

FLAVOUR OF
Europe

T H E W I N E S O F

Alsace

Enjoy a trip back in time and explore the Route des Vins d'Alsace – the wine road of Alsace – with **ROBERTA MUIR** and discover wonderful wines and fabulous food.

Josmeyer wine label,
Alsace, France

‘ The other 97 towns and villages
along the Route each have their own charm
and local delicacies to sample ’

SEPARATED from Germany by the Rhine River, and from the rest of France by the Vosges Mountains, the people of Alsace preserve a strong regional identity – many still speaking the Alsatian dialect.

Many villages retain a medieval appearance with half-timbered houses, in a delightful rainbow of colours, and largely intact fortifications. It is not uncommon for villagers to don national costume for festivals or days of celebration such as local weddings.

The Alsatian vineyard strip runs north to south along the eastern foothills of the Vosges Mountains for about 100km, covering an area of approximately 14,600 hectares of vines. From here comes some 160 million bottles of wine annually, which is 8% of total French white wine production. 25% of all Alsatian wine goes to the export market, while the remainder constitutes a third of domestic consumption of still white A.O.C. wines. Most of the 175 larger companies responsible for some 80% of the region's production, are still family owned.

Alsace has a long, cool growing season, so vineyards need to make the most of the sun's rays, with the best vineyards on south facing slopes, sheltered from wind by the mountains. Most are at 200–400 metres above sea level, and above that are the pine forests. Many vineyards are too steep for machines, so handpicking is necessary.

The mountains are also responsible for the low rainfall (500mm a year) which is one of the lowest in France. As a result of the fault line that created the Rhine basin, Alsatian soil varies widely (granite, limestone, gneiss, schist and sandstone), so careful planting means the vigneron can bring out the best in each grape variety.

The Route des Vins d'Alsace is well-marked and 170km long, stretching from Marlenheim in the north to Thann in the south and winds through 100 of the 119 wine-producing villages and larger towns of Alsace. Make sure you take at least two days to explore the Route, starting in Marlenheim, the least visited area, where the people are friendly and helpful. The majority of large producers, especially of Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris, are in the south.

In Kientzheim (near Colmar) the Château de Kientzheim houses the Museum of the Vineyards and Wines of Alsace. The exceptionally rich collection of artefacts and viticultural equipment vividly portrays the history and art of winemaking in Alsace through the centuries. The shop of Metz Frères, in Ribeauvillé, has a small but fascinating collection of past winemaking and distillation equipment, with a fabulous range of artisanal eaux de vie for tasting and sale (try the unusual "fleur de bière", made from hops flowers.)

The other 97 towns and villages along the Route each have their own charm and local delicacies to sample. Every town has restaurants and inns advertising their "Tart Flambé" (or "Flammeküche" in Alsatian). This is a delicious, thin layer of pastry topped with cream, onion and bacon (and sometimes cheese or mushrooms) – the perfect lunch with a fresh Alsatian Pinot Blanc.

In the evening something heartier may be called for, such as "Choucroûte Alsacienne," hot sauerkraut accompanied by sausages, pork or ham, delicious with a dry Alsatian Riesling. Foie gras is another regional specialty and in Sultz-Les-Bains it is possible to visit the "Domaine de la Schleif," producers of duck foie gras, confit etc.

One of the reasons Alsace has retained such a strong regional identity may be its often-changing ownership through the centuries. The conquering Romans introduced vines to the region around the 1st century BC, and Alsatian wines have been popular since the Middle Ages. Wine production flourished when France annexed the region in



© Adrian Lander

Designed by Bartholdy, the sculptor who designed the Statue of Liberty, this statue and fountain at Colmar commemorates the introduction of the grape into Alsace

the 17th Century and many of today's best known producers (such as Hugel, Trimbach and Dopff) were founded at this time.

When Germany reclaimed it in the 19th Century, however, many vineyards were used to produce cheap blending wines. After the decimation brought by powdery mildew and phylloxera, trouble-free hybrids were planted on accessible flat plains, with the steeper hillside sites (capable of producing the superior wines) largely abandoned. When, after World War I, it returned to French rule, some of the better sites began to be replanted.

Another setback followed during World War II with German occupation and a halt to potential exports. Although things began to improve from the end of the war, better sites were only replanted in earnest in the 1960s and 70s when the export market was re-established and the effect of the newly introduced Appellation Contrôlée system began to be felt.

The appellation system of Alsace is relatively young, being awarded only in 1962. The Vin d'Alsace appellation differs significantly from those found elsewhere in France in that it acknowledges specific varieties.

The permitted yield in Alsace is also higher than for any other A.O.C (100hl per ha), although yields are often far lower in order to assure quality.

From the beginning of the 20th Century a rationalisation of the many varieties found in Alsace began. This has finally been honed down to just seven accredited varieties. The major varietal wines now produced in Alsace are:

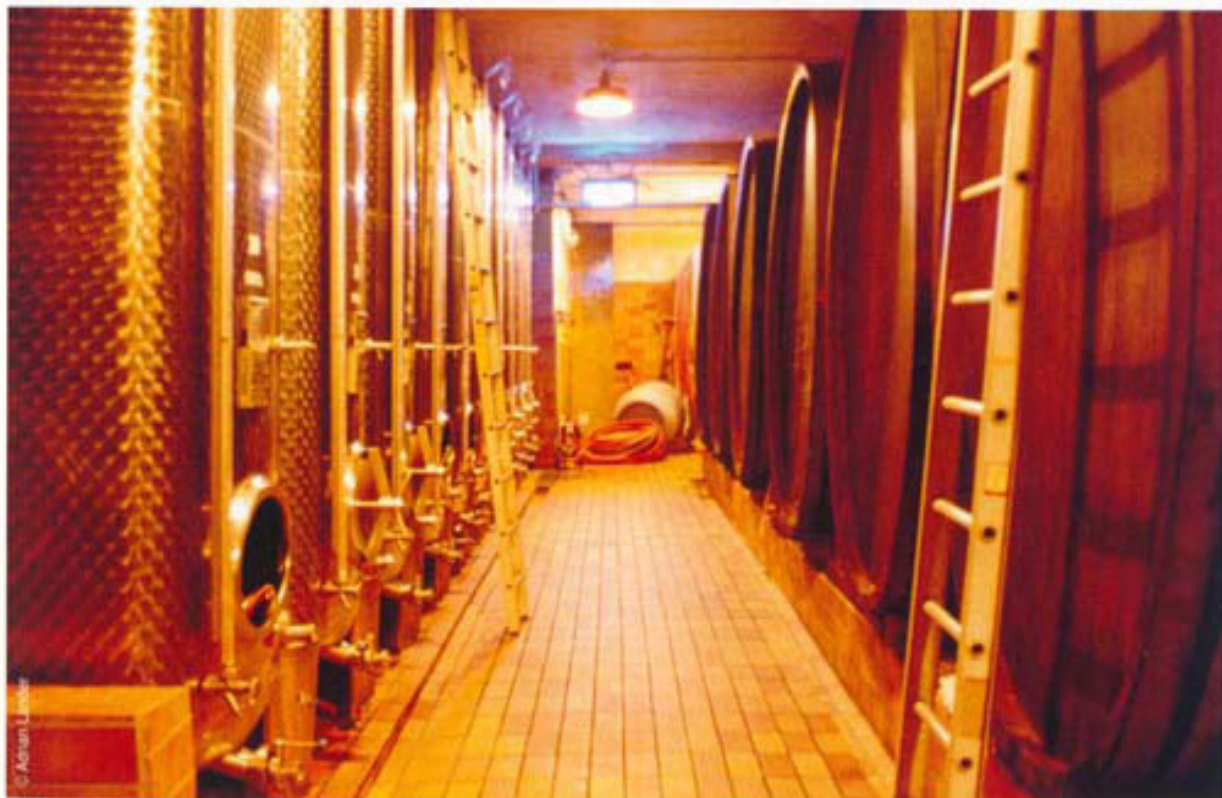
Riesling – one of the most widely planted varieties and the favourite of many growers with the area under vine constantly increasing. It is almost always bone dry and delicately "grapey," with an elegant, sometimes floral bouquet in youth, developing more mineral or flinty notes with age. It's considered the classic match for seafood (whether simply grilled or sauced), also for choucroute, white meat and goats cheese.

Pinot Blanc – (also known as Clevner or Klevner) is early ripening and one of the easiest varieties to grow. It has always been the base wine for Crémant d'Alsace, but is now increasing in popularity as a varietal in its own right.

Soft, delicate and fresh, yet nicely rounded, it is the most approachable of the Alsatian wines and is a good match for a wide range of dishes, including seafood, charcuterie, salads, quiches, pies, soufflés, asparagus, poultry and mild cheeses. It is sometimes blended with Auxerrois producing a fuller flavoured, broader, spicier wine.

Gewürztraminer – an unreliable producer, needing a sheltered location, with one of the largest areas under vine – but proportionately less production due to wide fluctuations (it has the smallest average yield.) It's full bodied and well structured with a rich, heady aroma of flowers, spices or exotic fruit. It is good as an aperitif or with foie gras, spicy dishes, strong cheese and some desserts. Although it is usually fermented quite dry, its low acidity, high alcohol and glycerol can give the impression of residual sweetness.

Josmeyer Winery in Alsace



‘ All along the
Route des Vins you’ll
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to extol the virtues
of Alsatian wines... ’

Sylvaner – though once one of the most widely planted varieties, it has developed a bad reputation for high yield/low flavour, as it requires more vigilant controls than many other varieties in order to produce quality fruit. Accordingly, plantings are decreasing. Good Sylvaner has a slightly bitter, earthy flavour and perfumed aroma with firm acidity. It is more often a light, refreshing, discreetly fruity wine, which is a suitable match for many types of seafood, charcuterie, salads, quiches, pies, soufflés, and mild cheeses.

(Tokay) Pinot Gris – is slowly increasing in popularity. Traditionally known as Tokay Pinot Gris it has been known just as Pinot Gris since a 1993 agreement between Hungary and the European Union. It has a complex, vegetal, often slightly smoky bouquet with an opulent flavour and a long finish. It is an excellent accompaniment to foie gras, sauced fish dishes, red meat, game, offal and spicy dishes. It ages well because of its acidity.

Pinot Noir – the only red variety of Alsace (over 92% of the wine produced in Alsace is white). Plantings and popularity of this grape variety are rapidly increasing. It is mostly treated like a Beaujolais, only left on the skins for about two days and not routinely oaked, although some does receive oak treatment for 9–10 months. It is the only variety routinely allowed malolactic fermentation (although increasingly producers are experimenting with malolactic fermentation in other varieties). It typically has a cherry, or sometimes raspberry, bouquet and flavour and is a good accompaniment to charcuterie, salads, poultry, red meats, game and cooked cheeses. It is ideally served young at about 12°C.

Muscat – both Muscat d’Alsace (also known as Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains) and Muscat Ottonel (a cross of Chasselas and Muscat de Saumur) are grown. Many wines labelled “Muscat d’Alsace” are a blend of the two. It is an unreliable producer because it is sensitive to poor weather and only produces well 50% of the time. It is a dry wine (unlike more southerly Muscats) with a fresh, distinctly grapey aroma and taste, low in alcohol and acidity. It is particularly good as an aperitif or an accompaniment to asparagus (the white asparagus of Alsace is known throughout France, and is much sought after during its short season in late May).

Other varieties found in Alsace include **Klevener de Heiligenstein** (lightly spicy, sometimes with a slightly buttery flavour); **Chasselas** (once widely planted, now generally blended for Edelzwicker) and **Auxerrois** (usually blended with Pinot Blanc or even mislabelled as Pinot Blanc.)

Most growers plant all, or most, major varieties. And since Alsatian winemakers believe in emphasising fruit flavours, wood is rarely used (especially new wood). All Alsatian wines are generally fermented dry, except for Vendange Tardive and Sélection de Grains Nobles, and most are bottled within a year to retain freshness.

Jesus on the cross overlooking the vines
on the Route des Vins d’Alsace



Local preference is to drink most of the wines young so that the fruit flavours are not lost. All A.O.C Alsace and A.O.C. Alsace Grand Cru wines are bottled in the distinctive slim, flute-shaped bottle.

All along the Route des Vins you'll discover people eager to extol the virtues of Alsatian wines and to show you the pretty area in which they live. Along the narrow streets you'll find flower-decked balconies, storks' nests on chimneys and church steeples and you can follow the curve of the Ill River as it slowly wends its way past vineyards with crucifixes and shrines. It is a wonderful experience for all, especially those with a passion for good food and wine.



Picturesque village of Colmar

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