

# Wine people – Jean ‘Johnny’ Hugel

In a three-part series MICHAEL TABONE profiles three of the most important wine people in the world whom he recently met. Here he talks about **Johnny Hugel** from Alsace. In the next two he recounts his meetings with **Miguel A. Torres** from Spain and **Thierry Manoncourt** from Bordeaux.



I CAN THINK of no great wine that is not grown in beautiful surroundings, where good food is prepared and generous, life-loving people live and work. Occasionally, from the same *terroir* that gives birth to great wine and food comes a man, or a woman who encompasses all that is great about a region. With a history going back 13 generations, an incredible understanding of human life, a renowned palate for good wine and a huge amount of energy, one man stands alone among Alsace's favourite sons. He is without a doubt Johnny Hugel.

Now in his 81st year, Johnny Hugel has been the foremost ambassador for Alsace's great wines for the past 30-odd years. As his grandfather, Frederick Emile did in the beginning of the 20th century and his father Jean in the Sixties and Seventies, Johnny has worked tirelessly endlessly for the renaissance of Alsace's wines, both in improving quality and in communicating those qualities to the wine-drinking world.

As a young man he studied agronomy and he admits that, had he not joined the family business he would probably have ended up growing peaches, one of his favourite fruits. Later on he studied oenology and in the 1960s he became the chief wine-maker, with his brothers Georges and Andre looking after the vineyards and the commercial aspect of Hugel et Fils. As chief wine-maker, he was responsible for vinifying a few of the greatest wines ever made, among which are the now legendary Riesling Selection de Grains Noble 1976, which I have tasted once, and the 1983 and 1989, which I have drunk on a number of occasions.

On the death of his father in 1980, 'Johnny' became the undisputed ambassador for Alsace's wines, travelling the world communicating the qualities of the region's wines. Although he is still very much active, 'Johnny' theoretically retired in 1997, and the company is now run by his nephews Jean-Philippe, Marc and Etienne. For his retirement the family honoured him with a range of wines labelled 'Homage a Jean Hugel' which were produced in the excellent vintages of 1997 and 1998.

As would be expected from a man with such experience, Johnny has much to say. His talk is flowing with anecdotes and stories about most things in life. I once said that if a Martian landed on earth and asked me how best to learn about life here I would suggest he studied wine. I might also add: "You must meet Johnny Hugel."

His energy and enthusiasm is remarkable, with strong, sometimes controversial

opinions on most things in life. "At my age I can freely say what I feel," he jokes. Johnny is very critical of wine journalists and that part of the wine media that tries to blind people with long-winded, sometimes imaginary, tasting notes of raspberries, blackberries and every fruit that the different seasons provide.

When asked to comment, he said: "Whenever my wife gives me a fruit bowl, I take a deep sniff, but I never smell Burgundy or Bordeaux!" He believes that wine lovers are the most important people in the wine business as they are the ones who pull the corks. "Put your nose in the glass and what you smell is your problem... if you don't like what you smell... then it is our problem."

He is very much against the current trend for making wines that are overpowered with oak or are too alcoholic. He openly criticises much of the wines coming from the new world, saying that they can make oaked wine, alcoholic wine, but not great wine.

### The wines of Alsace

Alsace has a varied and very interesting history. With the Rhine river providing excellent passage for shipment, between the 12th and 16th century the wines of Alsace became very popular in the northern countries of Russia, Sweden and the Baltics.

For example, records still exist which show that in 1481, 600,000 hl of wine were exported. The 30-year war (1618-1648) brutally brought this prosperous period to an end and gave rise to a long period of famine, disease and human slaughter. For example, the population of Riquewhir went from 2,245 in 1610 down to 74 by 1636; Bergheim from 2,600 in 1610 to 20 by 1650.

Although the population did recover slowly by means of immigration and some successes in other types of agriculture, viticulture continued to decline for nearly 300 years. Leaving the ravages of oidium, Phylloxera and the first world war behind, in 1918 a group of exemplary and hard-working vine growers with a vision of quality led the way for the huge scale planting of six noble varieties on which to base Alsace's wine renaissance.



JOHNNY HUGEL

These were Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Muscat. There were also the lesser Chasselas and Sylvaner. This enthusiasm for quality was dampened again with World War II but it found much vigour again in 1945. Today Alsace's white wines are probably the best whites in the world.

### Geography and climate

I asked Johnny why Alsace can produce quality wines in such a northern place. Describing the geographical situation as being right in the middle of rich people hiding their money in Swiss or Luxembourg banks, Johnny continued: Alsace is situated in northeastern France, on the border with Germany and Switzerland. It has two departments. The northern part is the Bas-Rhin with Strasbourg as its capital, and the Haut-Rhin in the south with Colmar as its most important city.

Some 25 million years ago, huge geological activities, which included the folding of the earth's crust, formed the Vosges mountains to the west and the black forest to the east. This eventually created a massive valley rift and, ultimately, due to floods and erosion, the Rhine river.

These geological upheavals exposed nearly all the soil types that were formed in different periods, with the result that today the area is endowed with an enormous diversity of soil types. Granite, flint, chalk, sand, loam and alluvial soils are all found here.

Possibly the biggest influence was the forming of the Vosges mountains, which give the region a unique, favourable climate. Although Alsace is on the same latitude as Paris (47°-49°N), far away from sea with a continental climate, the region is the driest in France with Colmar being the second driest city after Perpignan in Roussillon. (Average rainfall is 500 mm.)

This is the result of the mountains sheltering the region from the cold western winds coming in from the Atlantic, which after crossing the plains of western France gathers a lot of humidity. The Vosges range is the first high ground that these clouds encounter. This results in the precipitation of rain on the western slopes, leaving the eastern slopes and the region dry, especially in the autumn.

Most of the vineyards lie in a narrow strip of 140 km on the slopes and the foot of these mountains. The best are sited on the lower slopes facing east or southeast, benefiting from the morning sun, and are quite steep. Generally, these are to be found in the department of the Haut-Rhin where the mountains are higher. The plains leading to the Rhine are also planted but these are generally used for lesser wines and Cremant. The best vineyards are sited on steep slopes.

All these conditions give the Alsacian wine growers an excellent opportunity to combine soil types with the appropriate vine varieties. Recently a comprehensive study of soil types was made, with the result that in the local council offices of most wine villages there are maps of their respective region with soil analysis and which variety, clones and rootstocks should be planted where.

### Hugel et Fils

The Hugel family has been growing wines in Alsace since 1639 and, as a recently published book of letters found in the family archives proves, they have been championing the well-being of Alsacian wines, growers and the region for hundreds of years.

They are based in the beautiful village of Riquewhir and today they own about 27 hectares of excellently sited vineyards around the village. Among the many wines that they produce is Gentil, the hugely popular blend based on Pinot Blanc, which is excellent value for money. Their Tradition and Jubilee ranges have long been regarded as some of the best Alsacian wines.

They were also pioneers in revitalising the late harvested 'Vendage Tardive' and nobly rotten 'Selection de Grains Noble' wines, some of Alsace's most revered wines today. Johnny Hugel was responsible for drawing up the legal requirements for administering these wines. Hugel's wines, as indeed most of Alsace's wines, are very food friendly. They are excellent with traditional European dishes as well as with Asian cuisine.

As I said in a small speech I made in 'Johnny's' honour at a recent dinner at Ta' Frenç in Gozo, wine lovers of our generation are lucky to live in a time where we can still meet wine people like Johnny Hugel. Johnny has achieved many things which have brought him many honours and titles. To me he is simply one of the best wine communicators I have met and am ever likely to meet.

Drink Hugel wines with joy in celebration of a true wine man.

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