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**Alsace** Located on the border between Germany and France, Alsace is unusual for a French wine region in that most of its wines are varietally labelled. Still wine production is focused on aromatic white grape varieties made in dry, off-dry and sweet styles. Some red wine is also made.

### CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

Alsace has a cool to moderate continental climate. The Vosges Mountains shelter the vineyards from the prevailing westerly, rain-bearing winds and the lack of clouds results in sunny summers and dry autumns. These conditions ensure that the grapes can achieve high levels of sugar ripeness, although in the driest years drought can be an issue.

The best vineyards are located on the steepest slopes with east and south-east aspects. The more northerly part of the vineyard area has the coolest climate and the least protection from the Vosges. The lesser vineyards lie on the plain between the Vosges foothills and the Rhine. Here the grapes are often used for the production of Crémant d'Alsace, the local AC sparkling wine. (Crémant is covered in more detail in Chapter 42 *Sparkling Wines of the World*.)

Alsace has had a dramatic geological history and as a

consequence there is a great variety of soils in the vineyards that lie on the foothills of the Vosges. This geological complexity is a key factor that contributes to the variety of styles of wines produced, and the influence of geology on wine production is more clear here than in many other regions.

Grape growing practices vary depending on whether the vineyards are on slopes or on the plain. On the slopes vines are trained low to benefit from radiated heat and the rows are oriented to maximise the vine's exposure to the sun. Harvesting is done by hand. On the plain the vines are trained high to minimise the risk of spring frosts. Organic and biodynamic viticulture is widely practised in Alsace in part due to the low disease pressure in the sunny, dry conditions.

Many growers face a key logistical challenge at harvest time because they have a number of small plots of vines,

### ALSATIAN APPELLATIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

The appellation system in Alsace is very simple. There are only two principal appellations for still wines: **Alsace** and **Alsace Grand Cru**. There are two other classifications for Alsace wines: *Vendanges Tardives* and *Sélection de grains nobles*. These depend upon the sugar ripeness of the grapes. Both Alsace and Alsace Grand Cru wines can apply to use these terms.

However, this simplicity can cause problems as producers seek to distinguish between the different qualities of wine that they produce. Because of this, it is common to find on labels statements such as *Réserve personnelle* and *Cuvée spéciale*. These, however, have no legal status.

#### Alsace

Alsace accounts for the vast majority of the region's production. Most wines are made from a single grape variety and these wines are varietally labelled. If a grape variety features on the label, 100 per cent of the grapes used must be from the named variety. A small number of blends are also made; these wines are not varietally labelled. Some villages have the right to add their name to this appellation for certain styles of wine, although such wines are rare.

#### Alsace Grand Cru

There are over 50 vineyards that each have their own *grand cru* appellation. The wines must be produced from a single noble grape variety (Riesling, Muscat, Gewurztraminer or Pinot Gris); however, a few exceptions to this rule do exist. The label must state the name of the vineyard, the vintage and, where appropriate, the grape variety.

Controversy has dogged the Alsace Grand Cru appellation from the start. The major issue continues to be that of vineyard boundaries.

Many *grands crus* are considered by some top producers and commentators to be far too large and encompass land not worthy of the appellation. For this reason some producers with *grand cru* vineyards choose not to label their wines as *grand cru*.

#### Vendanges Tardives (VT)

This means 'Late Harvest'. These wines can only be made from one of the four noble varieties and must have a specific minimum sugar ripeness depending on grape variety. In the best wines the grapes will have undergone *passerillage*, and there may be some influence of noble rot.

#### Sélection de Grains Nobles (SGN)

These wines can only be made from one of the four noble varieties and must have a certain minimum sugar ripeness depending on grape variety. Minimum sugar ripeness levels are set higher than those for VT, and are usually achieved with noble rot. These wines are not produced every year and only ever in small quantities.

planted with different varieties. Because the varieties ripen at different times, the vintage may be spread over quite a long period. This normally starts towards the middle of September and may last until the end of November or even the beginning of December for VT and SGN wines (see section *Alsatian Appellations and Classifications*).

### WINEMAKING AND WINE STYLES

A range of grape varieties is grown in Alsace. The most important are Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Muscat, often termed the 'noble' varieties. They are the only grapes that can be used for VT, SGN and *grand cru* wines.

The vast majority of Alsatian wines are made from a single grape variety. Blended wines tend to be inexpensive and made from juice that was not selected for varietal wines. They are either labelled *Edelzwicker* or *Gentil*, or otherwise they carry a producer's brand name. Some very high-quality blends are made, including some from *grand cru* vineyards, but these are very rare indeed.

Most of Alsace's grape varieties are aromatic and therefore winemaking is focused on retaining the aromas and flavours of the grapes. Traditional producers ferment their wines in large old oak barrels, often more than 100 years old. On the inside of these there is a thick tartrate deposit, which prevents the wood from having any influence on the wine. In modern cellars, stainless steel vats are now more commonly used, facilitating the control of temperatures at the time of fermentation. MLF is normally not encouraged for aromatic varieties since this would mask the pure fruit flavours, although some producers allow it to occur. Bottling usually takes place in the spring following the vintage, while the wine is young and fresh. Most wines are then ready to drink, but many are capable of further evolution in the bottle.

With the exception of VT and SGN styles, the best wines have traditionally been dry but in recent years more and more wines, particularly at *grand cru* level, have been made with noticeable sweetness. This has presented producers with a problem as there is no official labelling scheme to indicate the level of sweetness in a wine and consumers often have no indication on the bottle to tell them whether they are buying a dry or sweet wine. VT wines can vary in style even more, ranging from dry to medium sweet; again, there is no official requirement to indicate the level of sweetness in the wine. SGN wines are always sweet although the extent of the influence of noble rot will vary from wine to wine. Knowing the house style of the producer can therefore be very important.

### Riesling

Riesling is the most widely planted of the noble varieties. The best are medium- to full-bodied, dry with medium alcohol, high acidity and display citrus and stone fruit aromas often with a pronounced stony/steely character. However, many wines are now being made with some residual sugar. As a point of comparison these wines do



not typically show as much floral character as those from Germany.

A view across to *grand cru* vineyards. Aspect and steepness of slope are vital ingredients to quality in Alsace.

### Gewurztraminer

Gewurztraminer is renowned for its pungent aromatic spicy nose, reminiscent of lychees, roses and sweet baking spices. The skin of the grape has a light pink tinge, giving a golden colour to some of the wines.





Large oak vats are traditional to the region, but now many winemakers are using stainless steel or, increasingly for reds, small oak barrels.



Gewurztraminers tend to be full-bodied with a rich oily texture, low to medium acidity and high alcohol: wines of 14% abv are not uncommon.

#### **Pinot Gris**

The best Pinot Gris are rich, full-bodied and high in alcohol, but often with more acidity than Gewurztraminer. They can have a similar colour to Gewurztraminer, but are less aromatic. On the palate they can be richly

textured and have a pronounced flavour intensity with fresh and dried fruits and a honeyed character.

#### **Muscat**

There are a number of grape varieties called Muscat, two of which are grown in Alsace. The best wines come from Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, and are intensely aromatic with flavours of orange blossom, rose and grape. They tend to have a light to medium body and low to medium acidity. Unfortunately, Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains is prone to poor fruit set and rot, and so the less aromatic Muscat Ottonel is more widely planted because it can be relied on to crop more regularly.

#### **Other Grape Varieties**

**Pinot Blanc** is widely planted. It tends to be grown in the more fertile soils of the plain rather than on the better sloped sites. It is widely used for the production of sparkling wines, but as a still wine, it is generally light, simple and refreshing, and non-aromatic in style. Auxerrois has similar characteristics to Pinot Blanc, but is slightly spicier and more full-bodied. It is sometimes blended with Pinot Blanc. Sylvaner used to be widely planted but has now made way for noble varieties. It can give wines that are delicately perfumed with some richness but far less than Gewurztraminer. It is best drunk young. Pinot Noir is the only black grape permitted in Alsace. Typically these wines lack the weight and concentration of Burgundian Pinot Noir and are often at their best as a light fruity red or rosé. Some winemakers make more concentrated wines with new oak flavours.