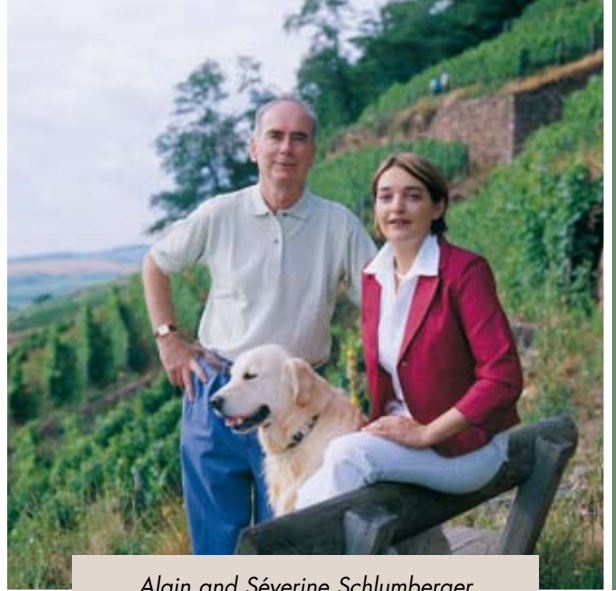


# Meet Séverine Schlumberger

*This charming dynamo is the seventh generation to run her family's wine business.*

RICHARD L. ELIA



Alain and Séverine Schlumberger

“I have only one daughter, but she talks enough for ten,” said Eric Schlumberger of his discursing and indefatigable daughter, Séverine, who now runs Domaines Schlumberger. The stylish Séverine is thirtysomething and is presently the seventh generation to run Schlumberger, the largest domaine in Alsace, now celebrating its 200th year. Located in Guebwiller at the southern end of the tiny Alsace vignoble, which is only 70 miles long and two miles wide, the property is gorgeous, with steep slopes, excellent exposure, splendid vistas of impeccable patchwork quilt vineyard plots, scaled terraces, and Roman-like walls erected pyramidically up the hilltops.

Séverine Schlumberger is the voice of the Domaines, and she is never without words. When asked what her role is at the winery, she says “everything, anything, whatever is needed, except make wine. I know my limitations. I took over in 2001. My father called me in London where I was learning English and working (she still speaks with a British accent) and said he was retiring. I said, ‘are you really retiring because if you aren’t, I’m not joining.’ I couldn’t work with him,” she says with her usual directness. “He did retire and now my uncle Alain and I run things. My youngest brother will be joining us in September and we’ll be rocking and rolling. My two older brothers had no interest, which is why I was called.” There may be a familiar family strain between father and daughter, a subject we didn’t care to pursue, but there clearly is none with her uncle, whom she admires. “We’re the guardians of our heritage; we share the same passion for wines. We work well together,” she says further suggesting that each enjoys a sense of adventure and *joie de vivre*.

In talking with her, we make reference to Domaines Schlumberger’s size, but Séverine stops us: “Some think that because we’re the largest domaine in Alsace that we’re a large, lifeless, monolithic company. We’re family owned and family run. Family is vital to me and to the Schlumbergers, all 200 years of it. We have 350 acres. But we grow our own grapes — we never buy from anyone. We’re still farmers, we have our feet on the ground, we belong to the soil, which we respect. People say what a great job I have. They romanticize it. I say to

them, “would you say the same thing about a potato grower or a tomato grower? Well, we do the same work.”

Any talk of celebrating the 200th anniversary is waved aside by Séverine, a petite dynamo who barely takes a breath, saying with her usual directness and a little irony: “We’re Protestants, we watch our money; there will be no pomp and circumstance; it’s business as usual. As I said we have our feet on the ground, we’re farmers. This is not Bordeaux or Champagne.”

Our conversation turns to perception, a topic that stirs her ire. If Alsace has little visibility in the United States, then blame Alsace. The entire region has been too “Protestant,” spending very little money on touring, marketing, and tastings. Advertising, for that matter, is virtually non-existent. Bordeaux, Burgundy, Italy and Spain are leagues ahead. Séverine frowns but agrees: “Alsace needs better public relations. I want to get ten producers together and go out on tour and spread the word. We need to educate consumers. We need to be more glamorous. As a group we’re not strong enough. We have a spirit of place. Schlumberger, like the rest of Alsace,” she says emphatically, “is not German.” Alsace, of course, was a hotly disputed historical area in eastern France, which was once part of western Germany, now separated by the Rhine. Many of the residents still speak Alsatian, a dialect different from French. It is further a “spirit of place” by the fact it is separated from much of France by the Vosges mountains. Alsace has a sophisticated provincialism all its own — and some of the best dining in France. “Our wines and our traditions are unique. Our wines are not sweet. Our labels are simple, not confusing like German ones. I even want a wine bottle with a different shape. The one we have looks German. I want something between an Italian and French wine bottle, and something that says ‘Alsace’.”

In the United States, our failure to drink more Alsace wines may be one of our wine tragedies. The wines are of such quality that they can turn the most hedonistic red wine drinker into an ardent Alsatian. Since 1983, when *Grand Cru* was added to the production, Alsace wines made a quantum leap in quality. The wines — especially the *Grand Cru* — are dry, floral, softly



perfumed, nicely spiced, earthy and minerally, with unique petroleum tones, texture and rich flavors, all with proper oak. One gets a new appreciation for the glories of Riesling, Gewürztraminer, and the underrated Pinot Gris. Perhaps more than those from any other major wine region, Alsace wines are consistent, reliable, and sensibly priced.

Our admiration of Alsace began decades ago when British wine writers, like Hugh Johnson, Serena Sutcliffe, and Jancis Robinson spoke glowingly of them. The British wine press have always had a greater admiration of white wines than most U.S. writers. Of Schlumberger, Hugh Johnson writing in his *Modern Encyclopedia* says the wines are some of the “richest of Alsace,” with “half of the estate in *Grand Cru* vineyards ... Guebwiller’s warm climate, sandy soils, and sheltered sites allied with old-style methods, make Schlumberger wines some of the roundest wines of Alsace, ... which repay several years of bottle ageing.” We mention the “old-style methods” to Séverine who is proud of this: “We still have time honored farming traditions, like using our own horses to plough the soil. They’re our treasure. They’re Comtois horses who work our steep terraces. Our wine cellars have monuments in them — I’m referring to 120 centenary oak casks there. Of course, we’re modern as well, having spent 3.5 million Euros updating our cellars with thermo control; we’re a union of tradition and innovation. Much of the wine world has gone green, but we’ve always been

that way, employing sustainable growing, organic and biodynamic practices. We respect the environment — it’s a moral matter to us.”

Of the 350 acres at Schlumberger, Séverine is eager to promote her *Grand Cru*. “We have three major vineyards in *Grand Cru* — Kitterle, Kessler, and Saering. In the last few years, there have been a few fabulous vintages, 2003 and 2007 especially, and the *Grand Cru* wines from these vineyards are special, and they can age well.” At this point, she withdraws from her luggage a bottle of 1945 Riesling Schlumberger. “It’s the oldest wine in our cellars — it’s 65 years old. During World War II there were no farmers to care for it in the vineyards. Its survival is a remarkable gift of nature; that it survived the Germans makes it historical.” The wine was deeply yellow and brown with streaks of gold; its aromas were in tact — perfumed and floral — and its acids were still vibrant. It was young in its way, with engaging nutty flavors and firm structure, but with a slowly weakening finish. It was, as she said, “history.” Séverine concludes, “a wine should tell a story. This 1945 tells us about Alsace, about its moment in our 200 years. Our recent wines tell a story that I want our customers to know. It’s about our quality, our seriousness. We’re not interested in mere volume. My father always told me ‘never be afraid to refuse a customer,’ one who didn’t appreciate what we are offering, who wanted price more than wine. To me, the most important customer is the one pulling a cork from our wine.” ☞

#### SOME RECENT SCHLUMBERGER RELEASES

- **2007 DOMAINES SCHLUMBERGER PINOT BLANC “LES PRINCE ABBES,” \$13.** Nice everyday, casual wine, and even better as an aperitif, that’s crisp and fragrant and lively.
- **2006 DOMAINES SCHLUMBERGER RIESLING “LES PRINCE ABBES,” \$16.** Deeply yellow, brisk aromatics of flowers and earthy-mineral notes, soft acids; it’s lovely, long and deep.
- **2006 DOMAINES SCHLUMBERGER RIESLING GRAND CRU “SAERING,” \$23.** This brings a new respect for Alsatian *Grand Cru*: beautiful yellow and gold colors, rich texture, engaging pungent petroleum aromas, with whiffs of perfume and flowers. Deep, long, and delicious. Buy lots.
- **2005 DOMAINES SCHLUMBERGER GRAND CRU PINOT GRIS “SPIEGEL,” \$25.** Delicious. Aromas of peaches, crisp acidity, earthy notes, smooth texture with lots of structure and flavorful finish.
- **2002 DOMAINES SCHLUMBERGER GEWÜRZTRAMINER GRAND CRU “KESSLER,” \$28.** The noblest of the Schlumberger wines we tasted that day. Deep gold hue, mineral-earthy-petroleum nose, with aromatic floral notes, deeply concentrated, huge structure, with finish to match. Buy as much as you can.