

Alsace is known for distinct white wines

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In wine, as in most things in life, there's black and white, and then there's gray. This idea is abundantly clear in Alsace, the wine region in northeastern France where you can follow "pinot" varieties across the spectrum, from white all the way over to black, with gray in between. Known for its distinct white wines, Alsace turns out varietals made from not only pinot blanc (white) and pinot gris (gray), but also pinot noir (black) — the only red grape allowed. But that's a different story altogether.

This is a story about the white and the gray, the pinot grapes creating wines ranging from bright and clean in the case of pinot blanc, to perfumed and rich in the case of pinot gris. (And yes, pinot gris is the same grape known as pinot grigio in Italy and parts of the New World.) Although white wine-producing pinot blanc and pinot gris grapes sit next to each other on the pinot color spectrum, they are as different from each other as "Star Wars" and "Star Trek."

Pinot blanc could be the most accessible wine of Alsace, a distinction that has the potential to cut both ways. Yes, the style is light and citrusy, and often does not plunge the depths of wine complexity. For some people, those are pluses. But because the wine is so accessible, with per-

haps less to say than its gray relative, some wine drinkers look past it. I suggest deciding for yourself.

I think of pinot blanc as being closer to a crisp Chablis than an oakly California chardonnay. If you prefer leaner white wines with a little punch of citrus and even some rounder, riper fruits, Alsace pinot blanc might be for you. In Alsace, pinot blanc is commonly blended with the auxerrois grape, which can lend both spice and softness to the mix. Otherwise, these wines offer flavors of anything from tangy citrus to bitter nuts, pairing well with salads, light seafood and spicy Asian fare.

Alsace pinot gris occupies a spot on the other side of the intensity scale. The more-renowned of the two styles, pinot gris is also one of Alsace's most intense and expressive wine styles. It offers fuller body plus floral notes, ripe stone and tropical fruits, bread crust and smoke. It pairs well with pate, seafood, cured meats, duck and roasted pork. As a bonus, pinot gris also has aging potential. If you find a few that you like, buy in bulk, and let some of them rest for a few years or more.

When shopping, you will see both grape names on bottle labels, as Alsace breaks from the French tradition of listing place names in lieu of varietal names. This is a boon for consumers, and so is the fact that the wines are relatively easy to find and fairly easy to buy, with many of them ringing up for somewhere around \$20.

Alsace is considerably north, sitting 300 miles east of Paris on the Rhine River and the country's border with Germany. The region enjoys a generally cool, long and sunny growing season, with only one French wine region north of it: Champagne. With that in mind, it's worth noting that pinot blanc and pinot gris are also used in Cremant d'Alsace, the region's famous sparkling wine, which is made in the traditional method, just like Champagne.

The following are notes from a recent tasting. The wines are listed by style — pinot blanc followed by pinot gris — and in ascending order, according to price.

Pinot Blanc

2016 Domaines Schlumberger Les Princes Abbes Pinot Blanc. Bright Meyer lemon, other ripe citrus and stone fruit give way to apple, peach and a touch of bitter nuttiness. \$16

2016 Döpf & Irion Cuvee Rene Döpf Pinot Blanc. This wine offers musky and floral notes, leading to ripe pear, fennel, a touch of bitterness and a restorative lemony finish. \$16

2016 Famille Hugel Cuvee Les Amours Pinot Blanc. Bright, fresh tangerine and lemon meringue, pear and nuts commingle in this refreshing wine, which clocks in at 12.5 percent alcohol. \$17

2016 Trimbach Pinot Blanc. An 80/20 blend of pinot blanc/auxerrois, this wine offers lemon-lime, floral notes, apricot and other stone fruits, culminating in a refreshing, clean finish. \$19

2016 Pierre Sparr Grande Reserve Pinot Blanc. This wine offers candied orange, apricot, river stone minerality, tropical notes and a nutty finish with lingering spice. \$20

Pinot Gris

2015 Famille Hugel Classic Pinot Gris. With musky notes and expressions of ripe tropical fruit, melon and buttery bread, this wine features a mouthwatering zing on the finish, plus 13 percent alcohol. \$22

2017 Domaine Emile Beyer Tradition Pinot Gris. With its round and soft texture, this wine offers ripe stone fruits and the slightly bitter tang of a peach near the pit, plus a long, nutty finish. \$23

2017 Gustave Lorentz Reserve Pinot Gris. Generous ripe fruits, from citrus to tropical, join nuts and spice in this full-bodied, lip-smacking wine. \$23

2015 Trimbach Reserve Pinot Gris. This soft and mouth-filling wine offers tropical fruit, peach, honey and smoke, which leads to a subtle nuttiness. \$26