

Ep 180: Latest Discoveries of the Wines of Alsace with Anne Mchale MW (Part 1)



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your Host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine friends, and welcome back to another episode where we are looking towards the Alsace wine region. So, I'm joined by the brilliant Anne Mchale, Master of Wine. She is an independent wine consultant and an educator based in London.

Now, Anne, she designs wine lists, she hosts corporate and private tasting events, but most importantly for this episode, she's very much focused on the teaching and education of wine, whether it be with beginner programs or her innovative course for WSET diploma students. And this is called Diplomatherapy. Everything will be in the show notes.

Now the D3 exam is the big one and it's renowned for its difficulty. So, due to the fact that you could be asked to talk about any wine region or a grape of the world, you then need to show your depth of knowledge, talking about viticulture, vinification, the wine styles, and even the global wine market.

But then you need to be analytical at the same time. You need to discuss the quality and how different factors could influence this and the price you might pay for the wine and why. Then of course, there is the blind tasting component and all this is done under time. So when you are time pressured and having to manage the stress, there is a lot to think about and process.

And so, Anne helps with how to study, how to answer the questions correctly, how to deal with stress and emotions. And so, I couldn't have Anne here with me without turning some of my questions for her into these specific, typical questions that might be asked on that D3 exam.

So, any of you studying, you can take some of Anne's advice here on this episode, but also it'll be great for those of you who just want to understand these exams a little bit better and obviously dive a bit deeper into the subject.

So throughout this episode, we're going to be exploring the unique terroir of Alsace, its Grand Cru sites, comparing and contrasting Riesling and its distinct style with other renowned wine regions. You'll hear about some top producers you should try and places to visit if you're in the area.

Anne's latest trip to Alsace has unveiled other hidden gems. So, we'll be talking about the enchanting Sylvaner grape, which they are dubbing as the Cinderella grape, and talking about what seems to be a much more exciting focus on Pinot Noir.

You're gonna hear Anne mentioning Crémants from Alsace several times. These are a fantastic alternative to champagne, crafted using the traditional method and offer great value for money. So, if you've never had a Crémant d'Alsace, I can segue this now to my wonderful sponsor of this season, [Wickhams Wine](#). Link to their site is in the show notes. And they stock the Cave de Turckheim Mayerling Brut Crémant d'Alsace Non-Vintage.

Now these guys, they're a co-op founded in 1955 and have been a leader in bettering the reputation of Alsace wine. So not a bad shout if you want to start your Alsace journey somewhere. Also, although they have their vineyards in several different areas now, they grow grapes principally in Turckheim. Hence the name.

It's a pretty village just north-west of Colmar. And this is one of the places that will get mentioned in this episode. I do love it when it all links together perfectly. So, if you are on Wickhams Wine website, don't forget to use the code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your first order. And don't forget there is a transcript which might help you because as remember, in Alsace, the names are all Germanic so you're going to find a link to the transcript in my show notes or you can just go to www.eatsleepwinerepeat.co.uk/podcasts. May you pour yourself a glass of Alsatian wine and enjoy the episode.

Janina Doyle 00:04:52 So, the first question, which I tend to ask everybody, but it's an important question, is how the hell did you get into wine? So, is this living in France that got you into it or were you already an avid wine drinker and lover before moving to France?

Anne Mchale 00:05:08 Great question. I always had a sort of love of wine in my family because my dad founded the first ever student wine society in Queen's University in Belfast in 1969 at a time when nobody in Northern Ireland really drank wine.

And so, it was around the time that he met my mom as well and they had lots and lots of stories about that time when I was growing up. So, I had the idea that, you know, wine was a really cool beverage and that you drank it with food and a very non-Irish attitude to wine, I would say.

And when I went to university, the first society that I joined was the wine society. So, by the time I went to live in France, which was during the third year of my language degree, I already had this idea that wine was a sophisticated beverage and it sort of set you above other students. So if that was your preferred method of getting drunk.

But funnily enough, I didn't actually like the taste of red wine. I went for those kinds of, I suppose like a lot of people when they first come into the wine category, they go for the sweeter styles. And I used to go for slightly sweet or off dry whites. But living in Lyon for a year and going out to dine with my new French friends, it was pretty hard to avoid red wine.

So, that is the year that I acquired a taste for really good wine. And in Lyon, you can drink everything from the surrounding area, Beaujolais, Burgundy, Rhône. So, I would say that was probably where my real love of the wide range of wines that exists began.

Janina Doyle 00:06:48 Love that. Okay. Obviously, you were doing languages at school, which makes sense because that also ties into culture – wine ties into culture. But at one point did you

decide, actually, rather than enjoy this, I want to study this, which has obviously taken you to completing your master of wine as well. So you didn't just do it by half.

Anne Mchale 00:07:08 Yeah, exactly. It all happened, I would say by accident, because I was always a person that knew more what I didn't want to do rather than what I did want to do.

Janina Doyle 00:07:21 That's still useful.

Anne Mchale 00:07:22 Probably some of the people listening will be able to relate to this. But I was coming to the end of my degree. I went to the university careers office and I said, please advise me. I don't know what to do when I leave here. And they gave me the usual list of options, you know, teacher, management consultant, lawyer, that kind of thing. And I just thought, no, no, no. No to everything they suggested.

So, I ended up moving to London with a group of friends and I was just living off my overdraft for, I think, the first six to eight weeks of living there, wondering how I was going to pay the rent and applying for jobs every day. And I tended to pick jobs that required a French speaker because I thought, well, that's a skill that I have, a tangible skill. And the first job I got offered was in a wine merchant.

So, it was actually a small importer. We were importing ex-cellers wines from French wineries, particularly in the Rhône. The company was called Mistral Wines. They sent me on my first WSET course. So, up until that point, I'd never had the intention of studying wine. I had this whole love of wine from my family background and from being in the wine society and university, but it didn't occur to me that it could be a career. Nobody had ever said that to me. And actually, I think, some work that we could do in the industry, it's probably to go out to universities and talk to people and say there is a job here.

WSET Level 3 was the first qualification I did. I would say I got the bug at that point. I thought, well, since I don't have any huge desire to go into any other industry, this seems to suit me perfectly. And then the more I explored it, the longer I was in it, the more it just seemed to fit really well.

So, I did the job in the Mistral wines for 18 months. Then I worked for a short while as marketing assistant at Wines of New Zealand. And then I joined Berry Brothers and Rudd in 2006 in their events team. And I was there for 10 years and they very kindly sponsored me through the rest of my diploma, which I had begun by that stage and then the Master of Wine.

Janina Doyle 00:09:31 Fantastic! And then, I suppose, whilst doing Master of Wine, you were travelling back and forth to lots of wine regions because that's obviously very, very important, isn't it, to be able to have context.

I asked you what have been some of the most interesting or amusing stories, things that you've picked up on the way learning about wine. And you mentioned something about talking to the viticulturist at Château Pontet-Canet.

Anne Mchale 00:09:56 The story was that I was with a group of MW students and we were visiting lots of really great châteaux in Bordeaux and we were with a viticulturist in the vineyards of Pontet-Canet. And they are one of the few people in Bordeaux to be biodynamic, which is obviously

a challenging task because there's a lot of disease pressure in Bordeaux, it's a very humid region, so you have to work very hard in the vineyard to be able to avoid using any synthetic chemicals. Even to be organic is challenging and then biodynamic takes everything a step further.

But MW students are always fully present with notebooks ready to write down any geeky stuff that they could potentially use as an example in the exam. So, one of the students asked the chap, "So how do you keep your yields low?" Which would be a standard kind of question that you might ask a range of different viticulturalists, and then you would compare and contrast the answers and decide what you're going to use in your argument in your essay.

And the answer that he gave was, "Because the sap of the vine run in my blood." And there was a silence in the group because I don't think anyone really realised how they could use this in an exam answer. It was very good. It's one of our best memories.

Janina Doyle 00:11:19 Yeah, conclusion. Yeah. What that goes to show is that there are many French winemakers or viticulturalists that just feel it is part of them and the passion runs very deep, does it not?

Anne Mchale 00:11:30 Oh yeah, absolutely. And you know, biodynamic viticulture is one of those things where, I mean, you try to prove it scientifically and you're not going to be able to get together all the evidence that you need. But you know it works. Sometimes we've got to have faith.

Janina Doyle 00:11:48 If it works, don't change it. Now, talking about biodynamics, maybe I can segue this to Alsace, the wine region that you've recently been to. Because actually, they're typically, and tell me if I'm wrong, actually more into this more lower, less intervention, organic, biodynamic wine growing. Is that fair now that you've been there for the second time or have you been there quite a few more times?

Anne Mchale 00:12:14 Yeah, Alsace, generally, if you look at it percentage wise, there is a high percentage of producers that are very committed, certainly to sustainable farming, and a lot of them are organic and biodynamic.

And I think that partly reflects just a regional commitment to very environmentally friendly practices, but also reflects the climate. It is a very dry part of France. If you look at the statistics, when I was there, it's quite wet, actually last week, which was like, come on, Vosges mountains, do your work.

But you have this mountain range to the west of the region, that actually a lot of the rain that comes in from the west falls on the mountains, and then doesn't make it down to the vineyards on the other side. And it's quite a sunny region as well. Again, if you look at the overall annual statistics, rather than anecdotally, the couple of days that I was there where it was quite wet. And so, that allows people to practise organic and biodynamic viticulture more easily, let's say.

Janina Doyle 00:13:22 Because this is actually in theory supposed to, and we have to say supposed to now because you can't believe it. It is supposed to be one of the driest wine regions in France, isn't it? Because of those Vosges Mountains.

Anne Mchale 00:13:32 Absolutely. They have 600 millimetres a year of rainfall, which is about half of what they get just on the other side of the mountains to the west. So, it's dry. And climate

change is spoken about a lot in the context of viticulture these days. And it's scary. We try not to think too far ahead, or we might freak out completely, in terms of wondering if the entire map of what we know about wine is going to change.

But certainly, rainfall is going to become a challenge, I think, in Alsace, because they are going to need a bit more water than they do have if we continue to get these very, very hot summers. So, that's something that they're thinking about a lot.

Janina Doyle 00:14:20 Okay, interesting. Now, what I want to challenge, so for people like, hang on a minute, Alsace, you've talked about it being really dry, like there's a mountain range, what is this wine region like? Because you do an incredible job helping diploma students.

Everyone, I will put links in the show notes. So, anyone who's studying and wants to know more, it's kind of the [Diplomatherapy](#), is that correct?

Anne Mchale 00:14:41 Yes, that is the name of my community, my membership program for diploma students, particularly those preparing for the beast, the D3 exam, but it's also very helpful study and exam technique tips for anyone preparing for a diploma and people have found it useful for D4 and D5 as well.

So, I created this community about... well, exactly four years ago. I first came up with the idea about six years ago. So, I started it just before the pandemic, I actually learned how to use Zoom before everybody else did. But then it kind of grew a lot during the pandemic.

Janina Doyle 00:15:13 Congratulations.

Anne Mchale 00:15:14 And yeah, we have a global community, we all help each other out. And I teach my core principles in there for study technique and exam technique for these exams. And the reason I called it Diplomatherapy is because I remember the challenges that I myself faced psychologically, as well as the challenges of acquiring all the information and putting it down in the exam in the way the examiners want.

There is also a kind of mindset part to it. So, that's where the therapy part comes in. So, we do our best in our community to support everybody with that aspect of it, as well as the study and exam technique side.

Janina Doyle 00:15:50 Now, the diploma is not easy, is it? It takes a lot of perseverance. You really need to find your way to study. I think you have a, is it a little test? What kind of study are you?

Anne Mchale 00:16:01 That's right. I have a personality quiz. Yeah. I have the exam winger, that was me, the person who leaves it all to the last minute and crams it. Then I have a conscientious reviser. So that's the person who studies really, really, really hard and then they're not quite sure why they're not getting a higher mark in the exam itself because they need to work on exam technique.

Then we have the reluctant participant who is not very motivated to study and they're struggling in the exam. So, we get a few of those, but most of my students fall into exam winger or conscientious

reviser. And then, we have the king or queen who's the person who doesn't really need me to be honest. There's not very many of them either.

Janina Doyle 00:16:45 I don't think there are. Oh, dear! Well, I'm just glad my diploma is over. But what I wanted to do in this episode, and we're going to see, we're going to see what happens here, is I want to talk about Alsace perhaps in a way that maybe people would try and structure an answer or what points they might need to focus on.

So, I wrote down some questions beforehand. I mean, let's see. But tell me now, is this the sort of question you think might come up in the D3 exam, which is the Wines of the World? So, the question I wrote was, can you describe the unique terroir of Alsace and how it influences the characteristics of the wines produced there. Does that sound like the kind of question that you would get in your D3 diploma exam?

Anne Mchale 00:17:32 Absolutely. And of course, you know having been through it. The classic kind of question is, explain how X, which I would put in X, some kind of factor in the production, whether that's the growing environment, the grape growing, the wine making, the maturation, how does X affect and then style, quality and price of the wines.

So that's really, if you look at the past exam questions, most of them follow that broad format. You then have elements of individual regions being brought in or commercial elements are brought into many questions, strengths and weaknesses, that kind of thing. But what you've just outlined is a very classic question format.

Janina Doyle 00:18:14 For anybody listening and those people who just want to get to know the wine region anymore would you potentially answer it? And actually, what are the beautiful characteristics of these lovely wines from Alsace? And how does the dry, sunny, not so rainy climate impact those wines that we can taste?

Anne Mchale 00:18:32 One of the things that you could point out is, of course, that when you have a dry climate during the growing season, a lot of other regions would be beset by a lot of rainfall during the crucial months of September, October.

But in Alsace, you can effectively extend the growing season because you don't have to wake up one morning, see that there's gonna be heavy rain and then have to pick quickly before you've got full flavour rightness in your grapes.

So, that is absolutely brilliant for aromatic varieties like Riesling and Gewürztraminer. So, you're letting those grapes develop, particularly Riesling needs a long period to develop the flavours fully. So, you have that opportunity. As we said about biodynamic and organic viticulture, the dry climate also reduces the incidence of fungal diseases. So, again, that's going to help in terms of the quality of your wine, because you're not going to get potentially off flavours. It's gonna help with the cost of production and your volumes, which is gonna affect your ultimate selling price and profitability. There are lots of things that we can say about the terroir and how it influences the wines.

Janina Doyle 00:19:48 But also I suppose anyway, it's always worth commenting on the fact that this is a cool continental climate, right? And so, the cooler the climate, typically, the fresher the

wines, the higher the acidity. Would that be something that's very important, a key point to make out when answering the question?

Anne Mchale 00:20:05 Yeah. Of course, yeah. So, climate is a crucial part of the terroir, as you say. The fact that it is cool and northerly, obviously that is changing as we know, but still in terms of, you know, all the regions in France, Alsace is pretty far north, pretty cool, and so you do get good retention of acidity in the grapes.

There's a lot of small areas within the region as well where you have what diploma students will know very well, the term diurnal temperature variation. So, I had a bit of an illustration of this myself in one of the Grand Cru vineyards because during the day at the height of the growing season, it can be 30, 35 degrees there, and at night it can drop as low as 14 or 15 degrees.

So, it's effectively a kind of a wind tunnel. As diploma students will know, what this does is it slows down the loss of acidity. So, you retain acidity while still developing full flavour ripeness. And that is incredibly important, particularly as the climate warms. I would say that any area that has this wide diurnal temperature range is going to become more and more popular for viticulture as the climate continues to warm.

Janina Doyle 00:21:30 Now, of course, we know four of the noble grape varieties, which probably is the focus that people should be looking at. So, that's Riesling, Gewürztraminer, as you mentioned, but also Pinot Gris and there's a little bit of Muscat. Are you finding they're planting more Muscat at all? Or is it still remaining quite a small proportion of the plantings in Alsace?

Anne Mchale 00:21:51 Oh, I would need to check the latest stats. I don't have that in front of me at the moment. One thing that did jump out at me quite markedly when I was in Alsace recently is that they are grubbing up Gewürztraminer to plant Pinot Noir because those two grape varieties in Alsace are very compatible with the same type of terroir. They both thrive on the clay and limestone soils.

Gewürztraminer is getting to the stage where it's actually pretty much impossible to make a dry one in Alsace without hitting alcohols of 16. And as we know consumers lean more towards drier styles, Gewürztraminer, I would say, is a challenging sell anyway in the current market.

Even if it is fully dry, it's quite a viscous, textural wine with low levels of acidity. And that completely contrasts with everything that is fashionable at the moment. You know, look at your Sauvignon Blanc, your Pinot Grigio and these kinds of styles.

So, there's a kind of climate change reason and a commercial reason to swap out Gewürztraminer for Pinot Noir because also then with the warming climate, you are more consistently able to ripen Pinot Noir and Burgundy Pinot Noir is really expensive. And there's another commercial opportunity there.

I thought that was really interesting. I need to check the stats for Muscat plantings. But I just thought I would share that with you because I thought that just really struck me and it's one of the things I'm going to remember.

Janina Doyle 00:23:33 Interesting. Okay. There are 51 Grand Crus in Alsace and actually for understanding the hierarchy, it's actually quite easy. It's AOC Alsace and then AOC Grand Cru, it's Alsace. So yay!

And another wonderful thing for everyone listening, basically most wines are a hundred percent varietal wines. And unlike everywhere else in France or the more traditional regions, they're labelled. It will say Riesling or it will say Pinot Gris, right? Which makes our life a little bit easier. But with the 51 Grand Crus, you can only label them as a Grand Cru for those four noble varieties that I mentioned, but not Pinot Noir.

So, I'm just wondering what your opinion is, or if you spoke with any winemakers on this visit, if they're planting more Pinot Noir, and there's maybe a focus, is there any – and this an interesting potential political conversation, who knows, about allowing Pinot Noir into Grand Crus? Is that something that maybe some of the winemakers are trying to make happen?

Anne Mchale 00:24:37 Well, this is one of the amazing things about visiting a region because if you'd asked me this question two weeks ago, I just wouldn't have known the answer. But having just been there, I have learned that there are now two of the Grand Crus in Alsace that are about to permit Pinot Noir.

And I believe, again, I need to double check my notes, but I think it's from the 2023 vintage onwards. They're going to be able to label Hengst Grand Cru, if it's Pinot Noir wine, and Kirchberg de Barr. And we visited both of these vineyards and saw the Pinot Noir vines. Of course, people have been growing Pinot Noir vines there for a long time, but they are now going to be able to put Grand Cru and the name of the Grand Cru on the label.

So, they had to come up with clever ways of doing it before. So, instead of Hengst on the label, they were putting H – one of the producers was putting H. So, kind of the knowledge was there that these grapes came from a Grand Cru vineyard, but yeah, they'll be able to use it officially.

Janina Doyle 00:25:42 And then, in your opinion, having gone to both of these two Grand Cru sites, tasting the Pinot Noirs and the fact that they're very, very shortly going to be able to label Grand Cru Pinot Noir there, do you feel like these two are not just the leaders, but actually showing some of the best examples? Or do you not think that's fair? It's just maybe they've just been quicker to get all their ducks in a row.

Anne Mchale 00:26:06 Yeah, I tried. To be honest, yes, I tried lovely Pinots from across the region. So, I wouldn't say that they're necessarily going to always be the best quality just because they're Grand Cru. And there are other Grand Cru, of course, who are in the process of putting in an application for being allowed to use their Pinot Noir and put Grand Cru on the label.

But certainly I was very impressed with the wines from these two vineyards. So, I think there is going to be potential for growth there for Alsace and can see why they've taken the decision to advance things in that area. It makes total sense.

Janina Doyle 00:26:45 Going back to diploma questions, I have actually written down, if I can find it. Riesling is probably still the number one planted grape variety. We've talked about Pinot Noir, but let's go back to Riesling because the wonderful thing about Riesling – well, I'm already ruining it for

you. It's dry. That's a wonderful easy sell for Riesling. It's dry here. They very often ask compare and contrast.

So, in terms of discussing the Riesling here, compared to maybe any other regions, what do you think from presumably tasting quite a bit of Riesling when you were out there? Did they give you enough Riesling?

Anne Mchale 00:27:22 Wow! Yeah. Actually, they did give us lots of Riesling, but they were also very keen to show off other stuff that was happening. So, we got a focused tasting on Crémant, which was brilliant. We did a Sylvaner tasting. As I say, Pinot Noir.

We did two Pinot Noir tastings. But on our last morning in Alsace, we had an incredible tasting, which was just Grand Cru Rieslings and we tasted 28 wines. And honestly, they were such fabulous wines. And the brilliant way that they ran the tasting was that we did it in pairs by producer, and we had an older vintage and a more recent vintage from each producer from the same vineyard.

So, you were always able to see how it was properly nerdy stuff. All the wine geeks were just like, "Wow!" So, that was really interesting. Really what struck me about these wines is how incredibly well they age. My notes when I was writing stuff about the older vintages, which were typically 2012 and 2013, that's what they'd selected. They were just as fresh as a daisy. They were just so vibrant and youthful. Just incredible.

And nearly all of them were practically bone dry. And if they weren't bone dry, then the acidity was so high that they felt dry. And that's actually an interesting new development in the region is that Alsace has finally adopted the EU labelling terms for sweetness. So Sec, Demi-Sec, all of that stuff, to give consumers more of an idea of where they're going.

But a more controversial aspect of that is that in the next couple of years, it's going to be compulsory for Riesling to be in the dry category. That's going to upset particularly some Grand Cru producers whose wines often climb residual sugar, because of the ripeness that you get from those sites, the residual sugar can be a little bit higher, because obviously, if you ferment out all the sugar, you're going to end up with very high alcohol levels.

So, that's perhaps a little area of controversy. And I asked one producer, what do you plan to do about this? And he gave the sort of Gallic shrug and sort of implied that whatever gets released, it gets released. Yeah, I think that's interesting. But as you say, generally when you see Riesling, it tends to be a dry style, but the rules will mean that you're not allowed to put Riesling on the label if it's not dry.

Janina Doyle 00:29:52 Yeah, okay. Very interesting. But I guess I know the wonderful thing about wine regions is when they can have diversity, but from a consumer's point of view, when we're always trying to say, what do you get from this region? What do you get from that? The standard is bone dry Riesling.

So, actually, it does make things a little bit easier to understand when you can say, look, it's all bone dry. It's labelled this way. It just isn't going to be any surprises. So it, you know, I don't know how I completely feel from the wine lover inside me. I love all the creations, experimentations, but from an educational point of view and understanding bone dry, tick.

Anne Mchale 00:30:29 As a consumer yourself, you know, I mean, as a consumer, I want to know the level of sweetness when I'm buying a bottle, because it affects how you pair it with food and all of that.

Yeah, I think it's a great idea. I'm glad that they've done it. The Riesling thing maybe wasn't entirely essential. Maybe they could have just stuck with using the sweetness terminology and that would have been enough, but they will work it out, I'm sure.

Janina Doyle 00:30:54 Leave it to them to fight. But with the Rieslings that you were having at the older vintages, often what can one of the aroma compounds in Riesling, and especially as the wine ages, that petrol note can come out in certain places. Did you notice any petrol notes with the older Rieslings from Alsace or not?

Anne Mchale 00:31:16 So that was actually one of the topics of discussion and we had the incredible Olivier Humbrecht MW giving us an introduction to this particular tasting. And I would probably have to pull out my notes to remind myself of exactly what he said. But he said that they have very little, it's a little bit controversial. Is it a fault or not? Is it a fault or is it tipicity?

But his implication was we don't really want TDN and we don't want to be known for having TDN and because of what we do in the vineyard and the winery, we actually don't get very much of it. And it's true that the general comments in the room where we've hardly detected any of it on these wines.

Janina Doyle 00:32:57 That's interesting because I actually did a tasting this weekend for a hen party and I bought a Riesling from Germany, Robert Weil, beautiful as you know. Like, they're fantastic, renowned Riesling producers. I was really excited to show it. A £30 Riesling.

I'm like, hey, look how good Riesling can be and it's dry. And it had this very petulant note. And it was a hen party of women who very often typically are drinking a lot of Prosecco and Rosé. That's the wine that they enjoyed. And they were all like, oh, this is disgusting. And I was like, oh, this is so annoying. And I was just explaining the different styles and whatever.

But I understand that actually for many, many a consumer, if there's that smoky petrol vibe, they are not interested. So, actually, that's quite nice to be able to say, hmm, you don't want sweet because a lot of people are scared of that, so Alsace is a good place to be. And actually, the petrol note that so many of you don't really like, you're unlikely to find it here.

I think people have a bit of an idea about what Riesling tastes like. Were you able to taste some of the sweeter wines, the Vendange Tardive, if I'm pronouncing correctly, or the Selection de Grains Nobles?

Anne Mchale 00:33:15 We actually didn't taste very many of those wines, I think because the focus, if you think about you're getting 22 Masters of Wine out to the region, and you want to tailor very carefully what it is that they're going to talk about when they go back, I suppose, the sweet wines have a wonderful history and they're of incredibly high quality, but they're not what the commercial focus is on at the moment.

They're wanting to bring awareness to Pinot Noir, Crémant, which is growing, and then of course we said that Sylvaner, which is described as the Cinderella of grapes, which is only now getting to go to the ball.

So, I didn't get the chance to taste many of the SGNs or the VT wines. One thing we did taste was Vendange Tardive Gewürztraminer from 1953 because that was the year of the founding of the Institute of Masters of Wine. So, at Domaine Hugel, Jean-Frédéric Hugel very kindly opened that.

And that was really fascinating because, again, I think it's just this amazing illustration of climate change, because even though that was a Vendange Tardive, it was an almost entirely dry wine because the sugar levels would just have been much lower back then. I actually didn't write down what the alcohol was, but it was probably around 13 - 13.5. The wine tasted a little off dry, but basically a dry wine. It had aged really well as well.

Janina Doyle 00:34:43 I've never had an aged Gewürztraminer, obviously it's beautifully aromatic and one of the easiest wines to blind taste, right? Lychee, rose petals, maybe some ginger. Was all those aromatics still there in some way, or how had they evolved? I don't know what happens to Gewürztraminer after 70 years.

Anne Mchale 00:35:09 I didn't notice a lot of the rose petals and the lychee, to be honest. It still had a lovely texture and viscosity to it. The acidity was probably more pronounced than it would have been in its youth.

Janina Doyle 00:35:23 Really?

Anne Mchale 00:35:23 Yeah, I just think, the acidity level wouldn't have changed. But in terms of the balance of the wine. I think it was a bit more prominent. And there's still this minerality. Minerality, salinity, all of these words can be debated endlessly and argued over. And what does it mean? Where does it come from?

And I don't think we're ever really fully going to know. But they will tell you in Alsace that from the best Grand Cru sites, you are going to get this minerality, which almost fulfills the role of acidity in terms of the ageability of varieties like Gewürztraminer, which aren't as high in acidity. So, I definitely noticed that, but it was remarkably alive. So it was quite cool.

Janina Doyle 00:36:06 And I love that you touched on minerality because I don't know whether in a Master of Wines trip, they talked about this, but they use the hashtag Alsace rocks, don't they? Across social media, I guess, the board has created this. But from what I understand, apart from the fact that it just sounds cool, Alsace rocks, makes sense, it does, it's rocks, it's awesome.

But it's also almost like a nod towards the fact that the very best Alsace wines have this minerality, this wet stones, this chalk, this flint, something there. Did that ever get mentioned when you were there?

Anne Mchale 00:36:41 They talked a lot about the impact of each type of terroir on the grape varieties. I think the word saline came up more than mineral. So, that's interesting. They weren't specifically saying minerality a lot.

One thing I learned is that Riesling when it's on clay soils becomes more textured with more mouthfeel and a lot of people associate Riesling just with that stony minerality, but actually it can be expressed differently as a grape variety and give you some different characteristics.

Again, very hard to pin people down on why exactly this is because I don't think anyone really knows why other than that we can study the availability of water that each soil type allows to the roots of the vine and there is evidence that that has an impact in terms of the level of hydric stress, in terms of the availability of nutrients as well. It's very hard to say, oh, this flavour in the wine comes from this mineral composition in the soil and to have actual evidence for that.

But I thought that it was quite interesting that you plant Riesling on clay versus granite and you're not just getting this mineral kind of structural Riesling, you're also getting a Riesling with mouthfeel and texture.

Janina Doyle 00:38:04 I'm going to keep on coming back to Riesling. Did you find as well most of the Rieslings were actually a lot more full-bodied as a style? Because typically the Rieslings I've drank from Alsace, which is obviously not enough but it's always these are the bone dry styles and they have a rounder, wider mouth feel, you know, on the palate. Or are you finding it just depends on what Grand Cru site the Riesling is coming from?

Anne Mchale 00:38:27 Definitely there are subtleties between the sites, but yeah, overall I would say they are quite broad-shouldered, quite robust wines.

Janina Doyle 00:38:36 I want to get away from Riesling before I just make this whole episode about Riesling.

You obviously went to Alsace and I, oh my gosh, I was just looking up Alsace before and seeing some of the most amazing buildings along rivers because this isn't a typical French region. I think it swapped hands between France and Germany like five times or whatever in the past. So, it's very Germanic, hence the names.

So, for somebody wanting to go to Alsace, basically me, where do I go? Where do I fly into? What's the village that I should either stay in or that just gave you the wow factor because just looking at some of the photos have given me a wow factor.

Anne Mchale 00:39:19 Yeah. It's so pretty. We were actually there at a lovely time of year because everybody was saying to us, you know, if you came here in July or August, it would just be so run with tourists that you wouldn't get the chance to take a photograph without a big crowd of people in the background.

If anyone is considering going, then I would recommend that you visit probably outside of peak summer season, certainly. April, a lovely time to go. It was still a little bit chilly. So, if you want it to be warm, then maybe May or June is good. Or September, obviously, they're very busy there then with harvest.

In order to be closest, you would fly into Basel, which is in Switzerland, but it has an exit to France as well. So, the airport is called Mulhouse Basel Freiburg. An easyJet fly there from Gatwick, that's how I got there.

So, wherever you want to come from in the world, try to get to Basel Airport if it's all possible. You can also, if you're coming by train, maybe from Paris or something, if you flew into Paris, you can get the train to Strasbourg and then you can change and get a train to Colmar. And Colmar, which is just C-O-L-M-A-R, it's just spelled exactly as it sounds. And that's kind of the capital of the wine areas, if you like, in Alsace.

It's the biggest town and we stayed there because it's a good kind of central location to base yourself and then kind of go north and go south to visit all the various sub-regions. In terms of pretty villages, there are too many to mention in Alsace. It's just such a stunning place. We went to Riquewihr a couple of times, which is sensationally pretty.

Eguisheim, I believe, is also amongst what they call the Plus Beaux Villages de la France, which is, you know, the prettiest village in France. There are lots of those to drive through in Alsace. The first time that I went to Alsace, I stayed in Munster, which is not a wine village. It's very famous for its cheese. And it's a little bit off the beaten track. So it's a little bit to the southwest of the main route du vin, as they call it but very, very pretty as well. Just gorgeous.

Janina Doyle 00:41:37 And actually that's not super far from Colmar, though is it? I think about half an hour in the car. So, if you need your cheese, get to Munster. What did they feed you in Alsace? What did they give you that they said was really traditional of the area?

Anne Mchale 00:41:52 The absolute traditional dish is choucroute, which is sauerkraut. And we actually were only served that once. I think the request had been made by the Institute of Masters of Wine that we have kind of lighter lunches so we tend to have nice buffet lunches with cheese, charcuterie, and salads, which was lovely.

And then one of the days for lunch, we got served the traditional choucroute and it comes with lots of different pork products on top. So you get traditional sausage and different charcuteries and everything. So, I took a photo of that for Instagram. So, it's quite impressive. And Sauerkraut is incredibly good for the gut, so very healthy.

Janina Doyle 00:42:32 And with all the pork as well, I imagine it was very nice with the Rieslings.

Anne Mchale 00:42:36 Absolutely. Actually, I was sitting next to a grower for that lunch, Ludivine from Domaine de la Cadette, whom I had actually visited on my very first trip to Alsace back in 2007. And I asked her what she drinks with choucroute. And she says, "Sylvaner, which is our Cinderella grape."

Janina Doyle 00:42:56 Okay, tell me a little bit about Sylvaner then, why is it the Cinderella Grape because I believe there is one cru that actually allows Sylvaner.

Anne Mchale 00:43:07 We met those two of the guys, two of the growers from that Grand Cru, Zotzenberg. We met them and heard all about the sort of the battle that had to be fought to get Zotzenberg recognized for Sylvaner.

Yeah, it's a variety with, I'd say a lot of potential, again, for kind of mouthfeel and texture, perhaps not as high acidity as Riesling, but still plenty of acidity enough for a really good balance. It seems to be adapting quite well to a warming climate. It's what they were saying. It retains its acidity quite

well, which is important. And so yeah, we tasted a really interesting range of those wines. So, it's something I would be looking out for again.

Janina Doyle 00:43:48 Interesting. Now, I know that after you've done your written question, whatever you're doing for your diploma, perhaps to score the extra little bit of points because of context, sometimes if you can name a producer or something that can help with getting some extra points. Is that still the case?

Anne Mchale 00:44:11 Definitely. Yeah. You don't need to do that to get a pass mark, but it looks really, really good if you're going for those higher grades. If you're looking for a high merit or a distinction, throwing in examples of producers is very useful.

Janina Doyle 00:44:25 So, of course, I think anyone who's ever interested in Alsace and also all over the world, they'll be able to get Trimbach to try, and Hugel and Zind-Humbrecht. But are you allowed to sneak in a few producers that you thought were really interesting that surprised you that maybe we should go out and try for ourselves?

Anne Mchale 00:44:45 Yeah. Well, we were lucky enough to test with a group called the Alsace Cru Terroir. So, they are at actalsace.fr. They're on Instagram as well. All those guys, they kind of have all clubbed together to form, suppose it's a bit like an embryonic version of the VDP in Germany, and they've kind of clubbed together to form this association.

They're all working at a very high level. I really enjoyed meeting Domaine Bott Geyl. Their wines were just gorgeous. And Domaine de la Cadette that I've mentioned to you, I sat next to Ludivine at lunch, and I had been to see them in 2007 because I worked for Berry Brothers and Rudd at the time, and we used to import them.

So, they are making just gorgeous wines, definitely recommend those. There's obviously, of course, Domaines Schlumberger. And that's how the French say. Again, I've been to visit them in 2007. And they were here represented in this Riesling tasting. So, I got to retaste their Kitterle Grand Cru. Kitterle is just like an insanely steep vineyard, kind of like almost 90% gradient in some places.

At the time that I first went there, they made me climb up to kind of get a feel for how hard it is to make wine in a place like that. It's probably one of the contributing factors to me deciding never to be a winemaker.

Janina Doyle 00:46:22 Well, not not in a place that has heroic viticulture. Somewhere a little bit flatter.

Anne Mchale 00:46:28 Exactly.

Janina Doyle 00:41:29 I love that. No, but that's brilliant. That gives us all a little a few options and everybody there is a transcript. So, check out the transcript so you can see all of these producers names and then maybe put them together and see where you can purchase them.

Janina Doyle 00:46:46 Next week, we are carrying on the conversation but going across to the Douro Valley in Portugal, where Anne is going to be telling us about her personal experience with the good old traditional treading grapes with your feet in lagares. So these are traditional granite troughs.

So, I am of course going to leave you this episode, well actually not with a wine quote but with a pun because you know, well, everything happens for a Riesling. Sorry. Honestly, I am embarrassed when I do that. But deep, insightful, thoughtful, right? Everything does happen for a reason. And actually, often those reasons reveal themselves in the most unexpected and perhaps tasty, transformative ways.

So may sparkle be part of your journey this week, maybe in that form of Crémant, but be happy, be energised, and I will see you back here again next Monday. Now don't forget to like, share this podcast, subscribe if you haven't and leave a review if you have just two minutes as this is the best way to share the wine love and make this podcast more discoverable. Until next week, wine friends, cheers to you!