Alsace reflections

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An Alsace view on the region's distinctive and delicious wines, from sparkling through white, orange, pink, red and dessert.

Bitter and fat. These are not words I normally expect winemakers to pronounce with pride when discussing their wines, and they are not words I'd have automatically associated with Alsace wines. But they cropped up so often on my recent trip to Alsace that I wrote them in capital letters across the much-crumpled printout of my schedule on the plane on the way home. They'd got me thinking about the way we see wine and, in particular, how wine producers from a particular region – especially one with a well-defined, very specific culture, heritage and language – might look for, understand and celebrate aspects of wine that outsiders might miss.

Both these words, in modern English and Western culture, have broadly negative connotations, emotional and physical. In wine lingo, we tend to use bitterness to describe wines that have been made from grapes that were picked before they'd reached phenolic ripeness or wines made with heavy-handed extraction techniques.

We also use the word ‘fat’ to describe wines that lack acidic structure. It often comes up in wines that also have high alcohol and/or have been manipulated in a way that over-softens tannins and other grippy components.

It was fascinating, then, to hear Alsace winemakers celebrate bitterness and fatness in their wines. Even more so because I’d been taught that the defining characteristics of Alsace wines are sweetness and/or acidity. The other thing I noticed about Alsatian wine-speak is that very few producers mentioned minerality. They talked about rocks and soils *obsessively* (and I really mean *obsessively*), but the comments ran along the lines of: ‘more bitter on limestone than on granite’; ‘granite gives the wine a shiny, vertical character’; ‘chalk is more generous’.

Amusingly, and less seriously (sort of), and perhaps not in the most politically (or religiously) correct context, the Alsace wine producers I met were adamant that the way to understand Alsace wines is not according to the traditional division of German/French hybrids pulling east towards Germany on the rich side and west towards France on the lean side. Instead, they proposed, the wines are either Catholic or Protestant. Reading that, your eyebrows might have shot up as high as mine did, and then, if you came from a very religious family background (as I do), you may be as amused as I was. Protestant wines, apparently, are those from vineyards on granite because the soils are ‘cold and more closed’; and the wines are ‘more strict, severe, disciplined and focused’. Catholic wines, on the other hand, are those from limestone, chalk and marl vineyards, where the soils are ‘more forgiving’ and the wines are more ‘opulent, exuberant, generous and expressive’.

When it comes to this interpretation of Catholic v Protestant, I can’t comment except to say that in my personal experience, as a child of strict Protestants but who was lucky enough to be taught by several Catholic teachers, I’d vouch for the severe discipline of the former and the forgiving exuberance of the latter. How this relates to fat and bitter could be extrapolated in all sorts of ways, depending on your stance, but it is, at least, a useful way to remember the general rule of thumb when it comes to Alsace terroir affecting wine expression.

It’s a very general rule of thumb, however. Alsace, with its 20 major soil formations (broadly speaking), seven (main) grape varieties, more than 30 winemaking villages including 11 named communes, 51 grand cru vineyards and over 4,000 winegrowers,

is an exciting kaleidoscope of a region that, I would argue, is not going to be neatly boxed into two camps, however holy.

Back to bitter and fat. Bitter first. Bitterness is a component that I experience as textural, structural and flavour-giving. Natural varietal bitterness, coming from ripe grapes and gentle winemaking, enhances sweetness, draws out length, rounds out acidity, adds rich marrow to the bones of a wine, seems to sharpen flavour in the way that spectacles sharpen sight, and gives wine an appetising edge. Bitterness makes me want another sip, makes me a little hungry, and makes me appreciate sweetness and savouriness all the more intensely. So it was with new eyes that I looked at Alsace Pinot Gris, Riesling, Gewurz and Sylvaner, appreciating for the first time that these wines are not just about sweetness and/or acidity. In the leanest of wines, this bitterness is leafy – like chicory, dandelion, sorrel, aloe vera. In slightly broader wines, it tastes like green olives and walnut skin. In the richest wines, it's a nuttiness: apricot stones, peach kernel and green almonds and ripe walnuts. Every time it appears, it brings with it gently fissured, ruffled, frictional texture – like bark rubbing. It gives the wine a subtle beauty that takes shape the more you lean into it. It also enhances every other facet of the wine. Bitterness in wine, unlike bitterness in humans, is a generous thing. I see why the Alsatians love it.

'Fat' in a wine in the Alsace context is also hard to define. It's not exactly full-bodied, or high alcohol, or rich or sweet, although the wine might be either one or two or all of these things. It's most certainly not loose or flabby. I listened with all my mind and from what I can work out (and I might be wrong!), when Alsace winemakers describe a wine as 'fat', they mean it has 'stage presence'. It's a ship in full sail. It's dramatic. It's a wine that envelops you, enfolds you in its very being. It has a sheen, a saponaceous slip, without being oily. It's generous. 'Fat' is structured largesse.

And that's what's interesting about these two attributes – they are both as much structural and textural as they are related to flavour. They affect the way the wine moves in the mouth, its length and how it finishes. I also found bitterness or 'fat'

appearing irrespective of variety and quality levels, from the 'classic'/entry-level wines all the way up to the grands crus. Whether it comes down to terroir or winemaking, it's impossible to say. But both these attributes help to make Alsace wines, however extreme in terms of residual sugar and alcohol, intensely food friendly.

Top discoveries for me personally were the wines of Bernard Bohn (Domaine Bohn), Félix Meyer (Meyer-Fonné) and, especially, Marc and Anne-Marie Tempé. The Tempés make the spellbindingly beautiful biodynamic wines, but (devastatingly) they are packing up – their kids don't want to take over the business and it's getting to the point where the intense physical labour of their work is taking its toll. Seek out and snap up their extraordinary wines before they are no longer made. Vine Trail imports Tempé (and Bohn) into the UK, and Vintage '59 imports Tempé into the US. Félix Meyer's Pinot Noir was a revelation – it's worth looking out for Meyer-Fonné Pinots which seem to be stocked by a couple of independents in the UK and are imported by Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant in the US.

Other standouts included Étienne Loew's Sylvaner, which tasted as complex and exciting as any Grosses Gewächs Silvaner from top producers in Germany's Franken region. Loew is also producing some outstanding Rieslings and Pinot Gris and a fun range of natural, skin-contact wines (called All You Need Is Loew). Dopff au Moulin's Solera crémant is pretty special, as are Rolly Gassmann's aged late-harvest sweeties.