

# Alsace Grand Crus

Olivier Humbrecht MW

For the larger public, the story of the Grand Crus in Alsace started in 1983 when the first batch of 25 Grands Crus were officially classified and the list was voted by the French parliament. A second batch of 25 Grand Crus were classified in 1985, making a total of 50 Grands Crus until 2007 when the Grand Cru Kaefferkopf was added to the list. Since then, there are 51 Grands Crus in Alsace.

The real story started hundreds of years ago, sometimes going back to the first settlement of vines in Alsace. Many Grand Crus can show proof of history that goes back almost a thousand years. As man tried to perfect the art of making wines, they naturally also tried to find the source for the best grapes. It is impossible not to speak about a Grand Cru vineyard without speaking about the concept of 'terroir' that includes the location of the vineyard (topography), its soil characteristics (top soil, mother rock, water movement...), the specific climate and also the influence of the people (and their culture) that developed vines in Alsace.

Alsace is located in a northerly region, and despite enjoying a drier semi-continental climate, wine growers always tried to compensate less sun intensity and heat by planting vines on hill sides in order to maximize the action of the sun, increase the soil natural drainage capacity and therefore favored soils types that were not too rich. Fertile land was destined for agricultural products! At the economical peak of the region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (that followed the disastrous 30 years war), there was about 30.000ha of vineyards planted in Alsace. At this time, vineyards would of course extend on the richer alluvial valley floors. At the end of WW2, the total surface was only under 6000ha.

At any time in history, and this is still true today, some more difficult vineyard (steep slope, poorer soils...) were cultivated only because the people that made wines from these places judged that the result was worth the extra efforts. These wines achieved natural higher prices, were thought after, even as far as wine could be shipped and gradually the name of the place became more famous.

Some religious congregations (Franciscains and Dominicains mostly), some cities (the free cities of the Alsace decapole for example), some wealthy owners (Church, Aristocrats...) were in constant search of improving the quality of the wines, because volume didn't matter in the best vineyards. There was enough light low alcohol wine produced on the fertile valley floor, so every effort was made in the best hillsides. It is possible to find early rules back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that would oblige the growers to respect some production rules or choose only some specific grape varieties.

Information on specific production rules, who owned which hillside, what price was paid for the wines and the land, the fact that the vineyard name was used on the label to justify a higher price in the past were all important information that would inform the classification commission on the historical past of each potential Grand Cru in Alsace.

The wonderful influence of time is that as centuries goes, people will remember the name of the place where the wine comes from, not the name of the producer or grape variety.

A Grand Cru vineyard has the capacity to show the influence of the place (terroir) on the finished wine. The Grand Cru AOP (Appellation d'Origine Protégée) was given to vineyards capable to express many form of quality: a strict delimitation within the Alsace wine region and specific production rules (perennial and annual conditions).

The Alsace Grand Cru delimitation.

The heart of the Grand Cru would often be an historic renowned hillside that is capable to produce wines with a strong personality. The delimitation committee, composed of experts member of the INAO (Institut National des Appellations d'Origine), would then look for a topographic and soil homogeneity around the historic heart and then propose the producers syndicate a very precise delimitation on a geographic area. This process can be long and complicated, as often financial interests are opposed to quality. Unlike the Bordeaux 1855 classification which classifies an estate or Château, whose vineyards holding can change with time, the Alsace Grand Cru classification is fixed and doesn't change, unless the delimitation committee comes back and re-open the file.

One of the main criticism of the Alsace Grand Cru classification is that some Grands Crus were delimited on a surface that is sometimes too large and it is then possible to find small variations of soil types or expositions. At the time of the classification process, many Alsace producers didn't perhaps understood fully the concept of terroir as precisely as it was done for example in Burgundy. So yes, it is possible to find small variations within a Grand Cru that can explain variations of style (dry to sweet) or a change of grape variety. As an example, I would always mention a very famous hillside in the Northern Rhone valley that has both limestone and granitic soil, with even some loess on top and it does make wonderful wines!

The Alsace Grand Cru production rules.

The INAO delimitation committee has fixed some strict production rules that protects the production of these GC vineyards. Until 2011, all the 51 Grands Crus in Alsace are classified under one AOC: Appellation Alsace Grand Cru Contrôlée followed by the name of the vineyard.

Every wine producer who wants to produce a Grand Cru wine must harvest by hand the grapes that would come from these precisely selected vineyards and declare to the INAO, before the 1<sup>st</sup> March of the vintage, the list of grapes and parcels that he will enter in the GC production

All Alsace Grands Crus are made from 4 grape varieties: Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot-Gris and Muscat. There are a few exceptions: since 2005, sylvaner is authorized in the Zotzenberg GC and blends in the Altenberg de Bergheim, since 2007, blends are also authorized in the Kaefferkopf GC.

Since 2000 and 2001, the production rules have been made more restrictive: minimum density of plantation is 4500 vines/ha, the canopy must respect a specific proportion between its height and the distance between two rows of vines (in order to keep a minimum leaf surface necessary for a proper maturation of the grapes, the height of the canopy should be > to 2/3 of the width of the row, which can be maximum 2m wide), the pruning limits the distance between the first two wires (so the pruning canes cannot be too long) which helps to limit production,

there should be a maximum of 10 buds/m<sup>2</sup> for Gewurztraminer and 8 buds/m<sup>2</sup> for the other grape varieties, no vineyard should have more than 20% of missing vines.

The yield of the Grand Cru Appellation is 55hl/ha, with a possibility to request 61 hl/ha.

With the 2001 reform, each Grand Cru in Alsace is organized around a local syndicate, called 'Gestion Locale', composed of all the grape producers of the Grand Cru. Each GC syndicate will propose every year the opening date for the harvest, increase the minimum ripeness level for each grape (11% for Riesling/Muscat and 12.5% for Pinot-Gris/Gewurztraminer), request an augmentation of the base yield of the AOP from 55hl/ha to 61hl/ha and fix the chaptalisation limit lower than the base rule (+1.5%). Each GC syndicate has one representative in the Alsace Grand Cru committee. The Alsace Grand Cru committee centralizes all the local requests, debates on their values and transmits them to the Alsace Winegrower's Association for official approval.

In 2011, each 51 Grand Cru in Alsace became an AOC or AOP. Production rules (Cahier des Charges) were written for each Grand Cru. So today, the Alsace region has in total 53 AOC (51 GC, Alsace and Crémant d'Alsace) compared to only 3 before 2011. Each Grand Cru is then described on the label by the mention: 'Appellation Alsace Grand Cru name of the vineyard Contrôlée'.

The role of each local Grand Cru syndicate has become even more important as it will now be able to propose specific rules that would apply only to one Grand Cru. These propositions or changes can only become stricter and can for example concern perennial rules (new grape variety – Pinot-Noir for example - or wine style – only dry or only sweet..., lowering yields, increasing the vine density...), environmental rules or vinification rules.

In 2011, the Alsace Grand Cru committee voted the abandonment of acidification. Chaptalisation can be requested individually by each Grand Cru syndicate, however the motivation must be high in order to be eventually allowed. 2012 is probably the vintage amongst the last 10 years where Riesling was the slowest to ripen. I am very proud to announce that not one GC syndicate in Alsace requested chaptalisation.

Alsace Grand Cru wines.

Grand Cru wines in Alsace represent only 4% of the total Alsace production (6M bottles). A critical eye would see that the potential of production is larger. There are still producers who prefer making Alsace AOC before they claim not having the market to sell more expensive wines (a consequence of the stricter production rules). Some still have forbidden grape varieties (Pinot-Blanc, ...). There are multiple reasons, but it is true that the smaller Grand Crus would sell a higher proportion of their wines than larger ones, probably not as rare.

A bottle of Grand Cru in Alsace should be easy to identify: the name of the Grand Cru should be the biggest information on the label and the denomination 'Appellation Alsace Grand Cru name of the vineyard Contrôlée' should be clearly visible on top of the label.

The information of the grape variety is not compulsory, but usually all the Grand Crus do have a grape variety information (there are a few exceptions like blends coming from the Altenberg de Bergheim).

Grands Crus vineyards can be divided in different categories in order to characterize the wines and maybe explain why some vineyards have developed a specific style or grape variety.

The Alsace wine region is located on a geological maze, cut by fault lines that run north-south and east-west. All the Grand Cru vineyards are located on the foothills of the Vosges mountain. There are no GC located on valley floors. The geological nature of the soils found in GC vineyards can be divided into two groups: GC located on Vosges mountain material (granite, slate, sandstone, volcanic...) and sea deposits (limestone, marl...). The first group is made of soils from the first era (>350M years) that have an acidic reaction (pH is often below 7), are poorer in organic matter (because exposed to the elements for longer), steeper (because made of harder material, so there is less erosion), have better drainage characteristics and are warmer (more rocky soils, less clay). This group will perform better with grape varieties that need more sunshine and heat to ripen the grapes and most importantly, with grape varieties that have a natural high acidity where losing a little more malic acid can make the wine more interesting. It is easy to see that the Riesling grape is the king in such vineyards. The second group is made of sea deposits from the second and third era. These soils have an alkaline reaction (pH >7 and are rich in calcareous), are usually more eroded because the rock material is softer, are more fertile (more organic matter/younger soils and more clay). They also have poorer drainage capacity and remain colder longer as they have a higher water retention capacity. The second group will be more adapted with grape varieties that have lower natural acidity and that need to spend more time to ripen. Gewurztraminer would be a classic example. It is a grape variety with a natural low acidity that needs a long time to achieve good phenolic ripeness.

Grands Crus vineyards in Alsace can also be divided according to climatic considerations into two groups: precocious vineyards and late ripening vineyards. Precocity will depend on altitude, regional climate, distance to higher mountains and shading effect, orientation of the vineyard (Grands Crus would be between full east facing to south-west) and soil type. A specific soil type can compensate the climate. A rich marl limestone located in a warm area would be less precocious than a granitic soil in a cooler climate. Precocity will influence the style of wine on both the structure of the wine and its aromatic profile.

L'avenir des Grands Crus

Pour déguster les Alsaces Grands Crus dans les meilleures conditions, il est bon de respecter quelques règles simples de conservation et de service :

Les Alsaces Grands Crus, s'ils sont agréables à déguster dès leur jeunesse, gagnent à être conservés bien plus longtemps (5 ou 10 ans, voire davantage pour les grands millésimes), dans

une cave à température constante (entre 10 et 15° C), obscure et bien aérée. Les bouteilles doivent

être maintenues couchées pour que le vin reste au contact permanent du bouchon.

Les vins d'Alsace Grands Crus se servent frais mais non glacés, à une température d'environ 8°C dans un verre fin en cristal incolore et à long pied.

Les AOC Grands Crus sont des vins gastronomiques par excellence qui ponctuent avec bonheur

chaque étape du menu. Le Muscat d'Alsace est parfait à l'apéritif. Le Riesling Grand Cru accompagne

merveilleusement les produits de la mer, poissons, crustacés et coquillages. Le Pinot Gris est parfait avec les viandes blanches, les gibiers et les foies gras. Le Gewurztraminer règne en maître sur les fromages et les desserts.

**Les 51 Grands Crus d'Alsace (ordre alphabétique)**  
**Grand Cru sol département-commune surface en**  
**hectare altitude exposition cépages les plus**  
**adaptés**

ALTENBERG DE BERGBIETEN MARNO-CALCARO-GYPSEUX 67 Bergbieten 29,07ha 210 à 265m sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

ALTENBERG DE BERGHEIM MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Bergheim 35,06ha 220 à 320m sud/sud-est GW, RI et assemblages

ALTENBERG DE WOLXHEIM MARNO-CALCAIRE 67 Wolxheim 31,20ha 200 à 250m sud/sud-ouest RI, GW

BRAND GRANITIQUE 68 Turckheim 57,95ha 250 à 380m sud/sud-est RI, PG, GW

BRUDERTHAL MARNO-CALCAIRE 67 Molsheim 18,4ha 225 à 300m sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

EICHBERG MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Eguisheim 57,62ha 220 à 340m sud-est Ri, GW, PG

ENGELBERG MARNO-CALCAIRE 67 Dahlenheim et Scharrachbergheim 14,80ha 250 à 300m sud Ri, GW

FLORIMONT MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Ingersheim et Katzenthal 21ha 250 à 280m est Ri, GW, PG, MU

FRANKSTEIN GRANITIQUE 67 Dambach-La-Ville 56,20ha 220 à 230m est/sud-est Ri, GW

FROEHN ARGILO-MARNEUX 68 Zellenberg 14,60ha 270 à 300m sud/sud-est GW, PG, MU

FURSTENTUM CALCAIRE 68 Kientzheim et Sigolsheim 30,50ha 300 à 400m sud/sud-ouest Ri, GW, PG

GEISBERG MARNO-CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Ribeauvillé 8,53ha 250 à 320m sud Ri

GLOECKELBERG GRANITE ARGILIFIE 68 Rodern et Saint-Hippolyte 23,40ha 250 à 36 m sud/sud-est GW, PG

GOLDERT MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Gueborschwihr 45,35ha 230 à 330m est Ri, GW, PG, MU

HATSCHBOURG MARNO-CALCAIRE ET LOESS 68 Hattstatt et Voegtlinshoffen 47,36ha 210 à 330m sud/sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

HENGST MARNO-CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Wintzenheim 75,78ha 270 à 360m sud/sud-est Ri, GW, PG

KAEFFERKOPF GRANITO-CALCAIRE ET GRES 68 Ammerschwyr 71,65ha 240 à 350m sud/ouest Ri, GW, PG et assemblages

KANZLERBERG ARGILO-MARNEUX-GYPSEUX 67 Andlau 3,23ha 250m sud/sud-ouest Ri, GW, PG

KASTELBERG SCHISTEUX 67 Andlau 5,82m 240 à 300m sud-est Ri

KESSLER SABLO-ARGILEUX 68 Guebwiller 28,53ha 300 à 390m sud-est Ri, GW, PG

KIRCHBERG DE BARR MARNO-CALCAIRE 67 Barr 40,63ha 210 à 330 m sud-est Ri, GW, PG

KIRCHBERG DE RIBEAUVILLE MARNO-CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Ribeauvillé 11,40ha 270 à 350m sud/sud-ouest Ri, GW, PG, MU

KITTERLE GRESO-VOLCANIQUE 68 Guebwiller 25,79ha 270 à 360m sud/sud-est/sud-ouest Ri, GW, PG

MAMBOURG MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Sigolsheim 61,85ha 210 à 360m sud Ri, GW, PG, MU

MANDELBERG MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Mittelwyr et Beblenheim 22ha 210 à 250m sud/sud-ouest Ri, GW, PG, MU

MARCKRAIN MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Bennwyr et Sigolsheim 53,35ha 200 à 300m est/sud-est GW, PG

MOENCHBERG MARNO-CALCAIRE ET COLLUVIONS 67 Andlau et Eichoffen 11,83ha 230 à 260m sud Ri, GW

MUENCHBERG GRESO-VOLCANIQUE CAILLOUTEUX 67 Nothalten 17,70ha 250 à 310m sud Ri

OLLWILLER SABLO-ARGILEUX 67 Wuenheim 35,86ha 260 à 330m sud-est Ri, GW

OSTERBERG MARNEUX 68 Ribeauvillé 24,60ha 250 à 320m est-sud-est Ri, GW, PG

PFERSIGBERG CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Eguisheim et Wettolsheim 74,55ha 220 à 330m est/sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

PFINGSTBERG MARNO-CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Orschwyr 28,15ha 270 à 370m sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

PRAELATENBERG GRANITO-GNEISSIQUE 67 Kintzheim 18,70ha 250 à 350m est-sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

RANGEN VOLCANIQUE 68 Thann et Vieux-Thann 22,13ha 320 à 450m sud Ri, GW, PG

ROSACKER CALCAIRE DOLOMITIQUE 68 Hunawyr 26,18ha 260 à 330m est-sud-est Ri, GW

SAERING MARNO-CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Guebwiller 26,75ha 260 à 300m est/sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

SCHLOSSBERG GRANITIQUE 68 Schlossberg 80,28ha 230 à 350m sud Ri, GW, PG, MU

SCHOENENBOURG MARNO-SABLEUX GYPSEUX 68 Riquewyr et Zellenberg 53,40ha 265 à 380m sud/sud-est Ri, PG, MU

SOMMERBERG GRANITIQUE 68 Niedermorschwyr et Katzenthal 28,36ha 260 à 400m sud Ri, GW, PG, MU

SONNENGLANZ MARNO-CALCAIRE 68 Beblenheim 32,80ha 220 à 270m sud-est GW, PG

SPIEGEL MARNO-GRESEUX 68 Bergholtz et Guebwiller 18,26ha 260 à 315m est Ri, GW, PG, MU

SPOREN ARGILO-MARNEUX-CAILLOUTEUX 68 Riquewyr 23,70ha 265 à 310m sud-est GW, PG

STEINERT CALCAIRE 68 Pfaffenheim et Westhalten 38,90ha 250 à 350m est Ri, GW, PG

STEINGRUBLER MARNO-CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Wettolsheim 22,95ha 280 à 350m sud-est Ri, GW

STEINKLOTZ CALCAIRE 67 Marlenheim 40,60ha 200 à 300m sud-sud-est Ri, GW, PG

VORBOURG CALCARO-GRESEUX 68 Rouffach et Westhalten 73,61ha 210 à 300m sud/sud-est Ri, GW, PG, MU

WIEBELSBERG SABLO-GRESEUX 67 Andlau 12,52ha 200 à 300m sud/sud-est Ri

WINECK-SCHLOSSBERG GRANITIQUE 68 Katzenthal et Ammerschwyr 27,40ha 280 à 400m sud/sud-est Ri, GW

WINZENBERG GRANITIQUE 67 Blienschwyr 19,20ha 240 à 320m sud-sud-est Ri, GW, PG

ZINNKOEPFLE CALCARO-GRESEUX 67 Soultzmatt et Westhalten 71,03ha 250 à 420m  
sud/sud-est Ri, GW, PG  
ZOTZENBERG MARNO-CALCAIRE 67 Mittelbergheim 36,45ha 215 à 320m est/sud GW, PG,  
MU, SY