

Alsace

Tom Stevenson

Is René Muré's rejection of so-called physiological ripeness the start of a welcome trend or a glitch on the radar screen?



TOM STEVENSON

On my last visit to Muré, René told me that he had been harvesting grapes three days earlier since 2005. When I asked him why, he said that although he had been pleased with the wines he had been making, he wanted more freshness in the fruit. He wanted crisper wines. He wanted to make dry wines that could be enjoyed every day, not just on a special occasion. I thought back to the first discussion on so-called physiological ripeness I had launched into at this establishment. It

was not that long ago. René had been picking riper and riper, and it was difficult to find a dry wine at Muré. To drive home the point I had been making, I had asked René what the oldest dry Riesling was in his cellar that was still drinking nicely. I forget the actual vintage, but when he told me, I remember asking what the potential alcohol would have been. "Eleven degrees, perhaps. Maybe only 10.5," he reckoned, and I responded, "Not bad, then for physiologically unripe grapes."

That was in February 2006, months after René's first earlier harvest. Obviously I was preaching to the converted.

TOM STEVENSON specialises in champagne, but he is equally passionate about Alsace. In 1987, he was elected a *confrère oenophile* of the Conférie Saint-Etienne, when he was the sole person to identify a 50-year-old wine made from Sylvaner. In 1994, his 600-page tome *The Wines of Alsace* (Faber & Faber, 1993) won the Veuve Clicquot Book of the Year award in the USA and attracted the mother of all reviews in the UK from Malcolm Gluck, who declared: "It is not simply the best book about Alsace wines ever written, or the most penetrating book about a French wine region ever written; it is the greatest wine book ever written, period." A revision is in the pipeline but more than a few years away. Tom is chairman of the Alsace panel at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards.

Muré's 2005s show an increased freshness of fruit, with a crisper finish, but it is the 2006s that demonstrate the most dramatic change in quality and style. The fact that 2006 was a poor year (see Vintage Report) and 2005 a truly excellent one should illustrate just how influential Muré's earlier harvesting has been. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Pinot Noirs. Muré's vineyards on the Vorbourg include prime sites for red wine. So much so, in fact, that René has applied for permission to grow Syrah! The Vorbourg catches the full glare of the sun from dawn to dusk; consequently, René Muré's high-density Pinot Noir vines (10,000 vines per hectare) develop grapes with thick skins that are exceptionally heavy with pigment. The Clos St-Landelin Pinot Noir is located at the foot of the Vorbourg and usually makes the darkest Pinot Noir. The 2006 Clos St-Landelin is indeed darker than the "V" Pinot Noir (from the non-clos part of the Vorbourg, just 500 m [1,640 ft] above), but it is not as dark as the 2005 Clos St-Landelin, also picked early but from a much riper vintage. However, these two 2006s certainly do not lack richness or ripeness; they are just more clearly defined, with such beautiful fruit and finesse that they are in a completely different class. As far as the dry whites are concerned, even the generic Côtes de Rouffach Riesling has lovely fruit, despite having only 2.5 g of residual sugar. Not all of his 2006s are dry, of course, but the ones that are suggest this could be a watershed vintage for Muré. It took another year for René's changes to affect his truly sweet wines in an equally radical fashion. If bottling has no

Grapevine

- **Is the Flûte d'Alsace doomed?**

While fine for most Alsace varieties, the tall and slender Flûte d'Alsace bottle has always been a bizarre choice for red wines, but producers have had no choice in the matter, since this bottle was forced on them by law in 1959. So when Jean-Michel Deiss jumped the gun and used a semi-burgundian bottle for his Burlenberg before it was legally permitted, it was very welcome. Sometimes laws have to be broken for progress to be made, and in this

instance the ends justified Deiss's means – but now we have another shape bottle. The bottle is one of two shapes that Willm has used to launch its NOW Pinot Gris. NOW stands for New Old World, and not unsurprisingly it is very oaky, but one of the bottles used tapers from a bordeaux-like shoulder to a significantly narrower base. It looks neither New nor Old World and does nothing for Alsace other than further erode the 1959 law.

detrimental effect, then his 2007 Muscat Clos St-Landelin SGN promises to be the first truly successful botrytized Muscat from Alsace, while his 2007 Riesling SGN is stunning, with 212 g residual sugar put on a knife edge by 16 g of acidity (expressed as tartaric).

My fear is that René will relent – or that no one else will be brave enough to renounce the false god of physiological ripeness and join him. But if Muré's earlier harvesting is the start of a trend to rediscover Alsace's dry-wine roots, relegating sweet styles to a tiny proportion of very special SGN or VT, then it could attract back this region's formerly most loyal consumers and appeal to new dry wine consumers.

Alsace gradually gets screwed

In *Wine Report 2007* I maintained that Alsace wines are ideal for the screwcaps, but apart from Blanck, Willm, Jean-Pierre Frick, and Gustave Lorentz, most Alsace producers have failed to take advantage of this technology. A big stumbling block is that, apart from the *grands maisons*, relatively few Alsace producers are seriously involved in export markets, where the benefits of these closures are widely accepted by large and increasing numbers of fine-wine consumers. The French are not, even though Stelvin is a French invention. I mentioned that although Trimbach is one of Alsace's most widely exported brands, this firm won't invest in the technology until it is accepted in the USA. I have since heard from JB Adam that its screwcap-bottling line was set up (for both Adam and Keuntz-Bas) in 2005 specifically to accommodate the US and Scandinavian markets. Talking about screwcaps to Marc Hugel, he gave me five reasons why he would not use screwcaps, only one of which I had not heard and dismissed before: they are easily damaged when moving bottles around by forklift trucks. I sent this to half a dozen of the most experienced screwcap winemakers in Australia and New Zealand, and they all came back with the same two comments: if he's that clumsy he shouldn't be driving a forklift truck; and if he made the same contact against a corked bottle, the glass would crack or shatter. Come on, guys – if Trimbach and Hugel went screwcap, Alsace would convert overnight. You do know the world is not flat, don't you?

Opinion:

Sugar can kill!

In this year's edition of *Wine Report*, I seem to be arguing for more sugar in Champagne and less in Alsace, but of course, neither argument is about sugar per se. Both arguments are based on what is necessary for their respective styles of wine. For Alsace, this not only concerns being true to the dry-wine image of Alsace wine for historical reasons, it also concerns reassuring consumers with a reasonably consistent style of wine, and then labelling it in such a way that consumers are not confused by anything as basic as whether it's dry or sweet.

There is no room for sweet wine in Alsace other than *vendanges tardives*, *sélection de grains nobles*, and maybe the occasional *vin de glace*. These are speciality wines and, as such, are expected to be rarities, prized and expensive, but they are devalued by the increasing sweetness of all other Alsace wines. A combination of seeking out the hottest, most expressive terroir (can be good), lower yields (good), biodynamics (good), so-called physiological ripeness (bad), and allowing wines to ferment as much or as little as "they want" (can be good or bad) has been responsible for increasing number of inconsistently sweet Alsace wines, particularly among the *grands crus* and *lieux-dits*. Because of different vintage conditions and the tendency by some producers to allow wines to do their own thing during fermentation, it is impossible for experts, let alone consumers, to know whether the same wine is dry, medium sweet, or intensely sweet from year to year. And because there is no obligatory designation for all dry wines, consumers have absolutely no idea whether the wine they would like to order with their fish is going to be dry or sweet. This has been eroding consumer confidence in the wines of Alsace for the past 10 years or so, and that has harmed the hard-earned reputation of Alsace as a dry varietal-wine region. Not all biodynamic wines are sweet, but not all biodynamic wines are good, either. Some biodynamic wines are great and dry, but many biodynamic producers believe in physiological ripeness, even though Rudolf Steiner never proposed this concept.

With the exception of *vendanges tardives* and *sélection de grains nobles*, which should be produced in the most limited quantities to preserve their value, sugar is the long-term enemy in Alsace. But in the short term, once again, I ask whether it is too much to ask for an obligatory dry-wine designation to help consumers make a choice.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2007

As in Champagne, a fantastically hot spring pushed the vines on one month in advance of their normal growth, but the weather started to fall apart in June. April and May were exceptionally hot and sunny, but on 15 June a hailstorm devastated up to 150 ha in the villages of Ammerschwihr, Sigolsheim, Kientzheim, Bennwihr, and Kaysersberg. I was dining at Bernard Trimbach's home the following week (20 June), when the telephone rang to say that a narrow band of fierce hail had struck their vines in Mittelwihr. Pierre and I went for a midnight drive in the wake of the storm to find 50 per cent of the potential crop had been destroyed. Mid-August rains encouraged the most meticulous growers to remove the leaves above bunches to help avoid a repeat of the previous year's rampant rot. Despite these climatic difficulties, the harvest took place under ideal conditions throughout a typically sunny Alsatian September, and many great white and sweet white wines have been produced, with Pinot Blanc, Riesling, and Gewurztraminer the most successful grape varieties. Pinot Gris also excelled. As for the reds, opinion is divided.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2006

Vintage rating: Red: 75, White: 75

The year of the mushroom! Over the past 20 years, only 2003 and 1996 yielded worse wines, but unlike those two years, this was neither an unpleasant nor difficult year to taste. While the dead fruit and lack of acidity made the 2003s hard-going and the malic (not malolactic) stink of the 1996 was (and still is) repulsive, the mushroom aroma pervading most 2006s was not at all offensive. It is the result of rot, but it is just boring and even had a silver lining because it made tasting my way through 470 2006s much easier – particularly the 380 wines at my centralized tasting at CIVA. While I have to give the best wines my undivided attention in any year, as soon as I hit a 2006 with mushroom on the nose or palate, I moved on. What would be the point of any further consideration? I'm not going to recommend such wines, although one producer told me that his American importer told him to send over as much "risotto wine" as

possible, because since he told his customers to drink it with mushroom risotto it's been flying off the shelf! No less than 12.6 per cent of the 2006s I tasted at CIVA were mushroom-affected, and when each producer is restricted to a maximum of four wines, presumably they are showing me their very best. Putting the all-pervading mushroom problem to one side, the worst varietal performance was *blanc de noirs* from Pinot Noir that was not fit for red wine. Many did not bother with red wine, yet some like René Muré made the best red wine of their lives. There are some excellent 2006s, but this is not a vintage to buy on spec. Every producer was affected. You must be very picky.

2005

Vintage rating: Red: 88, White: 90

Overall, 2005 is better than 2004, with brighter fruit flavours, and it vies with 2001 and 2002, but the wines need time to confirm their precise qualities. Gewurztraminer was the best all-round performer, while Riesling was the most variable (although some Rieslings were as good as the best Gewurztraminers) and the Pinot Gris was excellent. All other varieties were good to very good. Ideal conditions for botrytis suggest excellent botrytized (as opposed to *passerillé*) VT and SGN.

Grapevine

• **Trimbach wins the Decanter Trophy again** with its Riesling Cuvée Frédéric Emile. Last year the 2001 vintage collected the trophy, this year it is the 2002. Domaine Schoffit's 2005 Gewurztraminer Harth Cuvée Caroline picked up the Dry Aromatic trophy, and Pierre Sparr's 2005 Gewurztraminer Sélection de Grains Nobles won the Sweet Alsace trophy. The 2008 competition received the highest number of Alsace wines, with 83 entered, up from 46 in 2007. The Decanter World Wine Awards (DWWA) is the only terroir-driven international wine competition, where the chairmen and chairwomen are selected for their knowledge and experience of their respective regions and are given the freedom

to choose and tweak the judges on the panel based on their individual expertise of the wines in question. All medals and regional trophies are judged not on a universal basis but on the variety or style as grown and produced in a specific region. In 2008 this resulted in eight gold medals (three of which were awarded regional trophies), 13 silver medals, and 21 bronze medals. The wines entered do not have to be available on the UK market. In fact, the DWWA is an ideal platform for producers not represented in the UK, since Decanter actively promotes successful wines that are not available to the UK trade. Contact worldwineawards@decanter.com in any language for details.

2004

Vintage rating: Red: 86, White: 87

Definitely a more classic vintage, with good fruit and excellent acidity levels. Not in the same class as 2002 or 2001, but it has a distinct edge over 2000 and is certainly fresher, fruitier, and more classic than 2003.

2003

Vintage rating: Red: 93, White: 65

There is no doubt that the oppressively hot year of 2003 provided an exceptional and extraordinary growing season, but apart from – potentially – Pinot Noir and a handful of anomalies, the quality is neither exceptional nor extraordinary. Ploughing through 350 wines from this vintage in March 2005 was one of the hardest, most unenjoyable, but most instructive tasting experiences of my life. Acidification was allowed by special dispensation, but not everyone took advantage; of those who did, very few got it right, whereas many of those who did not acidify failed to produce wines of any elegance. Most are ugly with a deadness of fruit. Pinot Noir should be the star, but I have not yet tasted a glut of great Pinot Noir, although the optimist in me hopes that I will have more exciting news in the next edition of *Wine Report*. Putting to one side Pinot Noir, the most expressive 2003 grapes were Pinot Gris, which in fact looked as black as Pinot Noir on the vine and were made with a natural *vin gris* colour.

2002

Vintage rating: Red: 85, White: 89

Although there is some variability in quality, the best 2002s have the weight of the 2000s but with far more focus and finesse. Riesling definitely fared best and will benefit from several years' bottle-age, but Gewurztraminer and Muscat also performed well. The Gewurztraminers are very aromatic, with broad spice notes, whereas the Muscats are exceptionally fresh and floral. Pinot Gris was less successful. Some extraordinary SGNs have been produced.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Domaine Weinbach
- 3 Domaine Zind Humbrecht
- 4 Trimbach (Réserve and above)
- 5 René Muré
- 6 Schlumberger
- 7 Hugel (Jubilée and above)
- 8 Ostertag
- 9 André Kientzler
- 10 Léon Beyer (Réserve and above)

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 René Muré
- 2 Rominger
- 3 Cave Vinicole de Hunawehr
- 4 Keuntz-Bas
- 5 Schlumberger
- 6 Jean Becker
- 7 Hugel
- 8 Robert Faller
- 9 Lucien Albrecht
- 10 Paul Blanck

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Laurent Barth
- 2 André Kleinknecht
- 3 Leipp-Leininger
- 4 Gruss
- 5 Yves Amberg
- 6 Domaine Stirn
- 7 Jean et Daniel Klack
- 8 Schoenheit
- 9 Clément Klur
- 10 Fernand Engel

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 JosMeyer
- 2 Jean Becker
- 3 Lucien Albrecht
- 4 Cave Vinicole de Hunawehr
- 5 Jean-Louis Schoep
- 6 René Muré

- 7 Schoffit
- 8 Laurent Barth
- 9 Meyer-Fonné
- 10 Paul Blanck

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 ***Riesling Cuvée Frédéric Emile 2002** Trimbach (€30)
- 2 **Riesling Grand Cru Muenchberg 2006** Domaine Ostertag (€31.25)
- 3 ***Pinot Noir 2006** Clos St-Landelin, René Muré (€31.60)
- 4 **Gewurztraminer Sélection de Grains Nobles 2005** Pierre Sparr (€34.40 per 50-cl bottle)
- 5 ****Riesling Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim 1995** Gustave Lorentz (€30)
- 6 **Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim 2006** Marcel Deiss (€54)
- 7 ****Riesling Grand Cru Altenberg de Bergheim 1999** Gustave Lorentz (€23.40)
- 8 ***Gewurztraminer Herrenweg 2006** Domaine Zind Humbrecht (€20)
- 9 ***Riesling Les Escalier 2004** Léon Beyer (€24.10)
- 10 ***Riesling Grand Cru Furstentum 2006** Paul Blanck (€25)

BEST BARGAINS

- 1 ***Gewurztraminer 2006** Jean-Louis Schoepfer (€5.80)
- 2 ****Riesling Grand Cru Wineck-Schlossberg 2006** J-M & F Bernhard (€10)
- 3 ****Muscat Tradition 2006** J-M & F Bernhard (€6)
- 4 **Riesling Vendanges Tardives 1997** Lichtlé & Fils (€19.10)
- 5 ***Riesling Turckheim 2006** Domaine Zind Humbrecht (€17.90)
- 6 ****Gewurztraminer Grand Cru Sonnenglanz 2006** Jean Becker (€18.90)
- 7 ***Riesling Grand Cru Sommerberg 2006** Albert Boxler (€18)

- 8 ***Riesling Grand Cru Froehn 2006** Philippe & François Becker (€18.50)
- 9 **Jubilée Pinot Noir 2006** Hugel (€19.50)
- 10 ***Riesling Réserve 2006** Trimbach (€19.60)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 ***Sylvaner 2006** Domaine Weinbach (€11.10) *I cannot remember a better, more exquisite Sylvaner than this, and from the 2006 vintage too!*
- 2 ***Pinot Gris Calcaire 2006** Domaine Zind Humbrecht (€20) *Lovely acidity, sumptuous sweetness. A blend of 50 per cent Heimbourg, 40 per cent Clos Windsbuhl, and 10 per cent Rotenberg.*
- 3 ****Riesling Cuvée Albert 2006** Albert Mann (€12.50) *Squeezed between two grands crus of the same residual sugar (11 g), and it was this wine that showed the class and finesse.*
- 4 ***Le Zinn 2006** Eric Rominger (€24) *This assemblage of 45 per cent Gewurztraminer, 30 per cent Pinot Gris, and 25 per cent Riesling is the finest Alsace classic blend I have tasted for two decades!*
- 5 ***Andlau Riesling 2006** Marc Kreydenweiss (€12) *Kreydenweiss's malolactic style is not not for me – normally – but there are always exceptions, and this elegantly perfumed, soft, delicious wine is certainly one.*
- 6 ***Pinot Noir "V" 2006** René Muré (€25.60) *It's not certain whether this or the Clos St-Landelin is the better 2006 Pinot Noir.*
- 7 ***Riesling 1989** Léon Beyer (€55) *Amazing elegance for a vintage like this more than 20 years on.*
- 8 ***Riesling Grand Cru Kirchberg de Ribeauvillé 1978** Louis Sipp (€60) *Totally dry and honeyed, yet it still has another 10 years of positive development ahead of it.*
- 9 ***Pinot Blanc 2006** Domaine Weinbach (€16.60) *It is hard to imagine a more polished and poised Pinot Blanc than this 50/50 Pinot Blanc/Auxerrois blend.*
- 10 ****Klevener de Heiligenstein L'Opaline 2006** Zeyssolf (€10.50) *Not a grand vin, but this is the first Klevener de Heiligenstein I have encountered that has a sense of both variety and place.*

Notes: *Dry, **Off-dry

Grapevine

- **At the 11th World Riesling Competition** in Strasbourg on 28 January 2008, 514 wines were tasted from more than 300 producers in 13 countries. Alsace scooped five of the nine trophies awarded: Riesling Vieilles Vignes Glintzberg 2006 Anstotz, Riesling Grand Cru Wineck-Schlossberg 2005 Cave Vinicole d'Ingersheim, Riesling Cuvée Daphné VT 2005 Vorburger-Meyer, Riesling Grand Cru Mandelberg 2002 Hartweg, and Riesling Grand Cru

Bruderthal 2000 Bernard Weber. With just 10 wines fewer than in 2007, it was very noticeable that the proportion of gold and silver medals had changed radically, from an even 79 golds and 79 silvers in 2007, each representing 15 per cent of the total wines submitted, to no fewer than 124 golds and 19 silvers in 2008. That's a staggering 24 per cent gold and a minuscule 3.6 per cent silver! Alsace won 77 of the 124 gold medals, and 7 of 19 silver medals.