

WINE AND DINE

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Don't Judge a Wine by its Bottle

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My wife and I are part of a progressive dinner group that is always on the look-out for a unique theme to pair food and wine. When suggesting Alsatian food and wine, I was met with some quizzical looks. My guess is the shape of the Alsatian wine bottles may be holding some of us back from exploring these tasty wines. They are shaped like the sweet German Rieslings we may have tried in college (Blue Nun anyone?), which may not encourage us to seriously consider these wines. Well worth exploring, these wines are tasty, versatile, food friendly and better yet – affordable!

Alsace

Alsace is located in the northeast corner of France and is bordered by the Vosges Mountains on the west and the Rhine River and Germany on the east. Alsace has been influenced by both French and German cultures, as it has changed hands numerous times in European history. Since World War I, Alsace has remained French.

The food and wine of Alsace has definite German influences, from the shape of its wine bottles to the prevalence of rustic sausage and pickled cabbage dishes. Popular Alsatian dishes include Quiche Lorraine (Lorraine is located on the western side of the Vosges Mountains), Foie Gras (duck or goose liver pate), Onion Tarts (includes bacon as an ingredient), Baeckeoffe (a marinated meat and potato casserole or stew), Red cabbage and Choucroute (hearty sausage and pickled cabbage). Alsace is also home to Muenster cheese.

Alsatian Wines

Located in northern France, Alsace grows grapes that do best in cooler climates, like Riesling and Pinot Noir. However, Alsace is best known for its white wines, making up about 90% of its production. Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Muscat are noble grapes and used in the highest quality whites. The Vosges Mountains provide terrain for grapevines to be planted on slopes as well as the valley floor. The best wineries have more land on the steep slopes than the valley floor and face a south or southwest exposure, allowing the vineyard to capture more warming sunlight.

Alsace has three quality designations: AOC (includes whites, roses and red wines), Grand Cru AOC (highest quality white wines from classified vineyards) and Cremant d'Alsace AOC (sparkling wines).

While Germany and Alsace share the same shaped bottle, their wine styles are different. The key is how long the winemaker allows the grapes' sugars to be converted to alcohol. German winemakers stop the fermentation process of their Rieslings earlier, producing a low alcohol wine with some sweetness. Alsatian winemakers allow most of the sugars to be fermented, producing a Riesling with a higher level of alcohol and a drier style wine. While Riesling is also produced in Germany and Austria, Gewürztraminer offers Alsace a unique identity

in the European wine market. Important Alsatian wineries include Trimbach, Zind Humbrecht, Hugel, Weinbach, Beyer and Albert Boxler.

Gewürztraminers and Muscats are known for their intense aromas and flavors of white flower petals, citrus fruits and spice (cloves). While these aromatics can be “in-your-face”, these wines are very pleasant on the palate. Gewürztraminers offer exotic fruit flavors when they are young and develop a spicy character as they age. Rieslings are not as aromatic as these other Alsatian whites, offering apple and pear notes, can be full bodied and have good acidity with a lingering finish. Riesling grapes take longer to grow and quality examples of these wines can age for 10 – 20 years.

Full-bodied Alsatian whites can pair well with both white meat and delicate fish dishes. This versatility makes these wines an ideal beverage for dinners that feature a variety of entrees. The Alsations favor Pinot Gris with their cabbage dishes, while Riesling is the perfect foil for spicy Asian cuisine and hearty sausage dishes found at Oktoberfest celebrations. Gewürztraminer and Munster cheese are frequently paired in Alsace.

The Wine Spectator rated the 2007 Alsatian vintage 95 points (the 2008 vintage is also receiving praise) and mentioned that the prices have not increased from the 2006 vintage, making this an ideal time to explore the wines from this region of France.

Bill’s Alsatian White Wine Pick’s – with suggested retails

Scherer Pinot Blanc 2007 – Not yet rated	\$13
Albert Mann Pinot Blanc 2007 – 87 pts. Wine Spectator	\$15
Weinbach Riesling Cuvee Theo 2008 – 92 pts. Wine Spectator	\$18
Trimbach Gewürztraminer 2006 – 88 pts. Robert Parker	\$21

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