE HERING (Barr)

Look out. Domaine Hering does not have the reputation in the U.S. of a Zind-Humbrecht, a Marcel Deiss, etc.....but this wonderful estate, now energized by the work of scion Jean-Daniel Hering, is making some of the best wine in Alsace today. It’s not just Jean-Daniel’s quest for purity and tradition in winemaking that has brought this about; Hering, an old domaine (five generations), has some spectacular vineyard holdings.

I noticed something was up when I tasted (right after my Seltz visit!) the 2006 Sylvaner....quite green, with a lovely, grapy nose, great acidity, and a touch of very appealing earthiness. This mostly dry beauty could be my house wine anytime! Jean-Daniel explained to me that its pedigree comes from its special vineyard, which they call Clos de la Folie Marco (also a source of Riesling wines).

Then came the Pinot Gris shock....a 2006 which, though off-dry, had a gorgeous purity of clean, fresh Pinot Gris fruit,

nothing blurry, with great acid and superb balance. I was a little concerned about the 2005, which was very sweet, and not quite as interesting.....but my faith was soon restored.

Because.....before long....we slipped into the heart of things: wines from the Grand Cru Kirchberg (this is Kirchberg of Barr, not Kirchberg of Ribeauvillé), the monumental slope that rises up from the back door of the winery. As you know, I am not Grand Cru-smitten. And, I must admit these Grand Cru wines from Hering were not in my Clos Ste. Hune-ish Grand Cru comfort zone—the land of those dry, steely, concentrated ones I love so much.

Nevertheless.....in all of my tasting in Alsace on this trip, not a single vineyard left as powerful an impression on me as Kirchberg of Barr. Why? The fruit. The fruit. And I’m not a fruithead, either! But there is something so elemental, some shimmeringly beautiful about the fruit from this vineyard!

Let’s look at Riesling first. I had a shot at two Kirchbergs, and they were both wonderful. The 2005 Riesling Grand Cru Kirchberg had ravishing young Riesling fruit, with almost minty overtones, and a touch of earthiness already appearing. Lovely, refreshing, concentrated but extremely elegant. Then came the stunning 2001

Riesling Grand Cru Kirchberg, with a symphony of minerals-plus-orange-rind pouring out of it.....so juicy, so bouncy. But you can sense the extract, and the years it will take for this wine to fully unwind.

Then came the Gewurz show. Textbook 2006 Gewurztraminer from Kirchberg—except on the palate, where the fruit is gentler, less hot, less bitter than most Gewurzes! Sumptuous 2006 Gewurz from a special parcel of the Kirchberg vineyard called Clos Gaensbroennel (remember this!).....richer, denser, more backbone, more concentration, but still not hot or bitter.....and with a memorable display of complexity, ranging from pepper to licorice to mint. I thought the peak would be the 1985 Grand Cru Kirchberg, Clos Gaensbroennel Gewurz, which was so extraordinarily healthy. But then they killed me with the 2005 Grand Cru Kirchberg, Clos Gaensbroennel Gewurz, Vendange Tardive.....which was big, sweet, botrytised to the max, but sensorially un-cloying, balanced on the head of a pin.

Lunch followed, and I thought the assault was through.....until, with the main course, Jean-Daniel opened a bottle of the 2005 Pinot Noir, Cuvée de Chat Noir.....a Pinot Noir, of all things, from Kirchberg!.....but not able to use the Grand Cru name because

Pinot Noir is not on the allowed list of Grand Cru grapes.

Oh....my....God.

I am completely sure that this is the greatest Alsatian Pinot Noir I've ever tasted....really more like a great Premier Cru Burgundy than an Alsatian Pinot Noir. Brilliant ruby color. Blazing with gorgeous fruit—the red-fruit equivalent of the white-fruit transparency and aliveness in the Riesling and Gewurztraminer! One word sums up its fruit character: cherries. Raised in 50% new oak, and 50% one-year-old barriques, the wine is smooth and easy, but shot through with vanilla and spice. Who knew? A great red Hering!

Have I made myself clear? Get Domaine Hering in your life!!!!



**DOMAINE LOEW
(Westhoffen)**

I really wanted to adore the wines of this lovely, family-run estate in Westhoffen; bottle after bottle seems dedicated to great acid and bright fruit flavors. However, many of the wines I tasted with young winemaker Etienne Loew were in the Alsatian twilight zone, to my taste: not dry, not sweet, sometimes forceful and blunt. I'm sure I will encounter some of them soon, in some perfect dining context, and will fall in

love nevertheless. However, for now, I can't recommend them as high-odds dining choices.

I did, on the other hand, fall head over heels for some of the sweetest wines in the line—from the biggest grape varieties! The 2005 Pinot Gris, Selection de Grains Nobles, is a knockout: really penetrating concentration, with an onset of fabulous Pinot Gris smokiness. And the 2005 Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Altenberg, Selection de Grains Nobles, is worth every penny of its high price: big, lush, sensuous Gewurz, with lychee fruit *plus* peaches, *plus* honey, and a degree of Gewurz structure and bitterness that is actually pleasing behind all the massive fruit.



**NEUMEYER
(Molsheim)**

Quality wines, clearly....but I had mixed feelings about the wine style of this well-positioned winery. It sits at the northern end of the Alsace growing area, which makes it a bit cooler—all but guaranteeing really racy acidity in the wines. But these same wines veer between “steely-dry” and “semi-sweet” in rather unpredictable ways. And, among the wines I tasted, only the aged Rieslings showed true complexity. That said.....if you're a fan of rich, blowsy, sweet Pinot Gris and

Gewurztraminers.....you will find some happiness here.

My favorite wines were two non-Grand-Cru Rieslings. The 2005 Riesling, Les Hospices, had a lovely, young, steely-limey nose. Quite dry, with really electric acidity. Would love to age this one. And the 2005 Riesling, Les Pinsons, though a touch sweeter, showed more concentration, some great maturation flavors, and, again, great acidity.



HUGEL & FILS (Riquewihr)

You could argue that the two houses which built the international reputation of Alsace are the giants Trimbach and Hugel (which they pronounce “u-JELL,” with a soft “J.”) And you’d probably win that argument.

But you could always tell them apart. In my early Alsace-drinking years (like the 1970s), the two houses seemed to stand for two completely different notions of what Alsace wine could be. Trimbach was always more austere, drier, tauter, leaner; Hugel was always broader, rounder, softer. I found out later that one technical factor may have had much to do with this: Trimbach always eschewed malolactic fermentation (which softens a wine’s acidity), and Hugel did not.

Well, I liked them both, to

be sure.....but, truth be told, my heart always lay with the crisper wines of Trimbach.

So it was that I emerged from my recent tasting at Hugel’s spectacular “corner house” in the oh-so-atmospheric village of Riquewihr.....with surprise coursing through my veins. For what I encountered there were some extraordinarily steely young Rieslings, some of the crispest Pinot Gris I’ve ever tasted, and some of the most balanced Gewurz. I think the old Hugel style lives on in some of their less expensive wines—like the famous Hugel version of Gentil, a five-grape blend—but it became pretty clear to me that the old differences between Hugel and Trimbach are fading away. Which made me very happy: if Trimbach were switching over to Hugel’s style, I’d be crushed!

Once again, for me, Riesling carried the day. I was astonished by the limey 2006 Riesling, which smelled a great deal like Loureiro, one of the component grapes in Rias Baixas wine. This stuff was VERY steely, and VERY bone-dry.....with TONS of acidity. Dream Riesling, for me! The 2005 Riesling was more piney-earthly.....in a delicious way.....with a very similar profile.

Some of the biggest surprises of all were in the bigger grapes. The 2004 Pinot Gris

Tradition—a proprietary label—had great acid, a steely profile (even though this is Pinot Gris!), and was practically dry. The 2004 Gewurztraminer Jubilee—which, in code, means “Grand Cru,” since Hugel stands with Trimbach in rejecting that phrase for its labels—was, astonishingly, a “Grand Cru” Gewurz that was just a bit off-dry! Good acid, nice balance, not much bitterness at all—a Gewurz you can really work with at the table!

I tasted through a bunch of big-deal sweeter wines, and admired them—though, from what I saw, I wouldn’t say this is Hugel’s strength. However, I was bowled over by the 1988 Riesling Vendange Tardive—a velvety, almost dry VT which nevertheless is rich in botrytis-honey aromas and flavors. This would be a foie gras wine *par excellence*.

Bravo for Hugel.....to whom I’ll be paying a lot more attention!

BONUS: POST-TRIP TASTING

After my return from Alsace, I was in full Alsatian mode.....my fangs dripping Riesling.....ready to absorb more, more, more, always more, on this fascinating subject.

I hadn’t paid visits in Alsace

to two of my favorite producers.....and their current releases *are* in NY.....so what the hell, I figured.....a few bottles from each one are better than none!

In the interests of quasi-completeness, here are two more great producers whose styles you should track:

★★★★★
LÉON BEYER
(Eguisheim)

Monsieur Beyer certainly can't be left out of *this* article.....because many tasters with palates like mine rely on him for crisp, lean, dry, straight-up Riesling that gracefully fulfills the role at table mandated by the Riesling universe.

In my New York tasting, a bottle of basic-level, current-release Riesling was corked—so I didn't get to confirm the dryness that lies at the bottom of the tasting well at Beyer. But I've experienced it so many times, I'm confident in saying to you: rely on Leon Beyer Riesling for a dry, steely one that goes with food.

I wasn't entirely disappointed by the missed opportunity.....for I did have a beautiful bottle of 2002 Riesling, Cuvée des Comtes d'Eguisheim.....a non-designated Grand Cru (well, primarily Grand Cru grapes) with some age on it. Wow! Green-ish straw still. Perfect petrol development. Feels

like uppity extract, but balanced by staggering acidity. Maybe just a whisker in the off-dry direction. Not an oyster wine, exactly.....but likely a miracle for fish in cream sauce.

And there was more. I've always thought Beyer/Riesling, and Riesling/Beyer....but I tasted two wines made from other grapes that stretched the elegance limit of those other grapes. The 2004 Pinot Gris is the Pinot Gris of all I'd jump on right now. Really penetrating fruit, mingled with acid and earthiness.....and one of the driest Pinot Gris ever! Similarly, the 2005 Gewurztraminer, a gorgeous lychee exercise with an invisible sprig of mint, is very much on the dry side. And it's one of those rare Gewurzes that's not relentlessly, tragically Gewurz; you may actually forget the varietal for a moment, and simply enjoy your glass of white wine.

★★★★★
MARCEL DEISS
(Bergheim)

Marcel Deiss is the great radical of Alsace, the man more fundamentally at odds with “the way things are” than any other winemaker. And....he is also one of the very greatest winemakers in France. Put these facts together—and you've got someone worth paying attention to!

The fundamental war between Deiss and “the

authorities” concerns the conventional notion that Alsace wines need to have grape varieties identified on the labels. Deiss claims that before 1918 the best grape varieties were often grown together, picked together, and vinified together.....and that the best Alsace wines come from blends! He has battled for years with the authorities on this issue, and has finally won the right to produce wines with labels that mention the vineyard alone—Grand Cru vineyards, in some cases, lieux-dits in other cases, which he is identifying internally as “Premier Cru” sites.

At my brief tasting in New York, there weren't enough wines for me to discern big patterns. But I did notice these things:

1) the “dry” wines were mostly off-dry, so don't seek out the austere, steely ones here

2) across the board, the wines had extraordinary concentration and complexity, some of the best in Alsace

3) when Deiss goes full-out sweet, he really cranks it up

My favorite Deiss wine of the day was the 2002 Engelgarten. No varietal designation, of course—but Deiss' booklet tells us that the gravelly vineyard of Engelgarten, near Bergheim, grows Riesling, Pinot Gris, Beurot and Muscat.

Straw-yellow wine. On the nose, huge minerals—preceding a staggering core of extract which almost literally takes your breath away. Great acidity—steely, but luscious. Eternal finish! Just a shade off-dry, but it doesn't matter. This wine—you won't hear me say this often—is about wine!

As I circumnavigated the Grand Cru field, it was like stepping on mines: they were all powerful, but you could never tell which ones would supply the sweetest explosions. The one that blew me

away was the 2002 Grand Cru Schoenenbourg—no varietal labeling, but Deiss assures us that there's Riesling with “companion plantings.” The wine I tasted was a medium-green straw, with powerful reserves of petrol and fruit. Very sweet, very gorgeous dessert wine, just about beerenauslese level, and with a real German BA flavor. But tight, taught, insanely concentrated, round and velvety, with a phenomenally long finish. This is Alsace wine at rock star level.

BONUS #2: A FEW MORE PRODUCERS!

After the trip, and the post-trip tasting, I realized that I hadn't tasted the wines of a few key producers in several years. So I've listed below some of Alsace's greatest stars.....and some of my favorite winemakers.....hoping you can begin your own investigation into their current styles. Here they are, in no particular order:

Zind-Humbrecht

Josmeyer

Domaine Marc Kreydenweiss

Domaine Albert Mann

Domaine Ostertag

Domaines Schlumberger

Domaine Weinbach, Colette Faller et Filles

Alsace is vast.....please let me know what you think!

...it was like stepping on mines:
they were all powerful, but
you could never tell which ones
would supply the sweetest
explosions.

FOOD FROM ALSACE

There is a cliché about food from Alsace that has more than a grain of truth to it: Alsatian food is a French spin on German food. Yes, yes and yes. And I love that very appealing aspect of the Alsatian table.

However, I'm afraid it oversimplifies thought about Alsatian food, and overshadows other aspects of this absolutely fabulous regional cuisine.

For example.....it was not only the Germans who left their mark on this area; apparently, the Roman occupation as far back as the first century B.C. ushered in a plethora of gastronomic elements as well. Parsley and other Mediterranean herbs play strong roles in Alsace, as do a surprising range of spices; cumin, for example, undoubtedly introduced by the Romans, figures heavily in the traditional cooking. Primitive forms of pasta, of course, came with the Romans—and today we have Alsatian noodles in many forms, and *spätzle*, and an Alsatian type of gnocchi called *kasknepfle*. Additionally, one might see the Italian/Mediterranean roots in the Alsatian love of garlic—for the food of

Germany itself doesn't show the same stinkin' love. Records show that as far back as 1182, at a church in Guebwiller, a guild of masons regularly lunched on.....unlimited bread and garlic! Alsatian? Absolutely!

The Romans brought lots of fruits and vegetables with them, as well.....and were delighted to find that Alsace is a wonderful place for growing these things. There is a fundamental mistake most off-the-scene observers make about Alsace: they assume it's a cold, cold northern European environment. In fact, the region has more annual sun than any place in France outside of Perpignan, near Spain.....and, especially, enjoys remarkably sunny, warm, dry conditions in the autumn, right during harvest season. This is good for more than grapes! Alsace is a produce bowl, and its cuisine reflects that. You might have guessed that this is a great agricultural region for cherries and plums....but would you have guessed that it's also ideal for almonds, peaches, apricots?

Other local conditions figure heavily in the cuisine in unexpected ways. Despite Alsace's land-locked position, the rushing local rivers have always provided enough wonderful fish to make Alsatian seafood cookery a staple. The essayist Montaigne, upon visiting in 1580, saved his most fulsome

gastronomic praise for Alsatian fish dishes.....and, when Brillat-Savarin, in 1825, laid out the fundamentals of Alsatian cookery, his trio of building blocks included carp from the Rhine.

The influence of forest is as powerful, of course, as the influence of stream. There's wonderful game in the Vosges mountains, and menus swell every fall with trophies of *la chasse*. It all lends an earthy, rustic character to the region's food.....reflected in other ingredients as well.....such as garlicky/porky charcuterie.....such as a love of earthy local snails.....such as some of the smelliest cheeses in France.

Of course, it's not all earthy-rustic. For one thing, *the* fanciest, most aristocratic dish in post-Renaissance Europe, arguably, was invented in Alsace. This is foie gras country—fatted goose liver having been brought to Alsace, initially, by the Romans!—and, in 1762, to please the court, Jean-Pierre Clause embedded foie gras in a *farce*, then wrapped the whole with *pâte*, or pastry.....creating the classic *pâté de foie gras de Strasbourg*.....which, as you can see, originally referred to an elaborate puff pastry that went around the foie gras. (Today, of course, when we say “pâté,” we just mean the meat loaf itself).

But that elaborate, courtly

Alsace has one of France's greatest concentrations of two- and three-star templesresponsible for fascinating, world-class creative cuisine

side of Alsatian cooking has persisted, through all these centuries. Today, you see it, above all, in the region's upper-tier restaurants—for Alsace has one of France's greatest concentrations of two- and three-star temples. These places are responsible for a fascinating, world-class creative cuisine, to be sure—but they are, by and large, fiercely chauvinistic in keeping Alsatian products and Alsatian cooking traditions at center stage.

Here's a short list of the products and dishes that enchanted me during my recent visit to Alsace.....with, where possible, suggestions as to how you might start incorporating these things into your own gastronomic life:

BAECKOFFE. The classic

stew of Alsace, but little-known outside the region. What a winner!

Historically—like red beans and rice in New Orleans—it was a Monday dish, a laundry-day dish. The moms would drop off a huge, filled, uncooked casserole with the local baker on Monday morning—strewn with meat and potatoes—then pick it up from the baker, after many hours of slow baking, on the way home to dinner.

The finished effect is a layered meat-and-potato casserole, soaked in Riesling, nuanced with garlic, herbs and spices....that is a comfort-food sensation! I re-created at home the best version I had in Alsace.....which featured lamb (always in a baeckoffe), beef (usually), pork (usually), and pig's feet (a traditional addi-

tion, but not ubiquitous today).

To be at its best, baeckoffe requires an overnight marination, then lots of cooking. I baked mine in a slow oven for three hours, as most modern recipes recommend.....but the result had neither the tenderness I wanted, nor the oozy concentration in the liquid. So I simmered it on top of the stove until those things occurred.....another three hours! The six hours of total cooking probably accurately reflect what the bakers used to do! But I'm leaving the timing an open question: YOU pull it when it's tender and juicy enough. Remember: the juice never becomes a sauce, but an enriched, flavorful liquid that you spoon over all. Just make sure to finish the cooking when there's still enough juice !

**CLASSIC BAECKOFFE,
WITH LAMB, PORK
AND BEEF**

makes eight hearty main-course servings

- 1 1/2 lbs. boneless stewing lamb, not lean, cut in 1" chunks**
- 1 lb. boneless stew beef, not lean, cut in 1" chunks**
- 1 lb. boneless stewing pork, not lean, cut in 1" chunks**
- 2 pig's feet, halved**
- 1 tablespoon salt**
- freshly ground pepper, to taste**
- 2 bay leaves**
- 2 sprigs thyme, leaves only**
- 1/3 cup finely chopped parsley leaves, plus extra for garnish**
- 2 large cloves garlic, peeled and coarsely chopped**
- 1/4 cup finely chopped celery root**
- 1/4 teaspoon quatre epices (a French spice blend; you can make your own with ground clove, ground allspice, dried thyme, powdered ginger)**
- 1 bottle dry Riesling (you may substitute other dry white wine)**
- a left-over piece of pork fat**
- 3 lbs. large, waxy potatoes, peeled, sliced 1/4" thick on a mandoline**
- 1 cup chopped shallots**
- 1 cup thinly sliced carrots**
- 2 medium leeks, light-green-to-white parts only, cleaned and coarsely chopped**

1. Place the meats in a large, non-reactive bowl. Sprinkle with about 2/3 of the salt, and pepper well. Toss in bowl with bay leaves, thyme, parsley, garlic, celery root and quatre epices. Pour about 1/2 of the wine over all, tossing. Cover, and refrigerate overnight, stirring occasionally. Cap and refrigerate the wine, as well.

2. Select a large ovenproof casserole with a cover (I used one made by the Alsatian company Staub—a greyish-black Majolique 6-quart beauty.) Rub the left-over pork fat all over the inside of the pot and lid. Discard fat.

3. When ready to cook (the next day), place the four pigs-feet halves in the bottom of the pot. Cover with half of the potatoes, neatly overlapping; salt with half the remaining salt. Top with half of the shallots, half of the carrots, and half of the leeks. Lift all off the meat out of the marinating bowl, and distribute meat evenly on top of the potatoes and vegetables. Top the meat with the rest of the vegetables, distributed evenly, and top that with the last half of the potatoes in an overlapping layer. Sprinkle remaining salt over the potatoes.

4. Measure the amount of wine left in the marinating bowl, and double it with water. Then pour the water-wine mixture over the meat and vegetables in the pot. The liquid should come up to just below the top level of potatoes. If there's not enough liquid, mix the wine remaining in the reserved bottle with an equal amount of water, and pour water-wine mixture into the pot until the desired level is reached.

5. Pre-heat oven to 275 degrees.

6. Cover casserole with lid. Make sure the seal is tight; if it isn't, reinforce with heavy aluminum steel. Place in oven, and cook for three hours.

7. Remove casserole, remove lid, and check condition of the stew. If the meats are very tender, and the liquid has cooked down to a rich broth, your baeckoffe is done. However, it's likely that it will not yet be ideal. At this stage, place it on the cooktop, over medium-gentle flame, and let simmer gently, partially covered, over medium-low heat, until the meats have melted and the juice has thickened; this can take anywhere from 1-3 hours. Monitor regularly so that the juice doesn't boil away.....and don't stir the pot very much at all, in hope of keeping the potato slices whole.

8. Optional extra touch: when the baeckoffe is ready, pull up a little juice from the bottom with a spoon, glaze the top with it, and run the casserole under a hot broiler. This will give you a nice browned effect on the top potato layer.

FOR SERVING: It is wonderful to bring the big baeckoffe pot to the dining table, or a nearby side-board. Serve each diner a hearty portion right out of the pot in a wide soup bowl, or on a dinner plate. Spoon liquid over each portion. Sprinkle with minced parsley just before serving. You may offer only crusty bread and good butter on the side, though many modern diners enjoy a crisp, refreshing salad alongside all that meat. Wine's a no-brainer: a bottle of dry Alsatian Riesling, of course!.....though it doesn't have to be the same Riesling used in the cooking.

BOUCHEE A LA REINE. This quaint dish from French classical cuisine is *everywhere* in Alsatian restaurants today.....and I love it! Perhaps it reflects the 18th-century era that spawned pastry-wrapped foie gras in Strasbourg. The Bouchée à la Reine is a puff-pastry vol-au-vent shell, usually filled—and piled high!—with chicken, veal, sweetbreads and mushrooms in a creamy sauce. A big sauce boat accompanies, and some type of noodle is always served on the side. Big-time Pinot Blanc or Riesling opportunity!

CHOUROUTE. OK, here it is.....the big one. The iconic dish of Alsace.

“Choucroute” in French simply means “sauerkraut”.....and the dish we usually imagine, that platter of sauerkraut piled high with sausages and meat, is officially referred to as

“choucroute garnie,” or garnished sauerkraut.

It is no accident that “sauerkraut” alone is the word usually spoken, and the garnish is secondary—for the Alsatian sauerkraut itself is something that must be tasted to be believed.

We Americans tend to adapt European classics by focusing on the protein that garnishes the central ingredient. Italians focus on the spaghetti in spaghetti with seafood sauce, not the seafood; Gascons focus on the beans in cassoulet; Spaniards focus on the rice in paella, not the pile-up of shells, sausages and poultry on top.

In Alsace, it is the sauerkraut itself that stars in *choucroute garnie*.

The amazing thing about it is its lightness. It is finely cut—you just can’t find American-made sauerkraut with this delicacy—and cooked with an

extremely light touch in wine and spices. When you twirl it on your fork, you cannot believe that you are eating what is usually thought of as a heavy food: it is airy, refined, refreshing even.

Now, if you can visit when I visited—late September or so—you have a special treat in store. The summer’s cabbage crop is harvested in early September, put up in brine.....and ready for consumption in late September, early October.....when it is sold as “Nouvelle Choucroute”.....or new sauerkraut! And, on a steaming platter with all of its porky friends, it is a thing of phenomenal deliciousness: even lighter than usual, almost crunchy, fresher tasting, less salty, slightly “sweeter,” in a cabbage-y way.

Finding an equivalent of good Alsatian sauerkraut in the U.S. is not an easy thing; even the best brasseries in America serve thicker, heavier, American-cut sauerkraut.

Some years ago, however, I discovered a product from Germany that, for me, adequately filled the American sauerkraut gap. It was called Leuchtenberg Mildes Wein Sauerkraut, it came in an aluminum-foil pack, and it was available at Schaller & Weber, the old-time German grocery at 1654 Second Ave. in Manhattan. In my cookbook TASTE, I described in great detail how to heat this

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stuff up, how to partner it with sausages and meats, how to serve your guests a damned good approximation of a proper Alsatian *choucroute garnie*.

After my trip to Alsace, I went back to Schaller & Weber to make sure the product was as good as ever. I didn't find out.....because it wasn't on the shelf any longer!

However, they did have two similar products that I hadn't seen before.....which I of course snatched up and sampled.

The first one—Hengstenberg Mildessa Mildes Weinsauerkraut—made me nervous; it was thicker, sweeter and mushier than the product I remember.

But the second one brought the big smile back—because I think this stuff is even better than the original Leuchtenberg! Really thin, tangy, sourly, slightly crunchy.....the Kühne Weinkraut Choucroute (from Hamburg, Germany) has it all! You can buy it at Schaller & Weber, or mail-order it from them. Then, all you have to do is embed some great cured sausages in it (kielbasa kind of stuff), cured or smoked meats (a chunk of very meaty bacon would be great, among other things), and heat it all gently in a large casserole. On a platter, make a bed of the hot kraut, then top with all the meats. Mustard, bread and butter, dry Riesling

in the glass.....what a winter-time feast!

CHOU POITOU. When I got up early recently to visit the Thursday morning market in Colmar, I had no idea that I was about to find the most beautiful cabbage I'd ever seen. Now, "Poitou cabbage" is obviously from another region.....but I'd never seen it before, not even in Poitou. So when you're in Alsace, look for this amazing vegetable that confirms how *gastronomique* cabbage can be. It is large, long—about the shape and heft of a watermelon, though tapered at the root end—with an astonishingly fresh, sweet and vital taste. A discovery.

COQ AU RIESLING. In Alsace, cooking an ingredient in Riesling wine (long the region's star vinous performer) sometimes substitutes for preparations from other places.

The perfect example is *coq au Riesling*—which, in so many ways, is the Alsatian version of meat-and-red-wine stews found across France. The obvious parallel is to Burgundy's *coq au vin*, where chicken is stewed in Pinot Noir with onions and mushrooms. Here, chicken is stewed in.....Riesling!.....with onions and mushrooms! Some cream is added as well, so this becomes a creamy, white-sauce dish. The

fruity taste of Riesling, though much of it cooks away, does leave a very regional hint in dishes like this.

ESCARGOTS AU RIESLING. Alsatians LOVE their snails. And snails are as common on menus in Alsace as they are on menus in Burgundy. But....once again....the Riesling changes everything. Rather than the in-the-shell, garlic-butter-parsley treatment that snails get in Burgundy—in Alsace they get a creamy-Riesling-sauce treatment, usually not in the shell. Croutons are often mixed into the mixture.

FOIE GRAS. France is Foie Gras Central, of course, with great examples of it everywhere....but the two centers of Foie Gras Central, without doubt.....are the southwest of France (around Gascony).....and Alsace.

As I mentioned before, the Alsatian foie gras obsession may date back to Roman times. In modern times, unfortunately, there is very little foie gras actually raised in the Alsace area; much of it comes to the region in the form of raw livers from Hungary, and other points east.

However, there are tons of it being prepared and consumed in Alsace. And there are two essential things to know about foie gras there:

1) Owing perhaps to the

historic importance of *pâté de foie gras de Strasbourg*—Alsace is *terrine* country. Most Americans who are familiar with fresh foie gras gravitate towards what the French call *foie gras chaud*—raw slices of the liver sautéed in a pan. I would say that’s the preferred prep as well in the southwest of France, the other center. In Alsace, however, they prefer to marinate the raw liver lightly, cram the lobes into a ceramic dish, and melt the whole thing slowly in the oven until it becomes a terrine. The result, sliced and served cold, is heart-stoppingly sumptuous. If you’ve not experienced a glorious foie gras terrine before....Alsace is the place to do it!

2) One more contrast to southwest France helps define Alsatian foie gras cookery. In Gascony, the duck rules (spilling over into confit, cassoulet, etc.); in Alsace, though the duck is hugely popular as well, this is the region where you’re most likely to encounter *goose* foie gras. And an Alsatian terrine of goose foie gras is a glorious thing: not as firm as duck foie gras terrine, not as vivid in flavor....but, as everyone says, much more *elegant*.

Currently, American versions of foie gras terrine, both from duck and goose, both from American-raised foie gras and French-raised foie gras, are available in the U.S. For the full variety of offerings, one of the best sources is D’Artagnan in New Jersey.

HURE. There is an infinite variety of charcuterie, or pork-based products meant to be consumed cold, in Alsace; here’s one area that truly is a brilliant combo of French and German sensibilities. I mention *hure* in this listing, because it may be my favorite of them all. It is a pork roll studded with head-cheese-like gelatinized cubes that is cut into thin, delicate slices—a fabulously deep-tasting, sexily-textured marriage of the German butcher shop and French finesse. (Another charcuterie fave of mine, related to hure, is *presskopf*, an Alsatian version of headcheese).

JAMBONNEAU. Meaning something like “little ham,” this is a small, cured, skin-on hunk of pink-flesh pig leg that is usually served with choucroute (just the jambonneau is served in “jambonneau au choucroute”—no other meats are included).

JARRET DE PORC. Same deal here: this cured knuckle of pork is a stand-alone chou-

croute topper.

KUGELHOPF. One of the great Alsace signature dishes, *kugelhopf* is a sweet bread, or a cake, baked in a characteristic swirled turban shape. It is usually flavored with almonds and raisins, and is very popular for coffee-dunking duty in the morning. Lots of seasonal variations exist....as do lots of creative variations made into high-class desserts in the pastry section of fancy Alsatian restaurants.

MUNSTER. Always one of my favorite cheeses in France—a gorgeous, oozy, runny, cow’s-milk beauty, which, if you catch it right, bursts with smelling-funky aroma and flavor. It is a staple of Alsatian cheese courses, and is also widely incorporated into Alsatian dishes.

However....I must tell you about one of the greatest disappointments of my recent Alsatian trip.

Everywhere I went, of course, I asked for runny Munster. And....shock of shocks....nowhere did I find it. Not in country-style restaurants, not in fancy restaurants, not in the best cheese shops of Colmar and Strasbourg, not at open-air village markets. Everywhere I went, the cheese came out in triangular wedges that were cold, stiff, and pretty firm....with not a globule of

Everywhere I went, of course, I asked for runny Munster. And.....shock of shocks.....nowhere did I find it.

ooze in sight. I asked a million questions, of course, and kept getting the same answer: “you don’t really see Munster like that anymore.”

What??? In France??? In Alsace??? How can this be?

And I kept getting the same basic answer.....an answer I’d expect more in mid-America than in France: “If we keep it at the temperature that makes it run, and don’t sell it by the end of the day, it’s wasted. By keeping it cold, we can hold it much, much longer, and not waste so much of it. And....the flavor is almost as good.”

I was crestfallen. I just couldn’t believe my ears. I checked to see if this was a seasonal state of affairs, and they said “non.”

Finally, I asked “if I really, really, really want to get this thing, no matter what, am I totally out of luck?”

“Well,” they said.....”if you go up to the *fermes auberges* in the

Vosges mountains (little farms that also take in guests).....you could probably find some.” Unfortunately, I didn’t have time on this trip to pursue that.....but I urge you to! If you get there before I do....please let me know what you find!

ONION TART. I expected, of course, to find a ton of quiche in Alsace.....like Quiche Lorraine on every menu. I was wrong. Alsatians are quick to let you know that Lorraine is Lorraine, and Alsace is Alsace.....and not so quick to put quiche on the restaurant menu. In fact, of the twenty or so restaurants I went to on this trip.....I saw quiche only once!

What I did see everywhere, instead of quiche.....is onion tart, or *tarte a l’oignon*.....which is a virtual quiche. Like quiche, it’s an open-faced tart, in a flaky crust, with a creamy-custardy egg-based filling. Onion tart is

loaded, of course, with chopped, sautéed sweet onions, which blend beautifully with the ooze that surrounds the.

QUENELLES DE FOIE.

These liver dumplings go by many different names.....and, in fact, get many different treatments. But the basic idea is wonderful: a light, fluffy combo of puréed liver with flour, eggs, milk, formed into ovals (or balls), and cooked to airy doneness. Sometimes they appear on choucroute platters, sometimes they stand alone as a main course. More often than not I’ve seen them poached.....but one of my favorite versions was at a funky little inn, called Au Soleil, in the wine town of Wettolsheim, which featured crusty, sizzled ones, served with great golden potatoes on the side.

QUETSCH. The fall, of

course, is a glorious time for fruits in Alsace, as I so gleefully saw last month. To lovers of eau-de-vie (the clear, distilled, highly fragrant elixir usually made from fruits), it's no secret that plums rule in Alsace—because we all try to keep up with the different plum names on the eau-de-vie bottles. One of my very favorite fruits in Alsace—both for drinking, and eating!—is the *quetsch*, that elongated, blue-skinned plum with yellow-orange flesh that can only be found in the autumn. There are *quetsch* desserts galore at this time of

year—from your basic *quetsch* tarts, to far more creative flights of fancy in *quetsch*.

QUICHE. (see ONION TART)

TARTE FLAMBEE. If you've not had this great dish—which one might think of as Alsatian pizza!—you are missing something grand. It also goes by another, older, more Germanic name—*flam-mekueche*—but every town in Alsace today has a kind of fast-food stand offering “tarte flam-bée.” You will see it at a good

many informal restaurants, as well. It's quite simple, really: very thin dough, stretched wide (usually on a board), slathered with fromage blanc and cream, most typically topped with smoky bacon and sweet onion bits, flash-fired in a wood-burning oven and served, like a good pizza, all charred and crispy around the edges. These days, of course, you have options: I saw *tartes flam-bées* with vegetables, with truffle oil, with an extra step result in *tarte flambée gratinée*.....and, of course, *tartes flam-bées* desserts. Don't miss this!

quetsch
elongated, blue-skinned plum
with yellow-orange flesh
that can only be found
in the autumn

SPECIAL SECTION: DINING IN ALSACE

No matter how great the cuisine of a region is, for the traveller it all comes down to one thing: can you get a good representation of that regional cuisine in local restaurants? Time and again, in Europe, even in France, I get turned on like crazy by the ingredients I see all around me in markets, by the stories people tell of feasts at home.....but in local restaurant after local restaurant I find half-hearted attempts at true regional cuisine.....with the real energy going into big-deal creative food that seems less regional with every passing year.

I am absolutely delighted to report that of all the regions in France I've visited and reported on in the last decade.....Alsace is the one doing the very best job of preserving its local traditions. No question about it—this is the tippy-top in the game of regional retention.

For starters, the traditions of Alsace are very vivid, very specific. So when big-deal three-star kind of chefs create “modern” Alsatian food, it's not very difficult to include the feeling

of the base cuisine. On the other hand, a big-deal restaurant in, say, the Loire.....has a harder time retaining something vividly Loire-like amidst all the fancy dishes aiming for the stars.

But there's another huge factor working in Alsace's favor. In most regions, the care and nurturing of “regional” cuisine is left to the informal restaurants, usually known as “bistros.”

Unfortunately.....bistros across France have gotten real uppity in recent years. You see lemon grass and Moroccan spices all over the bistros these days, even in a place like Lyon.

Alsace has plenty of these upscale-type bistros, to be sure. Happily, however, the regional cuisine is secure in Alsace—because Alsace has a restaurant category that no other region has: the *winstub*. Literally something like a “wine bar,” the *winstub* has its share of local wines by the glass, by the pitcher, by the bottle; it is most definitely a place where people come to drink wine. However, so fortuitously, Alsatians are fantastically sensible in realizing that Alsatian wine is at its best with real, down-to-earth, traditional Alsatian food! Therefore, *winstub* menus are loaded with the most basic, the most classic Alsatian dishes. You don't have to worry about finding this stuff in Alsace—just go into a

winstub! And these are not “tasting” portions....this is dinner, *mon ami*, serious dinner!

Now, the actual picture is just a little bit more complicated than this. So, to give you the most accurate account of what I experienced last month in Alsace, I'm going to break the region's restaurants into four groups:

1) The Big-Deal Star-Job

It is often noted that no region of the world has more starred restaurants than the enchanted tri-country area that includes French Alsace, the German region of Baden, and the corner of Switzerland near Basel. Perhaps the most famous restaurant of all in this area is the three-star Auberge de l'Ill, in Illhausern, right in the heart of the Alsace wine-growing region. I haven't been there for years.....but I'll never forget how terrific my last experience was.....and how Alsatian the major-league food had remained.

On this trip, predictably—because of the growing creative wackiness around the globe—the big-deal star-jobs seemed a little less regional than they did 15 years ago. But they are still some of the most “regional” starred restaurants in France.

Now, readers of TASTINGS already know about the one-

star meal that kicked off my recent Alsace trip, at a restaurant in Colmar called **JY'S**—owned and run by a young chef named Jean-Yves Schillinger, who delighted us in New York in the late 1990s with a couple of great restaurants. Finally back in Alsace, Jean-Yves told me that his clientele thinks of him as the wanderer who returned....and expect him to bring his worldly baggage with him. He has. I begin with him in this report—because you will not find a *less-Alsatian* big-deal meal in Alsace. Put up with me for a few introductory graphs, as a kind of creative cocktail.

At the very hip, stylish JY'S, it's a wild ride through the cuisines of the world....with a special focus on the cuisine of New York! Among our first courses, we flipped over the turban of sashimi, artfully nestled over a core of shredded

daikon and micro-green salad—reflecting the love for Japanese raw fish that Jean-Yves developed in New York. Another stunner was the rich, full-flavored crab cocktail served in—what else?—a martini glass, layered with tortilla chips, guacamole, and partnered with a sorbet made from cactus pulp. Other surprise starters on the menu include a squid tempura served with “cocktail sauce” (recalling the Little Italy-type combo of calamari and tomato sauce), and the “véritable crabe cake”—which can only be American “véritable,” because there is no “veritable” French crab cake.

The parade continues at main-course time. The restaurant's considerable Spanish influence—represented, among the apps, by a line-up of “tapas”—climaxes in a plate of Iberian pork, the same black-nailed one used for the famous

jamon. But this fresh one, cooked rare, has other roads to roam. It is placed over a tangle of wok-fried vegetables, and a saucer of sweet-and-spicy chili sauce rides alongside—turning the dish into something that recalls, more than anything else, the flavors of New York Szechuan! We also get to see a bit of the Mediterranean, married to a bit of India, in a splendid, puffy chunk of sautéed sweatbreads, crusted with tapenade, resting on a duo of herb sauce and curry sauce.

You get the idea....and, as long as you eat lots of local food on your trip, I'm fine with the idea of you paying Jean-Yves a visit....for this is a great modern chef in full flight. If you do go, however, I insist that the one thing you **MUST** taste at JY'S is Jean-Yves' terrine of duck foie gras. His late father had a national reputation

At the very hip, stylish JY'S, it's a wild ride through the cuisines of the world....with a special focus on the cuisine of New York!

for foie gras terrine and, though I tasted terrine every day of my recent trip through Alsace, I did not taste one that came close to the depth, the velvet, the sheer sexiness of the son's version. Go crabcake-wild if you must.....but do not pass up an opportunity to find the center of one of Alsace's greatest contributions to gastronomy.

All right. Let's move on to big-deal food that's more Alsatian-basedwhich ain't hard to do in Alsace. One of the great regional/creative meals of my life took place, 15 years ago, at the extraordinary **Le Cerf**, in Marlenheim, about a 20-minute taxi ride from Strasbourg. The place had two stars then, and has two stars now.....and I couldn't wait to get back, which I did.

Go there; the Husser family is still turning out extraordinary food, with real Alsatian roots—and the country-inn environment has grown nothing but more charming and more comfortable with the years.

I do have to level criticism, however, on two fronts. On a busy Saturday night—which should be no excuse—I experienced some shockingly bumbled service, particularly from the youngest members of what looked like an inappropriately green staff in a big-deal two-star restaurant. I got over it. What worried me a bit more

was the way in which the kitchen's style has evolved—or not evolved. Happily, it hasn't given in to a lot of multi-culti fury; unhappily, what creativity there is seems fixed in a particularly 1980s kind of mind-set, replete with 1980s kind of clichés (yes, you will find langoustine ravioli).

Still—damn, can these guys turn out rich French food!

My favorite dishes all had significant Alsatian spin. I really enjoyed the brochette of local eel, grilled perfectly, with a green wonderland below: lentils mixed with “pistou Alsacienne” (parsley and garlic), and lusty, earthy local snails.

Another big winner played the foie gras card: a terrific, high-quality, sautéed chunk of it on top of crispy brik leaves (they call the dish a “pastilla”), anchored in a wonderful layer of blood pudding slices with apples, and drizzled with a Gewurztraminer sauce informed by the spices of gingerbread (Strasbourg is one of France's gingerbread centers!)

If you go, of course, you must go for the most Alsatian dish of all: the Husser's two-star version of choucroute, crowned with insanely crispy-juicy parts of a roast suckling pig, as well as the same mysterious-tasting smoked foie gras I had fifteen years ago (and never forgot). But the big thrill this time, frankly—as it's supposed to be—was the sauer-

kraut, probably so strikingly because this was “Nouvelle Choucroute” season. Would you think me mad if I compared it to *capelli d'angeli*? I hope not.....for this *was* the angel hair of sauerkraut, as delicate a vegetable dish as I've ever tasted, resilient-tender, twirling and untwirling on your fork like some insane northern Italian creation. The total effect of lustiness, savoriness, elegance and pork-frenzy in this dish will, I guarantee, drive you crazy. With a 1998 Lorentz Grand Cru Riesling Kanzlerberg from the fabulous list—lots of power, petrol and fruit, just off-dry—this was an Alsatian experience to dream about.

I'd had every expectation that Le Cerf in Marlenheim was going to be the fancy gastronomic highlight of my recent trip.....and it was awfully good overall.....but my premonition was wrong. Perhaps I fell into the star trap, hoping for too much from a binary system. I also go to lots of one-star restaurants in France every year.....and normally walk away happy.....but every once in a while one of them completely takes me by surprise.

So it was, two years ago, at **L'Amphitryon**, outside of Toulouse, the home of a young chef practically no one knows about (except Rosengarten Report readers).

And so it was again this year....at the one-star **La Table du Gourmet** in the very beautiful but much-touristed wine town of Riquewihr. This is a restaurant, and a chef, worth making a special trip to experience. It was the best meal of my Alsatian journey....and, maybe, the best meal I've had all year.

The chef's name is Jean-Luc Brendel, and he works in a very bizarre space; I like it, but most certainly *c'est bizarre*. The place is kind of a cave, in an old, hidden building (from 1539), with underground-feeling cave walls supported by black, rustic beams. But those walls are shocking red, bordel-*lo* red, on top of red carpets, hung with red paintings, and serving as backdrop for incredibly graceful, beautiful water glasses, that also happen to be red. It's like a pre-historic version of a Chinese restaurant gone high-concept. You're gasping from the moment you enter....and then you will gasp even more.

Brendel's food is an amalgam that doesn't sound so unusual on paper: Alsatian roots, esoteric local ingredients, bold conceptual touches, a shadow of molecular gastronomy. However, like Ferran Adria, the "wow" aspects of the dishes, conceptually, don't begin to measure up to the "wow" ways they land on your palate.

Ultimately, we all seem to have forgotten, a great chef's food *tastes* great.

I start you off mildly....as Brendel did for me, with a simply perfect scallop, fat, sweet and luscious (scallops, though not local, are adored in Alsace). This particular scallop was coated with muesli and sautéed, creating a wonderful brown nuttiness on the outside. It sat, simply, in a bowl of counter-intuitively *warm* jelly, of green tomatoes and citrus. The counterpoints were music of the spheres.

The much-beloved Alsatian escargots were next—these served in a hollowed-out onion. Touch the onion but gently....and a deep-green bouillon pours out, carrying a most haunting, most sublime, most ineffable flavor. Chinese celery leaf? Curry leaf? Parsley leaf? Wrong. It is *livèche*....the essential herb that seasons Maggi, which just happens to be a local product. This is the gift of the Maggi; it is what all snails should bathe in in heaven. Outside of Maggi, I have never tasted anything like it.

But I have never *seen* anything like the chef's astonishing *omble de chevalier* dish, made from the local Alsatian arctic char. Now, we're all grown-ups, and we've all been through the big pyrotechnic displays, and we're all supposed to be numb and jaded. I sure thought I was. I sure

This is the gift of the Maggi; it is what all snails should bathe in in heaven.

thought I was immune to on-the-table theatrics. I sure was wrong. Something like a tall chemical beaker arrives from the kitchen—with a certain Victorian-design panache—served upside-down on your plate so that it hermetically seals the preternaturally white smoke swirling inside. The waiter lifts the beaker, clouds escape, dissipate....leaving three slices of almost sashimi-like arctic char “qui fume à table,” as the menu says (“which get smoked at the table”). They are quivering, luscious, touched so gently with smoke you want to cry. They sit on top of a green-apple purée, and, before you can say *El Bulli*, a velvety sauce of green tea touched with Japanese cherry blossoms is poured around them. The moment is exquisite. Am I immune to this type of pres-tidigitation? No. I am not. I was truly knocked over.

Good thing, however, that we didn't peak there....for then I wouldn't have known the greatest chunk of veal I've ever tasted, a thick chunk, about 4" long and 1" thick, cooked in a special hay box invented by the chef....which brings veal about as close to the condition of pork as you can without genetic manipulation. This insane, sweet, buttery meat was a gorgeous pink inside, with streaks and layers of melting fat running through it, truly the Kobe of veal, one of the most magnificent protein displays in memory.

Any let-downs? Yes. Dessert.....good, but really old-fashioned, really un-technical, really un-conceptual.....not part of the rising action. Didn't bother me. All I could think about was the next meal at La Table du Gourmet.....not to mention a meal (which, unfortunately, I couldn't make) at Brendel's new *downscale* restaurant in Riquewihr, d'Brendelstüb, which I hear is about as deliriously, rustically, delicious Alsatian as a restaurant can get. Next time. Man, am I hooked.

2) The Restaurant "Gastronomique"

As do other regions of France, Alsace offers a number of places that are not exactly Michelin-star type of places—

but not funky bistros, either. I like to refer to them as "restaurants gastronomiques"....and when you find a good one, there is joy in the air.

A winemaker took me to his favorite, in Ingersheim, an extremely cheerful family place called **Taverne Alsacienne**. I highly recommend a visit here, if for nothing other than a crack at the large, amazing wine list, stuffed with aged Alsatian wines (especially Riesling!), at staggeringly reasonable prices.

Food-wise....well.....this wouldn't be among my top choices in the region. The large dining room obviously went through some kind of renovation recently, becoming large *and* modern in the process. Of course, the charming feeling of another era can't be plastered over; the almost palpable vision of generations coming here for a big-deal local splurge can't be blotted out. It's the same with the food: the menu lists many touches that show an awareness of Paul Bocuse, *nouvelle cuisine*, maybe even Joel Robuchon....but, at heart, this is a place to visit for seafood dishes in old-fashioned cream sauces. In fact, the modern-consciousness stuff muddies the Alsatian tradition part, so that you end up with something frustratingly in-between. My advice: come here for old-fashioned warmth, drink buckets of great vin-

tages, and try to find the most traditional things you can to eat (I had one of the better choucroutes of the trip at this place, with an amazing horseradish sauce). Do save room for cheese (excellent selection) and dessert—including a really compelling *kugelhoppf glacé*, ice cream in the shape of a kugelhoppf, with a kind of spumoni-like flavor.

L'Arpege, in Colmar, is a big step up, gastronomically—offering hearty local food with a good deal of thought behind it. Still, I don't think this small, cozy, practically hidden place is headed for Michelin stars, either. For one thing, the chef, Patrick Kayser, is *too* busy, *too* restless, *too* eager to toss a modern fig or three in a savory dish when no fig at all would do. But the procession of kumquats and quinces doesn't really penetrate the hearts of these dishes, and there is a vitality, and lustfulness, to his Alsatian cooking that I admire.

I greatly enjoyed Kayser's first-course salads fitted out with all sorts of proteins, such as sweetbreads, and *rillettes de porc*. And, one of his least fussy dishes—a crustacean-intense layering of in-shell lobster with potatoes in a brown-butter emulsion—was one of the best shellfish dishes of the entire journey.

Main courses show the chef at his most characteristic. I flipped over the thigh of a

young pig, roasted to perfection—tender, juicy, fatty, deeply barnyard-porky. I wanted it all by itself—for it was hurt by the apple concoction that came along for the ride. Exquisitely cooked kidneys, all rosy-and-fatty inside, as they should be, crowned a gorgeous bed of new cabbage in a tight sauce—which would have benefited from a 50% reduction in the juniper-berry onslaught. See what I mean? Great base elements—but not following the classic Escoffier advice to “make it simple!”

All of these “restaurants gastronomiques” provide lovely experiences, and are well worth visiting—but the one that is guaranteed to tickle your gastronomic bone is the exquisitely folkloric **Au Relais des Ménétriers** in Ribeauvillé, a key Alsace wine town. Despite the efforts of the chef of this bistro-like place to embellish traditional cuisine with a significant dose of creativity.....and despite the fact that this is *not* a two- or three-star restaurant.....I loved the food here as much as I did in any *winstub* of the visit, or in any temple of gastronomy. This is great, great cooking—which jumps to an even higher level at dessert time.

But first things first. You walk into this place out of the postcard that is Ribeauvillé, and into a postcard of a rustic Alsatian restaurant; it is

cheery, warm, with dark wood beams across the ceiling, and lots of miniature local portraits. It sets you up perfectly for the food: rustic too, but also with an exquisitely deft touch.

Among the apps, one of my favorites is a superb salad, brimming with local flair; the *Salade Champêtre Alsacienne* features gorgeous greens with a creamy sauce at the center of the action—but the real action’s a periphery of radish-garnished endives, cervelas (like an Alsatian mortadella), smoked bacon, and a crazy-good slab of Munster cheese melted on soft, puffy toast. Another first-course winner features hot quenelles of potato that are buttery-crunchy on the outside, dense and flavoury inside, swimming in a gorgeous shallot-rich cream sauce, garnished (just in case you might starve) with a great slab of sautéed foie gras, crackling with good salt. Hope you had a light breakfast.

The main courses I saw were not hyper-creative....but were fabulous, integrity-laden turns on straightforward country dishes. The suprême of guinea hen was just perfect, with intense poultry flavor, enrobed with a winy-rich brown sauce, tossed with earthy wild mushrooms (*girolles*), and partnered with absolutely first-rate house-made noodles. Even better, for

me, was a brilliant twist on *baeckoffe*, the region’s meat-and-potatoes staple. At Au Relais des Ménétriers, the stew comes in an individual crock—and features a layering of rich duck confit, devastating thin-sliced potatoes, and forest- evocative cèpes, all awash in a broth of almost other-worldly intensity. With one of my favorite Alsatian Rieslings—Trimbach’s Cuvée Frederic Emile, this one from the 2001 vintage—another Alsatian-style orgasm was achieved.

And then came dessert.

Allow me to evoke the names for you. *Kougelhopf Chaud et Froid aux Sultaines Macerées au Marc de Gewurztraminer* is a small, cake-y *kugelhopf* (spelling varies) featuring warm pastry, cold ice cream, with a velvety custard sauce offering the big, grappa-like taste of Gewurz distillate. As this thing started to melt, so did I.

Gratin de Framboises et Figs au Sabayon de Fleurs d’Oranges et son Sorbet Pêches des Vignes is a *clafoutis* of the gods: fantastic local figs, bound together in a light, puffy-brown gratin, with a creamy sauce, orange-blossom flavors, and a just-right sorbet made from “vine” peaches (which means they’re grapy-red in color).

Lastly, the *Confits de Myrtilles Chaudes, Petit Vacherin, Glace à la Vanille*.....a meringue confection.....fea-

tures, at the bottom of things, an incredibly lovely, warm, saucy concoction of local blueberry-like fruits, that is purple, deep, passionate, irresistible.....even after a powerfully substantial meal.

Well, that meal wrapped up gloriously. But I'm not done yet. There's one more place on my *restaurant gastronomique* list—even though I didn't really get to sample the *gastronomique* side of things here. But I thought I'd better tell you about this place because it is.....unusual.

It's called **Restaurant du Faudé**, and it is the *restaurant gastronomique* of Hotel du Faudé—a sprawling, ramshackle inn in Lapotroie, a village hard by some of Alsace's greatest vineyards. A group of winemakers took me there.....but didn't realize that the restaurant, which has an ambitious, creative kitchen, was essentially closed that night. It was open for hotel guests only (and the odd wine writer), and a set menu of non-creative regional courses was being served to all.

Though I like to work my own way through a *carte* when I'm on the road, I wasn't disappointed. Why?

First of all, I got to see this wacky hotel—which has loyal patrons who come back every year, particularly at holiday time (I'm told it's one helluva Christmas party!). Rooms are

smallish, and not too embroidered—but prices are exceedingly gentle (way under 100 Euros a night), making me think that this might be a good, economical base for a long-ish Alsatian wine trip. There's a swimming pool, sauna, lots of bustling common rooms.....and then there's Chantal.

On the night we met Chantal, she was wearing a flowery, old-fashioned Alsatian dress, the kind you might display in a folk dance. Even better, she was a charmer. Even better still—she is the keeper of Faudé's fantastic wine cellar, where, without too much convincing, Chantal will lead you down and spend hours discussing the nuances of Alsatian vintages with you.

Then, of course, the food.....which, by dumb luck, just happened to feature on this night the best traditional *baeckoffe* I've ever tasted (it's the model for the recipe I gave you earlier in this story). We were about 8 at the table—and so the chef had prepared a full *baeckoffe*, just for us, which was ceremoniously un-lidded and portioned out at tableside. It was all that I described earlier—but the best news is this: if you are a party of at least six, and if you order at least 12 hours in advance, the kitchen will prepare your very own *baeckoffe* as well, right in the enormous blue *baeckoffe* crock

that has yielded stews right here for decades. It is an Alsatian experience not to be missed.....particularly if you can cajole Chantal into drinking some dry Riesling with you.

3) The Winstub

At last, my favorite category. The old reliable. The thing in Alsace that has no chance whatsoever of making you crazy.....and every chance of making you happy!

But all Alsatian winstubs are not the same. Winstubs can actually have a small, bistro-like character.....and winstubs can have a large, sprawling, bustling, brasserie-type character. What binds them together is the type of food they serve: mainstream Alsace (obvious or esoteric), without many twists. You want regional food in Alsace? Don't even think about it. Go to a traditional winstub.

My first one on this trip—**Winstub Brenner** in Colmar—was a honey of a place, a mom-and-pop corner bistro set right near the dreamy canal that goes through the prettiest part of Colmar. Lots of blond wood and low lamps give it a warm, local feel—but airy, not stuffy. Great, invested staff (I love the jolly round man with a bald pate above friar-like silky locks), bringing you oom-papah platters of delicious food.

My first bite on this trip was

the terrine of chicken livers, and I was home. The livers were not the mushy New York things; they were cured pink, held together in a terrine slice by a big band of broad white fat. This was chopped liver that went to Le Cordon Bleu—resulting in an ultra-flavorful, ultra-funky slab of major-league charcuterie. And it had the most careful raw vegetables tossed around it: great shredded carrots topped with a raw-and-runny onion purée, plus maybe the best celeri-rave remoulade ever.

If you're going to have an onion tart, this would be a good place for it. Sweet and creamy—not unlike Jewish eggs & onions!—inside a gorgeous, rustic crust, with perfect browning on the crisp top side. With its ideal leafy salad on the side, and a glass of dry Riesling.....this is what France is all about!

All right. First night. Gotta do the chou.....and I was rewarded with one of the best four choucroutes of the trip. The meats here were especially good: two thick slabs of cured pork belly, buttery and porky; a juicy slice of smoked pork loin; a fat, dark-red sausage with insane crunch, mousse-y inside; a pale, thin sausage, snappy, smoky, tender inside.

At dessert time, that good onion tart crust now supports wonderful retro fruit pies—

quetsch or coing (quince) when I visited. Short-ish wine list, but appropriate for this place—about 20 wines, many at 25 Euros or below. Plus.....1/4-litre carafes of all local varieties served in rustic pots.....for 6 Euros or so.

You can drink here. You can eat here. But do it fast. The friar with the pate may be selling out to Jean-Yves Schillinger around the corner. Who knows? The place could become even better than ever. But if you want to see *this* piece of Alsace history.....better see it now.

At the other end of Alsace, in Strasbourg, and at the other end of my trip (the last weekend), I ran into the great, iconic winstub of the region, the sprawling, two-story, kitschy brasserie-like one, **Zuem Stris-sel**, that has been serving sauerkraut and beer, in some form, since the end of the 1600s. If you hit Strasbourg, do not fail to set your compass straight by visiting this raucous place, a short walk from the gorgeous Strasbourg Cathedral.

Be prepared: the menu is large. The portions are large. The pressure to eat heroically is large. Only the prices are not too particularly large.

We slammed into about half a dozen apps, because it looked like the thing to do. Great onion tart—best creamy filling of all, though the crust round

goes to Brenner. Even better is the *tarte flambée*, this impossibly thin, crispy one topped with *more* fromage blanc for a gratinée, quand meme. Meats were also mighty pleasing: excellent goose foie gras terrine, an exemplary *presskopf slice* (head-cheese) in a superb vinaigrette, and, my fave, a jellied chunk of last night's stew turned into *Terrine de Pot au Feu, avec Crème de Raifort* (horseradish cream).

Predictably, this was one of the great choucroutes of all time—with amazingly super-light, super-flavorful sauerkraut. It was almost crunchy, quite tart, and giving evidence of serious encounters with goose fat and spices. But I love the other ordering strategies, too: get a pig's knuckle on your choucroute instead, a gorgeous hunka, almost lacquered on the outside, salty, sweet, porky, immaculately tender and juicy. Or.....an exquisite jambonneau on your sauerkraut.

Or.....skip the choucroute entirely and have the best *tête de veau* ever, that rustic collection of skin, meat, gelatinous tissue from a calf's head splayed on a big plate with appealing vegetables and a perfectly creamy sauce gribiche. Wow!

Or.....wander into liver territory and sample the best poached liver dumplings ever—large quenelles with a sweet, old-fashioned, meat-loaf-y kind

of taste and texture.

Save room for lots of wine.....and/or beer.....and eaux-de-vie.....and dessert! The signature sweet is warm apple strudel with crème fraîche, a huge roll—really browned and crunchy outside, all cooked-down-appley within. I also loved the dessert *tarte flambée*, made with apples and Calvados, and a superb warm chocolate cake served with whipped cream.

You like Balthasar in New York? You like Brasserie Vaudeville in Paris? Come here. You will know similar mirth.....and you will have better food.

4) The Winstub Chic

So fanatic are the Alsatians about their food—and so proud are they of their traditional winstubs—that they have devised a way to riff, a little bit, on the winstub theme.....without messing up the traditional winstub! I found this out from some locals who were telling me their favorite winstubs.....but kept saying, of some, “oh, that place is winstub chic!”

Wow! In the rest of France, the bistro “chic” is wiping out the traditional bistro! Here, the winstub “chic” lives in perfect harmony with its progenitor.

And from what I could see,

the biggest differences were in crowd and ambiance: the winstub “chics” I visited were not very edgy at all, food-wise, and seemed very happy to be in the vicinity of the mother ship.

A good one to start at is the old **Muensterstuwel**, just a few steps from Strasbourg Cathedral; if the weather’s nice, you can sit at large tables in front of the restaurant, under the sun, watching the world go by. I tell you.....I wouldn’t go by the array of nicely updated salads, charcuterie, quiches, etc. that they serve here. Nor would I deny myself the best Bouchée à la Reine I found on the trip, the creamy protein dome abetted marvelously by model spaetzles—gorgeous flaps, golden-brown in spots, so buttery and eggy, almost like French Toast in flavor.

But The Big Dish for me....and the one that pushes this place into winstub “chic” territory....is the roasted saddle of boned rabbit, served with a mysterious creamy-brown savory sauce with amazing complexity. Caramel? Butter? Chocolate? It reverberated endlessly with the pearly meat.....and with the good pitcher of house Riesling! Lots of quotidien onions and mushrooms just to keep things down to earth.

Moving up the “chic” scale—both in decor and food—is the prettiest winstub

I’ve ever been in, a place called **L’Ami Schutz** in the ravishing La Petite France neighborhood of Strasbourg, where old canals criss-cross with old medieval, timbered houses. L’Ami Schutz has almost its own park around it, and a gorgeous outside spot for summer parties. Inside, it seems like a rustic Alsatian country house: small, low ceilings, cross timbers with holes in them, knotty pine, lots of copper on display, gorgeous casements with stained glass,and a feminine turquoise touch in play everywhere.

Now, not everything I tasted here was great. After a lot of heavy eating over the week, the range of winstub-plus salads attracted us—but they were bland, by and large. However, other starters hit pay dirt—like the snail sauté, earthy little critters, perfectly tossed with cubes of pig’s feet, melding in a just-right sticky-brown reduction.

At main course time, I came across one of the greatest Alsatian dishes of the trip. You’d expect a baeckoffe at a winstub—but this winstub “chic” made one with *sandre*, a river fish.....and, with its creamy broth (staying true to the “baeckoffe-broth not baeckoffe-sauce” tradition), it was one of the greatest fish-and-potato concatenations I’ve ever tasted. Can you say Alsatian grandmother? Chic Alsatian

grandmother, perhaps?

If you have room, and if you're in season.....don't miss the monumental purity of quetsch halves cooked in.....a deep-red-purple wine-soaked purée of quetsch! This is the essential taste of plum.....with just a dab of fantastically subtle cinnamon ice cream to "chic" it up.

The last winstub "chic" of my visit was not, by far, the prettiest—just a big square room near a bridge in Strasbourg, with rows of tables, and rather glaring theatrical lighting. But the chic is in the feinschmeckers here.....because only foodie insiders know that **Pont du Corbeau** has some of the most insanely delicious

winstub-type food in Alsace, even if it is slightly gentrified. Do not miss this place! The crazy jumble of Alsace cured meats, sausages, secret parts of pigs, salads that work—how about a cold new sauerkraut salad with wild mushrooms??—will take your breath away. Imagine a California or New York spin on Italian food—an Alice Waters approaching, say, panzanella—and then you understand: this is a breath-of-fresh-air, ingredient-driven, artisanally-obsessed Alsace restaurant with, essentially, a California-style perspective. Of course, no one in California ever ate this much pork fat—but you will in Strasbourg, I guarantee!

And here's the Halles of Fame:

BEST CREATIVE CHOUROUTE

Le Cerf
(Marlenheim)

BEST TRADITIONAL CHOUROUTE

Zuem Strissel
(Strasbourg)

BEST CREATIVE BAECKEOFFE tie:

l'Ami Schutz
(Strasbourg)

Au Relais des Ménétriers
(Ribeauvillé)

BEST TRADITIONAL BAECKOFFE

Restaurant du Faudé
(Lapotroie)

BEST WINE LIST TO PLAY WITH

Taverne Alsacienne
(Ingersheim)

BEST DESSERTS

Au Relais des Ménétriers (Ribeauvillé)

THREE GREATEST RESTAURANTS OF THE TRIP

La Table du Gourmet
(Riquewihr)

Au Relais des Ménétriers
(Ribeauvillé)

Pont du Corbeau
(Strasbourg)

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