

Vineyards thrive on the slopes of the Vosges

ALSAUCE IS TUCKED AWAY in the north-eastern corner of France, bordered by Germany on two sides and the Vosges mountains to the west. It is a region with a turbulent history. It has been part of Germany at various times in the past (as Elsass), and its language and culture owe much to both countries. Most of the village names and many of the surnames are German'.

The presence of good vineyard sites at altitudes (47.5–49°N) is made possible by the Vosges mountains. There is a pronounced rain-shadow effect on the eastern side of the mountains, resulting in less cloud and rain, lower relative humidities and higher temperatures than the lands immediately to the west or east. The higher the mountains, the more pronounced the effect: as a result the best vineyard sites are found in the southern half of the region, south of Ribeauvillé.

The 13,000 ha of vineyards stretch for 110 kilometres from north to south, starting just to the west of Strasbourg and ending at Thann. Of the 50 Grand Crus, 60% are found between St Hippolyte in the north and Rouffach in the south, with Riquewihr in the approximate centre.

Vineyards are generally located on moderate slopes at an altitude of 175–420 metres. The aspect is predominantly east but some of the best sites face south; for example, in the vicinity of Riquewihr. Growing season day degrees² for

Colmar (located 8 km south of Riquewihr at 188 metres altitude) are 1,231, with 1,369 sunshine hours. The most comparable Australian regions based on these criteria are Hobart (Tasmania) and Leongatha (Victoria). Growing season rainfall (April to October) and annual rainfall are 355 mm and 502 mm respectively. No other grapegrowing regions in France, with the exception of some parts of the south-west, have a low rainfall. Frost is a potential problem for low-lying vineyards.



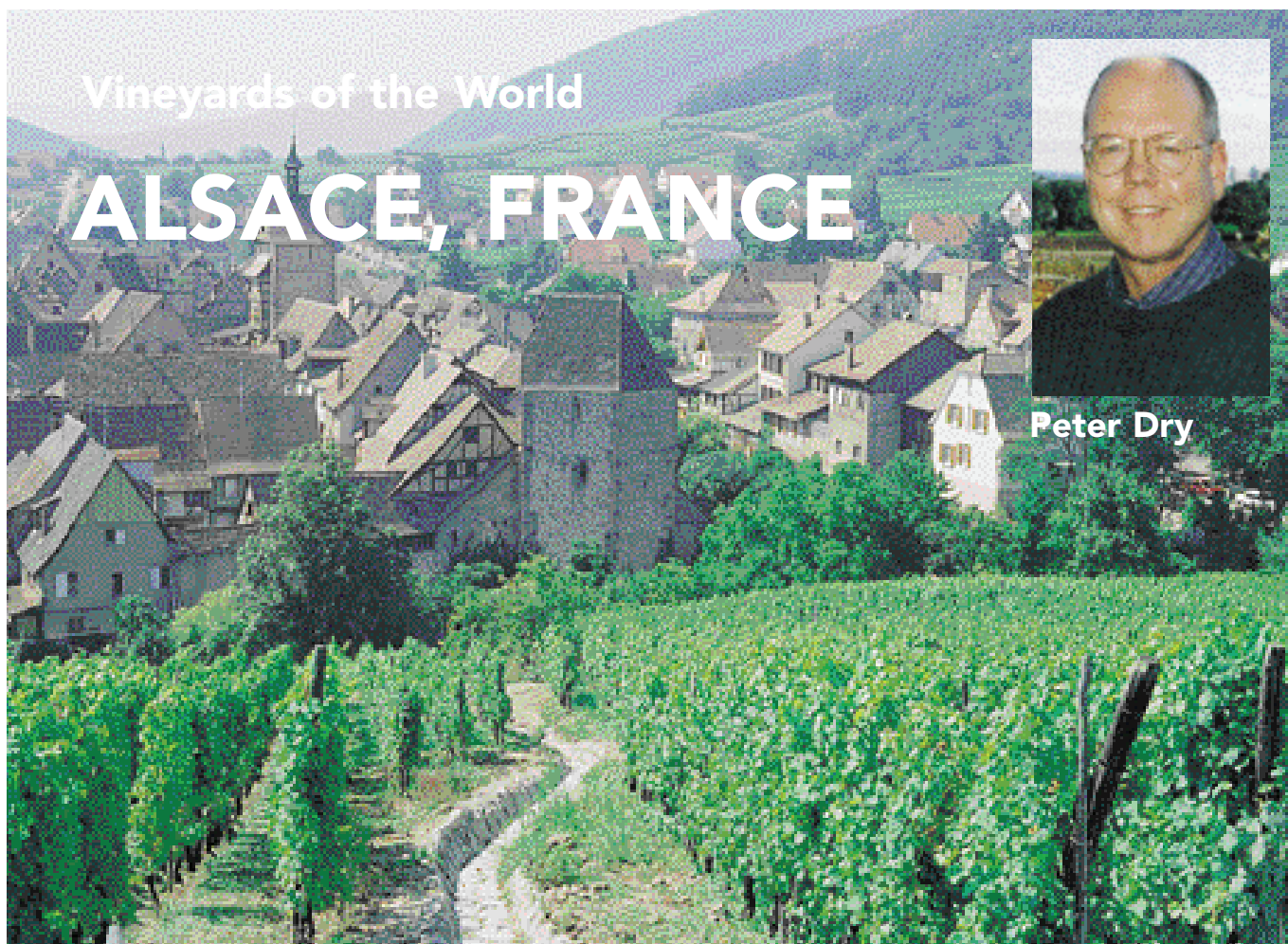
Soil types are extremely variable, ranging from acidic, sandy loams derived from granite to calcareous soils on limestone. The high, steeper slopes tend to have thin topsoils with subsoils of weathered gneiss, granite, sandstone, schist and volcanic sediments. The soils of the more gentle, lower slopes are derived from the Rhine delta bed, with deeper topsoils and subsoils of clay, marl, limestone and sandstone. In the past, the steepest sites were terraced for erosion control. However, modern vineyards typically have rows running up and down the slope, with use of a permanent sward to reduce risk of erosion.

Most of the production from the region is white wine. The main variety is Riesling with 20% of the planted area, followed by Traminer (20%), Pinot Blanc (18%), Sylvaner 15%, Pinot Gris (also called Tokay here) 10%, Pinot Noir (9%), Muscats (Muscat Ottonel, Muscat Blanc) (4%), Auxerrois (2%) and Chasselas (2%). Only Riesling, Traminer, Pinot Gris and Muscat Blanc are permitted for wines of the Grand Cru classification. Chasselas is used solely for blending purposes; the remaining varieties are sold as 'varietal' wines with the variety clearly displayed on the label, a most uncommon situation for French wines. In recent years, the area of Riesling and the Pinots has increased at the expense of Sylvaner. The relatively late-ripening Riesling is planted only on the best sites (generally south to south-easterly aspect with well-drained, 'warm' soils). The earlier ripening varieties are planted on the less favourable sites. Riesling, Traminer and Sylvaner are virtually absent from all other French regions.

In terms of general design, the vineyards look more German than French. Planting density is 4,400 to 4,800 vines per ha, with rows 1.5 metres



The vineyard after hedging



Vineyards of the World

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The village of Riquewihr is surrounded by vineyards

or wider. Pruning is mostly to canes with either single Guyot (one, 15 node cane per vine) or double Guyot (two, 8 node canes). Up to 12 nodes per square metre is permitted, but in practice, fewer nodes are usually retained. The trellis is a VSP³ with a fruiting wire at 60 to 90 cm (it may be higher on frost-prone sites) plus five fixed and two movable foliage wires.

Summer pruning and hedging are standard operations with a start as early as the first half of June. Leaf removal in the bunch zone is carried out in July to late August. Mechanical harvesting is becoming more common on the flatter sites. The main rootstocks are SO4 and 3309, followed by 161-49 and 5BB.

Maximum permitted yield for Grand Cru classification is up to 60 hL/ha (approximately 8.5 t/ha) with extra allowed in good years. Lower classifications may yield as high as 100 hL/ha (14 t/ha). Harvest starts with Pinot Blanc and Muscat Blanc in mid September on average, finishing with Riesling in mid October. Although the region is characterised by 'German' grape varieties, the wines are distinctly different from their German counterparts: the Alsatian versions tend to be more full-bodied with higher alcohol.



A vineyard scene near Colmar, looking north

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REFERENCES

- 1 The local place names often end in berg (= hill), heim (= home of) or wihr and willer (= small isolated locality).
- 2 Gladstones, J.S. (1992) Viticulture and Environment (Winetitles). MJT for Colmar is 20.1°C.
- 3 Vertically shoot positioned trellis.