

Wine Hi-Lo

Alsace: Riesling with a French accent

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France's most underrated--and underpriced--whites



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The wines of Alsace, on the French side of the Rhine River in the country's northeastern corner, are strangely obscure considering that they produce examples that are among the world's very finest Rieslings, Gewurztraminers, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blancs. You never read an article like this one without a mention of how these often extraordinary white wines deserve to be far better known and appreciated. So there, I said it too. And it's the stone truth.

Within France, there may be some hesitation about these wines based on the fact that for a place famous for its dry wines, Alsace produces an ocean of mediocre, sweetish stuff, too (this does not include the majestic and pricey dessert wines--which Alsace also excels in). Fortunately, very little of the supermarket plonk makes its way across the Atlantic. For us in the United States, Alsatian wines are a notably high-percentage bet.

The best of the Rieslings come with a range of localized flavors, from the super-minerality of the great vineyards around Andlau to the chimney smoke character of the Grand Crus from Rangen. The top aromatic whites, like Gewurz and the white Pinots combine exotic perfume with a refreshing crispness and a luscious texture profile that doesn't lap over into unctuous super-richness. Chardonnay drinkers who enjoy the pure fruit side of the wine but not so much the oaky, buttery, hot-



alcohol side, are a natural audience for Alsace's best wines. But first, they have to give them a try.

HI: Domaine Weinbach 2007 Riesling Schlossberg Grand Cru, Cuvée Ste. Catherine (\$60) This is a remarkable price for a wine of this quality and distinctiveness, even in this market climate. A very Alsatian, as opposed to German style of Riesling, with a rich, filled-in palate and exuberant flavors of ripe peach, mango and citrus cut with a fine minerality. It is compulsively drinkable right now, but has at least 8-10 years of development ahead of it. Laurence Faller, the winemaker of the family, produces four Rieslings from the steep, terraced granite slopes of this Grand Cru vineyard; this bottling comes from the sweet spot in the mid-slope. (Importer: Vineyard Brands)

LO: Hugel 2007 "Gentil" (\$15) From an old tradition of blending in Alsace, somewhat overlooked in the age of naming single grapes on the label, this is like summer in a bottle. A juicy, easy drinking medium- to light-bodied blend of five white grapes, it gets a melony, rounded character from Pinot Gris, an anise and exotic fruit-oil character from Muscat, and rose-hip and Asian spice aromas from Gewurztraminer. A "house white wine" candidate with a twist. (Importer: Fredrick Wildman & Sons)