



20 | TERRY THEISE
17 | ESTATE SELECTIONS

CHAMPAGNE



THEISE MANIFESTO

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

*The whole of any wine must always
be more than the sum of its parts.*

*Distinctiveness is more important
than conventional prettiness.*

*Soul is more important than anything,
and soul is expressed as a trinity of
family, soil and artisanality.*

*Lots of wines, many of them good wines,
let you taste the noise. But only the
best let you taste the silence.*

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CHAMPAGNE

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INTRODUCTION



As I write, today, the funeral for Denis Varnier—of Champagne Varnier-Fannièrè—has just taken place. Denis was only forty nine, and as far as anyone could tell he was a paradigm of vitality. I liked Denis very much, and I absolutely love his wines. The day I received the news we had a bottle of his Grand Vintage already in the fridge with plans to drink it that evening.

We have a little deck outside our kitchen, and I like to taste wines in the open air, when they seem more vivid. (It helps if the air is dry and cool, but this is Boston we're talking about, and you'd laugh to see the arctic gales I'll venture outside in, just to eke every scintilla of nuance from my wines...) It was a pretty Spring evening, on the cool side, nothing really leafing out yet but everything wanting to.

The Champagne was superb; every bottle has been superb. I stood there with wet eyes and toasted my friend Denis, and

*thought about the mysteries of our lives, all of us. Around me a thousand buds seemed to be asking **Now? Is it time? Can we open now?** In my glass the beauty exploded in a million gentle bubbles. In the world surrounding me, the seeds were stirring. In my heart, my dead friend.*

This year's work is dedicated to Denis Varnier.

If you are 35 years old or younger, there's an excellent chance that you *don't* remember a wine world in which grower Champagnes didn't dominate your Champagne attention. I made my first offering in the Fall of 1997; you'd have been sixteen or younger. By the time you entered the wine industry, everything had changed for Champagne.

To put those numbers in perspective, back then there were 33 RMs exporting to the United States, representing 0.62%

of U.S. exports. Might as well have been nothing. Today there are **nine times** that number. That's right—**284** RMs sending wine to us, and this number doesn't even include the growers who, for reasons of French tax laws, are "officially" NMs but who do all the work themselves. The market share now has billowed to 4.87%. This isn't a very large number, and the five biggest brands still control 67% of the market, so we're basically a pebble in their shoe; we won't cripple them but we can sure mess up their hike. Most significant, this 4.87% is quite conspicuous in the places that matter, the "prestige" placements, spots on wine lists and by-the-glass, and retailer newsletters, and journalist stories and reviews.

It also seems to have grown into a stable number; it has found its sustainable equilibrium. Five percent, give or take, is a healthy market share, and 284 is a healthy



number of growers. In fact it's a smaller number than last year, which I think is actually encouraging. Quality was at risk of dilution as mediocre growers started showing up on the lists of importers who were late to the farmer-fizz phenom. By then the best and next-best growers were already snapped up.

Back in the dark days the conversation about Champagne—to the extent there was one—consisted in rote articles about the “house styles” of the Big Brands, and each year around early December you'd see the invariable token columns on *Which Champagnes To Drink For the Holidays*. None of it was very interesting. All of it carried the stale stink of commercial volume-driven business, coated with a veneer of spurious “romance,” and trade secrets protected just as though they were guarding the Coke formula.

The big guys kept their cards close to the vest, possibly from force of habit

and partly in order to obscure the fact they often had little to say. They promulgated a kind of macro “terroir” by which the primacy of Champagne was asserted, while allowing their vineyards to be used as a repository for trash from Paris. They firmly denied the usefulness of terroir distinctions *within* the region because their work obliterated those distinctions. Moreover they insisted that great Champagne *had* to be blended, because no single terroir was any good alone.

It was a dull morose world, and it seems like a nightmare now, though it was less than twenty years ago. Many things have changed for the better. The market is full (too full, but we'll go into that later) of growers, everyone is talking about terroir, it turned out those distinctions were valid after all, and not just valid: *fascinating*. The mega-companies no longer had control of the narrative, and this shocked them, dismayed them, and in the fullness

of time, prompted some of them to enter the world of the fine wine business and the mentalities it fosters. Many of the big houses have improved, qualitatively. Many of them are less parsimonious with information. (They had to be, or no one would bother talking with them any more.) Many of them are working to improve the conditions of the vineyards.

Yet most of them still think with “industrial” minds. You see it in how they treat their customers. There's very little to distinguish their actions in the marketplace from Big Whiskey or Big Wine (such as Gallo); they just have a higher level of fairy dust to sprinkle over it all. And they have a lamentable tendency to overbid the price of any vineyard land that becomes available—in an effort to shut the growers out—and they continue to bid up the price they'll pay for grapes, so that the irresolute grower will say “We work less hard and make more money

selling grapes to LVMH, so why not just quit making Champagne ourselves?”

Thankfully there are enough growers for whom it's fun, and enough of them who appreciate the values they enact, and I think that for any three who may close up shop, there's five new ones about to open. Growers are proliferating, and yes, Yay, because we want more growers. The question is, how *good* are these growers?

The answer is, some of them are excellent, talented, passionate. Some of them are just... passionate. And one hopes their customers know the difference. I do understand that any portfolio that's been on the market for a while starts to fade into the landscape. That makes sense; it also happens to me. I do not understand the idea that someone now knows everything there is to be known about a grower just because you've had the wines over the years. Most growers are moving targets, and just because someone new comes along doesn't make it *better* than what's already available.

So there's another way that Champagne is just like all the other wines: you have to discriminate. It's another sign of a mature market—and 2017 is the 20th year I've been doing this, and I don't care what people say, Farmer-Fizz is here to stay. Thus I wince a little when I see really gnarly wines extolled to the very skies because of some hallucination of hipster cred. I went to see a new grower last month. The guy came highly endorsed (from trusted friends) and it was a terroir I didn't already offer, and I arrived hopeful. The man himself was genial and interesting and likeable. All systems go, all indicators positive.

After tasting six wines, I really only liked one and found another that “worked” in a style unconvincing to me. They were charged, pronounced wines, but there was ice where their souls should have been. Most of them were imbalanced, and even if I agreed that it was fine for Champagnes to have essentially zero fruit, I granted the point they were interesting to “study” but I couldn't fathom wanting to *drink* any (but one) of them. A few of them reminded me of dosage-seminar wines we use to demonstrate *imbalance* in Champagne. Yet I am queasily sure the fellow will find an importer who will insist the wines are “cutting edge” in contrast to my archaic classicism.

If asked to sum up this portfolio, it consists of a number of absolute *benchmark* growers, alongside of another number of pretty compelling geeks. I know there's a trope out in the ether that this portfolio is somehow “conservative,” but

that's far from the truth. If this group of growers were only just now being introduced to the market by someone eager to establish his hipster bona-fides, (s)he could say:

We have the first grower to ever make a Blanc de Blancs from Aÿ. We have the first grower to plant a field blend of every permitted variety inside a single parcel, and to vinify it all together and produce a Champagne from it under the parcel name. We have the first ever Spécial Club that's 100% Meunier, and the first ever 100% Meunier *Rosé* Spécial Club. We have the first grower ever to make a range of cuvées from the *heirloom* varieties; we have one of the first growers to use concrete eggs in his cellar, and to break-out his production into a group of single-parcel single-variety Champagnes. I'm not sure how much more *recherché* one has to be—do we ferment with goat spleens? Do we introduce some gnarly worm-ridden chunk of *Bleu de Termignon* into the cellar so that the cheese maggots can eat the “ambient” yeasts and then shit out even *more* ambient yeasts? “We have a mastiff whom we allow to drool into the vats, because he lives here with us and is therefore also an element of terroir...”

When I drink a wine like Peters' Chétillons, Gimmonnet's Spécial Club, or just about anything from Hébrart, I think “Can anything more be asked of Champagne than this?” Classicism is consistent with creativity, and indeed it's the tandem of those two things that can make a wine profound. But too many things calling themselves “creative” are merely self-indulgent and sophomoric.

Now that grower Champagne is itself trendy, it brought out all the little dogma cockroaches from their hiding places within the walls. As a result we waste a huge amount of time arguing over how much RS is the right amount, forgetting that this question has already been answered again and again. The right amount is what tastes the best, whether it is zero grams, or 3 or 7 or 10. The dry-at-all-costs mentality is sucking a lot of tastiness, charm and grace from myriad Champagnes. And as much as we talk it to death, did you know the market share for extra-brut and zero-dosage Champagne is actually only 1.3%?

TWO THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW

Most of you do know that Champagne villages are classified on a so-called “scale of growths,” and that 17 of these villages

are Grand Cru, after which there's a slew of Premier Crus and then a very big glom of just plain Crus. Many of you know, or have wondered, how they could classify entire communes, when any given commune's vineyards are bound to vary in quality. To use a blatant example, the least of (GC) Cramant isn't as good as the best of (PC) Cuis, its neighbor.

The natural question becomes, why isn't there a classification of actual vineyards within communes, so that the best of them can be recognized?

The usual answer is, everybody knows which are the best parcels and sites, but it would be politically impossible to enact such a granular classification, because all it could do is harm. That is, think of a grower who trades on his “Grand Cru” Cramant, whereas in fact he has the lowest quality land in the commune. If his parcels are suddenly downgraded to Premier Cru, it's tantamount to lifting Euros from his pocket. Growers would take to the streets with pitchforks. So, it is argued; such a classification is impossible.

Except, it already exists. And is used. Just not shared with the likes of us.

Each commune has land in categories A, B and C, and the hierarchy is taken into account for all manner of vineyard work including the issuing of the official permission to start harvesting. It is based largely on microclimate. These things have been studied, observed, and are known. So JB Geoffroy might receive permission to pick his (warmest) category-A vineyards in Cumières 3-4 days before he's allowed to start in the category-B vineyards, and Cumières in general will begin earlier than, say, Damery or Dizy.

Ambient warmth isn't everything. There are geological factors in play, as well as exposure, and it could well be that a grower's cooler vineyard—say an east-facing parcel—will give his best wine because of a longer hang-time. Degree-days alone are a blunt object. Yet! I think this information should be shared with the public, because I think the more we know about where wines come from, the more deeply we will understand them.

Another thing we don't talk about enough is this:

When Didier Gimmonnet told me “We waited to pick and then had to pick all at once because the grapes were ripening immediately; we actually picked some lots with 10.5 and even 11% potential alcohol,” my first question was how you keep the eventual Champagne within the typical 12.5% alc after the second fermentation. It turns out there are two ways. One is, you manipulate the second

fermentation by the amount of sugar in the liqueur de tirage, and the other is you manipulate residual sugar. In short, you will create less supplemental alcohol by using less sugar in your sugar-yeast mixture. Which in turn means you won't necessarily have the six atmospheres of pressure one presumes are present in normal Champagne. In fact this is far from uniform, and one grower told me, "You can find everything from four and a half to six and all points between."

Something we hear less often is that not all secondary fermentations complete to absolute dryness. I don't suppose it happens a lot, but I'm also certain there are Champagnes with residual sugar in the base wine before dosage is added. It's worth remembering when you listen to the dry or anti-dosage purists. Most of them of course mean exactly what they say, but we should at least bear in mind, when someone says how dry his wine is because he uses little or no dosage, that his base wine may have had a dollop of its own sweetness.

Last year was the year-of-the-dosage-trials, as growers let me further into their process. I am touched by the collegial gestures of trust. I also have strong opinions on this question, or better said, one strong opinion. It's simple and seems self-evident, until you contemplate how infrequently it is applied.

Wine should be balanced. Different wines are balanced with different amounts of sweetness, and a few are balanced with little or none. The 4 g/L of a Lallement Rosé would simply not work with Margaine's Rosé, but it's perfect for Lallement. Other examples abound.

But why does this even need to be said? This is kindergarten wine understanding! But, sadly, a common sense proposition like this one is mortally threatened by an obtuse and dogmatic insistence that drier is always preferable. And this idea is just stupid enough to be speciously seductive, and a lot of otherwise sharp cookies were seduced.

So I was hugely encouraged when two growers shared their dosage trials with me, because these were two who seemed at risk of slipping down the rabbit hole whereby dryness was forced into their wines as proof of purity. I watched them return to reasonableness, and was happy.

Less dosage is not always better. It doesn't make your wine more honest, more pure, more transparent, more sophisticated or more honorable; it just makes it more dry. Among the many dubious things we owe the big Champagne houses is that they've poisoned the well

by making their commercial bottlings treacly-sweet in order to mask the deficiencies of the base product, or because they presume their "market" wants the wines sweet. And so we all believe that less sweetness is more desirable. First we let them dupe us, and then we duped ourselves.

Less sweetness is more desirable under two and only two circumstances in Champagne: one, the wine tastes better that way; two, the drinker happens to honestly dislike sweetness in his Champagne. (We'll leave aside for the moment the sweetness he accepts in myriads of other things...). You cannot determine these things until you taste. Can you imagine someone saying "I ate a lot of Fritos when I was a kid, and now I just can't stand the taste of salt in anything." Somehow it's only sugar that inspires these theological disputes. Tom Stevenson recently published an article in *World of Fine Wine* in which he said—someone finally said—that Champagnes with less than 6 grams per liter (g/L) wouldn't age well. I'll revisit this subject when I write about the many shades of "Brut" a little later on.

MORE WORDS ABOUT THE 2011 VINTAGE

The good news is, it is retreating. This year's NVs are markedly better than last years, and we have a few good years ahead of us, as all of them have been good, and two of them—'13 and '12—appear to blend really well together. Chartogne and Peters, to name but two, are offering the best NV Bruts they've ever offered. But growers who practice the "perpetual reserve" for their NV wines will still need to reckon with a diminishing amount of 2011 in those cuvées.

I am at the point where I won't order an NV wine sight-unseen at least for another year. Whether grower or Negoç, 99% of the wines stink of pyrazine. I am nearly certain it comes from ladybugs. Author Richard Juhlin writes that he was present for the 2011 harvest and the bugs were everywhere. Also, we know what causes that smell by now; we've been seeing it in various places since 2004. I don't mean to disrespect the growers who insist it is a form of under ripeness, or a form of botrytis or stem-rot. They *could* be right. But I doubt it.

I screened anything with "the '11 aroma" really rigorously this year. A couple wines will show it as an almost indis-

cernible nuance, and some wines won't show it at all, even when they're entirely '11. As a general rule, if you're looking at disgorgement dates starting in late 2014, you are probably safe. But bear in mind that this cannot be categorical.

Apropos disgorgements, we began by asking growers to provide these dates for all NV wines, as otherwise there was no way for you or I to know whether we had this wine or that, freshly arrived or been-here-awhile, not to mention it's always smart to wait at least nine months after disgorgement before you broach the bottle. Most growers just decided to put the dates on all their wines. "Why not? If we do one wine it's no more difficult just to do them all." One would have supposed this solved a problem, usefully. One would have failed to reckon with certain aspects of customer psychology, or simply human nature. People, it turned out, grew fixated on just **one** possible disgorgement date, especially if it had been reviewed. No other date would do. When I learned of this I allowed myself a rueful chuckle. Oh well, it's a small price to pay to serve the greater good. Some geek will always lay a fart in the elevator.

But there started to be a backlash among certain growers. Not because they were shrinking from offering information, but because they believed it was the *wrong* information, and would lead to just the kind of market behavior I described. These growers have proposed UPCs on their bottles, which will yield a huge amount of information when read by your smart phone. I have a lot of respect and sympathy for that approach. Anything that promotes transparency is good.

My caveat is probably this: The disgorgement date is the least bad way to let us know—merchants and civilians alike—what kind of shape the bottle's likely to be in. A code linking to a pdf or webpage with that (and more) info is all well and good, provided the drinker has a smart phone on hand at that very moment.

The info itself is excellent, but will it fit on the U.S. Export label with all the mandatory garbage? And even if it did, how will the drinker know that they don't ship UNTIL x-months after disgorgement? Is that also going to find space on the already crowded label? Or do we need to just learn that little fact?

But the overriding theme is, at LAST producers are asking what is the best way to give the consumer the information she ought to have. That's all I care about in the end.

PIERRE GIMONNET



REGION / SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs / Cuis

VINEYARD AREA

28 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,800 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Cramant Grand Cru,
Chouilly Grand Cru,
Oger Grand Cru,
Aÿ Grand Cru,
Vertus 1er Cru,
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru
(chalk);
Cuis 1er Cru
(chalk and clay)

GRAPE VARIETIES

98% Chardonnay
2% Pinot Noir

AT A GLANCE

28-hectare winery, therefore enough wine, which is good because it is VERY BEAUTIFUL WINE with great class and savor. And sensible prices!

HOW THE WINES TASTE

The wines are suave, creamy and refined, with a "soft" minerality dispersed through the fruit. Silky, stylish wines rather than vigorous, racy wines. These are very deliciously accommodating to the palate. Old vines impart a palpable creaminess. The majority of Gimonnet's vineyards are more than 40 years old, the oldest parcel (in Cramant) is 100. The wines tolerate a very low dosage, 6-8 grams per liter for most Bruts. "For me, we must have concentration, but also balance, elegance and harmony," says Didier. This is more than just word-wash for him. He's constantly challenged by callow journalists for his views on yields and ripeness. And he goes on making his lovely wines, which have all the density they need and no more. "In 2003 we had, as you've surely heard, a great vintage," he said. "And just as an experiment we left some grapes hanging three weeks after the end of the regular harvest. They achieved a potential alcohol of nearly 13% (T.T. here: 9-10% is considered normal) and we vinified them separately. Later, when we were tasting the lots for assemblage, we agreed unanimously, this wine was useless to us; it belonged nowhere. We ended up selling it off. It was heavy and clumsy."

"I prefer harmony to intensity."
– Didier Gimonnet

There's no plausible denying that Gimonnet is one of the titans of the Côte des Blancs, certainly the top grower in the three communes Chouilly, Cramant and Cuis, and producer of one of Champagne's Blanc de Blancs icons, his Spécial Club. And the wines are actually improving!

You see it as soon as you start tasting the *vins clairs*. I'd made a visit to a well-regarded producer in Cramant the day before, entailing a tasting of *vins clairs* from various lieux-dits in Cramant, a helpful explication of terroir and some very nice wines. However—first sip at Gimonnet: perspective.

Didier gave an interview last Fall, and spent some time explaining how "unfashionable" he was. I knew what he meant to say, and I know the joy he takes in saying un-trendy things. But—and he hasn't asked me to do this—I wish to elaborate. He isn't so much "unfashionable" as his values are more durable and he isn't swayed by fashion. He is faithful to his own experience, his principles arise empirically, and I have seen him adapt his principles not to fashion, but to the ordinary development of his own curiosity. If I say he is a classicist, that doesn't mean the man or his wines are colorless. It means that Didier and his Champagnes are benchmarks, and that they represent permanent values, those that abide regardless of this fashion or that one. You do understand that word "classicist," right? The syllogism is this: if "Champagne" is a great type of wine, and if a "classic" is the pinnacle of its type, then a "classicist" is someone whose wines are as good as the

type—as Champagne—can be. The curiosity of a serious person seeks always to learn more and to deepen. The curiosity of a frivolous person seeks only novelty. It is a strong year for Didier; his wines are markedly superb even by his standards. Again and again as I tasted I heard myself think, what more can be asked of Blanc de Blancs Champagne than this? What more can be asked of any Champagne? He seems to enjoy telling us what he will never do, and then doing it. When I first met him he was resolute: nothing but

Chardonnay in Gimmonnet Champagnes. And no rosé! Then his curiosity got the best of him and he made the cuvée “Paradoxe,” a blend of CH/PN. And then, of course, he made a rosé, one very much in the sheer, aerial Gimmonnet style. He has also said he’d never make a monocru or a single-commune wine, yet he has done just that, and there are monocrus en tirage.

Gimmonnet’s is a polished domaine as small growers go, with his 28 hectares, the most in the Côte des Blancs. He’s renovat-

ed his reception area, and you can now taste as the delicate ladies and gentlemen I know you to be. It is, dare I say, elegant. But then Didier wants to find some piece of information about a harvest gone by, and instead of pulling it up on his up-to-the-minute iPad (nowhere to be seen, in fact) he pulls it from a decidedly ratty pocket-sized little notebook, where all the data are scribbled by hand. This I just love.

Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KPG-1

+

Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V.

3/1500ml | KPG-1M

(+)

This wine improves exponentially if you can bear not to drink it for a few years after you get it home. I took a bottle from the cold-box of a store in San Francisco and drank it at dinner, and my friend—also a wine pro—thought there had to be some mistake, this was way too good to be the “mere” NV. Indeed it was; but the disgorgement was three years old, and we wouldn’t have been surprised if we’d been told it was a *négoce Tête-de-Cuvée*.

Apropos *négoçes*, Didier sells a little to one of the good ones, who told him “We don’t use grapes from the Côte des Blancs for non-vintage wines; they’re too precious. They go into *Millésime* and *Tête-de-Cuvées*.”

So is this really an “NV Brut?” Only insofar as there’s nothing else to call it. What it actually is is an *apéritif* wine from Cuis. This commune gives *fruit* to any blend it’s included in, especially from the climat *Croix Blanche*.

Another thing conferring unusual class on this wine is, the back-vintages you see in the *cuvée* are not just any-old wine from the stated vintage; they are the *finished blend of the NV of that year*. It creates a kind of chain reaction of complexity, as a given “NV Brut” from Gimmonnet could contain—literally—hundreds of wines. This practice was started in 1997, and only differs from other similar “perpetual reserves” by being aged not in tanks or casks but in Magnums. This entails a huge amount of work, but the wines are fresher and yet also more mature by dint of extra autolysis.

What’s on the market now was disgorged in August 2016, and this will be here through the summer. It’s 70% 2013, 6% 2012, 9% of 2011, 10% of 2010 and 5% of 2009. It’s both classy and *classic* young Gimmonnet; mineral, stylish and needing only time to shed the youthful brashness that partly obscures the rich toasty flowery fruit. It holds out a thread to the riotously aromatic Jasmine “Dragon Pearls” I’m drinking right this very moment, from my pals at Red Blossom in SF.

Its successor is 65% 2014, 12% 2013, 10% 2012, 8% of 2011 and 5% of 2010. Disgorged in Feb 2017, Didier feels it’s a quick developer. I find (not negative) a subtle oxidative note, while fellow tasters spoke of “lactic” “caramel” and “butterscotch.” Didier theorizes it’s the ‘12 in the blend. Personally I wouldn’t object to a forward edition of this typically reticent wine. I also have an intuition it will taste *more youthful* in the Fall with time on the cork, which flies in the face of all logic, but I’m just an antic galoot.

Finally, the MAGNUM is the same wine as the 2013-based NV, and was disgorged the day before my visit. It’s not at all forbidding, but needs 2 years or so to soften its starched crunchy profile.

Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils “Rosé de Blancs” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KPG-5

(+)

Again this is the *Gastronome* assemblage with 8% Bouzy Pinot Noir (‘14 and ‘13). The balance—92% is 2014, and consists of 25.5% Chouilly (from the great *Montaigu*), 16.5% Cramant, 10% Oger, 9% Vertus and 32% Cuis (*Croix Blanche*, the most Riesling/Chenin like of the Cuis parcels).

Disgorged 11/2016, it remains a stylish gauzy Rosé that seeks to be delicate but is almost too expressive (!); the silvery herbal mineral lunges ahead of the pink fruit, which emerges on the finish and in the empty glass. I love it now, and wonder where it’ll go.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronome” Brut 2012

+ +

12/750ml | KPG-212

This is often my great favorite, for times when I want a slender minerally Champagne with character and length. Didier's goal is to create a Champagne for the table—thus it has 4 rather than 6 atmospheres of pressure, and a silkier mousse. That said, we're all starting to realize that most Champagne is fantastic with food.

It's 50% Chouilly *Montaigu* and *Rond Buissons*, both in the 55-65 year old range, 21.5% Cuis, 15.5% Cramant and 13% Oger. Maybe it's that Oger or perhaps it's the '12, but this is a fabulous iteration of this (I bought it immediately for my cellar), textbook, a paradigm, the best in years. Long and rich, but incisively thready and chalky.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Fleuron” Brut, 2010

+

12/750ml | KPG-710

If Gimonnet's wines are ever “rich and generous” it's with this vintage-cuvée, which is lambswool as opposed to the cashmere of the Club and the Gastronome. We have 27% Chouilly, 40.5% Cramant, 6% Oger (including *Terres de Noël*), 16% Cuis and 10.5% Vertus. Disgorged 12/2016.

I am finding my way to 2010. At times it seems constricted and green—“green” as in not-quite-ripe. Yet there are wines at the slim peak of the pyramid that are really sizzingly good in an iridescent way that reminds me of 2004, with more mizuna and less verbenia. This wine is a case in point; it has fine, focused searching aromas, the cool steel point of '10 with the collagen-richness of Fleuron. More herbal and chalky than brioche-y but none the worse for it. Very long for its silky self.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleuron” Brut, 2009

(+ +)

3/1500ml | KPG-709M

The 750s are a noble citizen in my cellar, and the Magnum only needs time. The assemblage is similar to the '10—no Vertus is the primary difference—and it was disgorged 12/2016.

Before getting to the wine, what's with Magnums? It's said to be the “perfect vessel” and there's little question that all things being equal, the Mag will overtake the 750 with age. The two sizes also age disparately. I have said elsewhere that bottles age from the stomach out, and Mags age from the head down. So the 750 shows more... let's call it “fruit” or “middle” or even “vinosity” and it seems to billow out from a tertiary center, like the trunk of a person's body. The Magnum, in contrast, is always taller, more tensile, more cerebral; it develops from the head and runs down; it will usually show *less* “fruit” but more complexity because every other element is heightened. 15-20 years after the vintage it is (usually!) clear the Mag has left the 750 in the dust. But I think the Mag needs to be respected for the particular critter it is, and serving/pouring from young Magnum can be an affectation, because more often the 750 is the more attractive drink—when both are young.

This one could well be the most *intense* Gimonnet wine I've tasted; the aromas are muted but the palate is quite the fanfare of herbal vim, with the Altoid-shriek of too-young Magnum. Lay it down at least 3-5 years.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Oenophile” Non-Dosé Extra Brut, 2008

+

12/750ml | KPG-308

I don't know when I've tasted a better bone-dry Champagne, and it's from a high-acid vintage. A really fine fragrance; about as grand as can be imagined. It has—as most such wines do—about 1.5g/l rs after 2nd fermentation—and what complexity, seamless balance, crushed oyster-shell, length, lemony splash and suave stoniness. On the short list for WINES OF THE OFFERING. It is exactly the Fleuron blend, without dosage. New disg. 02/17

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Paradoxe” Brut, 2008

+

12/750ml | KPG-908

I like this wine and hope Didier keeps making it, though it adds a line item in an already large offering. This '08 is richer and “sweeter” than '07, a more endomorphic body showing more PN than last year's, but with the tightness and length of '08. Sure it's atypical Gimonnet but it's also good Champagne. 81% PN (from Ay and Mareuil) and 19% Chardonnay (of which 7% is Mareuil).

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Oger Grand Cru” Brut, N.V.

(+)

12/750ml | KPG-10

It's a first from Didier—an 100% Grand Cru and a single commune wine, not to mention an “alien” terroir down in the “Mediterranean heat” of Oger, which is about six miles away from Cuis, by the way. It's 55% *Terres de Noël*, 18% *Fondy* (on clay, not chalk) and *Champs Nérons* (chalk again, and 64 year vines). Didier himself calls it “less fruity and more austere,” but I find it seductive, with classic smoke and nectarine, easygoing yet classical.

Pierre Gimonnet “Spécial Club” Brut, 2010

+ (+)

6/750ml | KPG-410

This icon-wine of the Côte des Blancs is compelling and unusual in 2010, largely focused on its green elements (balsam, wintergreen) and florals (osmanthus and lilac) and less on its savor—which makes sense from 2010, an incisive but seldom generous year. Yet there is a curious warmth that emerges on the finish here, alongside an intricate minerality. In bud form now, this delicate chiseled wine is a masterpiece of sensual logic, not (yet) of revelry. And it tastes wonderful. 61% Cramant, 23.5% Chouilly, 14% Cuis and 1.5% Vertus—we have details on the climats; just ask if you’re curious.

A year later (and a new disg. 10/2016) a crusty-forestry mid-palate is starting to emerge; it’s a superb but still atypical Club, that I think will always show the herbal cool balsam and resins of the vintage, though it will of course change with 7-9 years age.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Spécial Club” Brut, 2012

+ (+)

6/750ml | KPG-412

Disg. 04/2016, available from September forward, the blend is 60% Cramant (from 7 parcels including the most ancient vines, well over 100 years), 30% Chouilly and 10% Cuis. It’s a masterpiece in the making but it’s also a rebel-yell of Club, big-footed and with unusual amplitude. I wonder whether it will slim down like the ‘09.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Spécial Club” Chouilly Grand Cru Brut, 2012

(+ +)

12/750ml | KPG-312

Part of a three-commune series of Club bottlings, in tiny quantities, and again, this arose not from dissatisfaction with the existing Clubs (which are perfect and need not be improved—cannot be) but from sheer curiosity. *What’s everyone talking about with these micro-terroir wines?* There’s also a Cramant wine for which the jury’s out. But [this](#) will be interesting!

Disg. 3/17 it is 100% *Montaigu* (planted in 1951), picked 9/21 and not chaptalized. He plans to release it at year’s end, but I might suggest waiting longer, bearing in mind I tasted from a bottle disgorged in the previous couple days.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Spécial Club” Oger Grand Cru Brut, 2012

+

12/750ml | KPG-412

This is of course a radical departure for Gimonnet, a Club monoterroir. It hails from 54% Terres de Noël and Brulis, 23% Champs Nérons (chalk) and 23% Fondy (limestone). It’s a sexy-pants Champagne; it’s got wiggle; toasted brioche, allspice, sautéed peaches, but what really makes this fly is the underlying mineral, and a fascinating note of quince taps your shoulder just before it leaves.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleurion” Brut, 2008

+ +

12/750ml | KPG-708

This is a “cellar reserve” disg in 2015, and the wine is fabulous, a fabulous tertiary wine from a superb vintage; malt and brioche and balsam, clinging and hedonic and spicy. Just a riot to drink now. Bless him for making it available!

The blend is 33.5% Cramant, 32.5% Chouilly, 10% Oger, 22% Cuis and 2% Vertus.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Millésime de Collection, Vieilles Vignes de Chardonnay” Brut, 2006

+ +

3/1500ml | KPG-606M

Again, a noble impulse, to offer a back-vintage in Mags that one can actually drink for pleasure right damn now. A very fresh (02/17) disgorgement somewhat impedes this, but even so it’s a textured, generous but not effusive glass of wine. You can drink it without guilt or keep it a few more years. As a rule ‘06 is a quick-developing, round and juicy vintage, but the best wines—most often the Blanc de Blancs—have a chalky spine which the Magnum format emphasizes.

The blend is 65% Cramant, 22.5% Chouilly and 12.5% Cuis.

We ended the tasting with a look at two gorgeous old Champagnes, a ‘73 Club and a ‘61 Fleurion, the latter one of the great wines I have ever tasted (and which contained some Pinot Meunier from plots in Cuis), but I’m keeping my powder dry on the notes I wrote, and may put them into my new book.

VARNIER-FANNIÈRE



REGION / SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs / Avize

VINEYARD AREA

4 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Avize Grand Cru,
Cramant Grand Cru,
Oger Grand Cru,
Oiry Grand Cru
(chalk)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Chardonnay

AT A GLANCE

Tiny, 4 hectare domaine with exclusively Grand Cru land. Young vigneron making feline-snappy ultra-clear wines.

Curiously, in Champagne it is often possible to link the person to the wine by vibe alone. Hébrart's sculpted style is reflected in JP's visage, and my friend JB Geoffroy's intensity and energy is certainly embodied in his wines. And the list goes on.

Yet it stops at Varnier, because Denis was an exception, and one I never entirely understood. The man himself was urgently rugged, as though you'd interrupted his rugby scrim with your effete agenda of tasting Champagne. Yet Denis' Champagnes are—I can't bear to write "were"—as detailed, etched and chiseled as Champagne can be, with every measure of precision and all the Avize graphite flavors you could ever desire. Nor did Denis, for all he broadcast the serene diffidence of the natural athlete, take a macho view of his wines. They are balanced so as to emphasize terroir and to favor fruit, things he understood are not mutually exclusive.

It's especially poignant to write these words, less than a week since his death, because the group of Champagnes we tasted a month ago were the best he had ever assembled to show us. Denis himself wasn't especially demonstrative in a sen-

timental way, but his wines are delicious and indelible. They delight me in all the ways a wine can: sensually, cerebrally, and now alas, wistfully and longingly. I wish the man was with us still.

There is reason to hope the domain will continue in some form, perhaps even in its current form. But it's early days, and we'll see what happens. Meanwhile...the miracle of the wines.

Not only are they incisive in that graphite-y way, but they are correctly conceived as regards dosage. They exude class and fastidious detail. They are like the calligraphy of Avize. And this year I learned they have slightly lower pressure than many Champagnes—about 15-20% less. This may be why they feel so silky and limpid. It turns out Denis has as much land in Cramant as he does in Avize, and I also learned one possible reason his Champagnes are so silky and refreshing: he microoxygenates the still wines in order to use less sulfur and to encourage the tertiaries to express. Denis does full malo, and is another one who undertakes the back-straining work of the old Coquard press. The style is a theoretical hybrid of Pierre Péters and Larmandier-Bernier, but the fruit is unique. The wines are fastidious and etched: even his Rosé. You know those magnifying goggles the jewelers wear when they're inspecting a stone? Drinking Denis' Champagnes is like looking at flavor through those spectacles.

Varnier-Fannièrè “Esprit de Craie” Extra Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVF-9

This wine was new to me. “Spirit of the Chalk” hails from (35%) Grauves and Mancy (1er Cru) and (65%) Avize and Cramant. Denis had a request for an NV between his zero-dosage and his “regular” cuvée; it’s half/half 2013-2014 (which, by the way, blend beautifully together), and the wine is delicious, not as racy or complex as the Grand Cru NV, but digital, articulate and precise; grain and straw and jasmine and white teas, into an incisive and savory finish. Disg. 12/2016.

There is no “commercial reason” for me to offer this; it’s just so damn tasty.

Varnier-Fannièrè Grand Cru Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVF-1

A fantastic edition of this! Again half/half 2013/2015, disg 11/2016, it’s long and charming, with apples, grasses and spices. It is exactly what it should be—what Champagne should be; insanely delicious, refreshing and complex, and perfectly balanced.

Varnier-Fannièrè “Cuvée de Jean Fannièrè Origine” Extra Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVF-5

This homage to Grandpappy is the driest wine in the range (apart from two zero-dosage wines I don’t like), and it’s now 100% Cramant, from the lieu-dit *Chemins de Chalons*, right over the commune line from Avize, and out in the plain where the soil is chalkiest.

The cuvée is half/half 2011/2012, it’s disg. 10/2016, and it’s actually outstanding, as the power of the ‘12 subdues any bugginess from ‘11; salty, doughy and balanced, Denis’ most savory *umami* wine, and one needn’t “forgive” the presence of ‘11, because the wine is simply excellent.

Varnier-Fannièrè “Cuvée Saint-Denis” Brut, N.V.

++

12/750ml | KVF-2

Not only a magnificent Champagne, it is also an **ASTONISHING VALUE**, and if I only bought *one single wine* from this offering, it’d be this one.

Formerly a monocuvée from a parcel called *Clos du Grand Père*, it is now a combination that includes 30% from *Pierre Vaudon*, which sits on the plain to the south of Avize. *Grand Père* is affected with fan-leaf and much of it needs re-planting. The vine age is still around 50, the wine is 40% 2011 and 60% 2012, and it seems creamier than usual; discreetly mineral beneath a feather-quilt of richness; both hedonic and detailed. I’m thinking this is a serious player among the icon-wines of the Côte des Blancs.

Varnier-Fannièrè Rosé Brut, N.V.

++

12/750ml | KVF-4

It’s the same wine as last year—half/half 2011/2012—disg. 11/2016, and it remains an exquisitely beautiful wine. Precise and pretty, bush-berries, a truly haunting finish; the wine has all the fruit in the world yet isn’t “fruity.” The PN, as always, comes from Dethune in Ambonnay.

Varnier-Fannièrè “Esprit de Craie” Rosé, Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVF-10

It’s identical to the blend for the white Champagne, and it’s a delicious and seductive Rosé that’s basically irresistible; it’s easier than the Grand Cru but still not ingratiating. Think rose-hips rather than strawberries.

JEAN MILAN



REGION / SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs / Oger

VINEYARD AREA

6 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

9,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Oger Grand Cru
(chalk)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Chardonnay

AT A GLANCE

Wonderful discovery in the heart of the Côte des Blancs. Champagnes of marvelous purity and focus.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

They have that pencil-y minerality beneath the loveliest imaginable fruit. They are truly exquisite wines. Just don't miss them. Prices are amazingly reasonable and availability is better than you'd expect from a small domaine.

It has been...something of a saga.

Back a few years Milan was the best estate in Oger—which curiously doesn't have many growers. Then a number of things transpired. First, they did away with an entry-level cuvée called (if memory serves) *Carte Blanche*. This was a Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs, but it was on the young side. And while it was actually quite delicious and useful, Caroline Milan thought it best to upgrade the family's basic NV Brut to something older and drier. It was, she said, a question of legacy. I sympathized with that sentiment, and already liked the wine, so I went along. I was only sad that we didn't have the old wine's *price* with which to entice customers into the fold.

A new facility was built, shortly after which the wines began to show a range of curious flaws, mostly orbiting mercaptan and other reductions. The culprit was (or seems to have been) a chemical that was used in the construction. The family was impeccably transparent and honest, and we hoped the problem would

soon pass—or as soon as is possible in Champagne, where you have a 2-3 year lag between taking action and seeing the results. The next calamity had to do with a tardy delivery of bottles, which caused condensation within the bottles, which damaged the Champagne that went *in* to those bottles. Issues arose with corks and with a flaw in the dosage liqueur. The poor family sure seemed star-crossed.

Then Caroline became ill, with an obscure and miserable condition that laid her up for nearly two years. She's better now, thank God, yet the crisis caused her to evaluate her life, and she's decided to make a big change. She's ended her time at the winery, though as a family member she will always be connected (and was there for my visit a few weeks ago), and the dear woman will use her studies in psychology to do family therapy and clinical hypnosis.

This leaves her younger brother Jean-Charles in sole command. I don't know him very well. He also appears rather stymied by his father, as the two men have incompatible methods, and dad seems to be hanging on.

Sometimes a generational transfer is seamless and supportive, and sometimes it isn't.

The current range of wines is sound and improving each year, but with some distance still to travel. Mind you, I remember them as they were, and so my paradigm is different from someone approaching the wines *tabula rasa*.

The wines, also, continue to emerge from the troughs they'd been in. We who know the domain also know their posi-

tion at the top of the heap in Oger, and are eager for them to reclaim it. Oger sits between Avize to the north and Le Mesnil to the south, and though it's tempting to suppose its wines are a stylistic bridge between those communes, I see it oth-

erwise. There's more steep hillside land in Oger, a lot of it on a south-facing hill that gives the wines more generosity than, say, Cramant or Chouilly. Gimonnet finds them entirely alien to the cool green stony wines from his neighborhood. To him

Oger is masculine and smoky, but again, I see it otherwise. Oger is big-bodied, yes, but it isn't burly, and if I use a word like "queenly," I hope you'll know I mean regal in a womanly way.

Jean Milan Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KML-2A

Blend of 2013-2014, disg. 11/22/2016, all Oger, and very dry. It's a cool Champagne, not aloof but not effusive. It's salty and iodé, nice and long and with some of the flavors of Pacific oysters.

Jean Milan Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KML-10A

The "superior" NV that many growers make, this is a year older (so 2012-13), and also disgorged 11/2016 (so also a year-longer tirage), and even though it was somewhat less dry it seemed coarse and brassy. The dosage was wrong—not too high: **TOO LOW**. Just as a lark I blended in some of the "Sec" (sweeter) Champagne and it made this wine markedly better. Eyebrows were raised. I think I made my case, or they were being polite, but the next time this wine's disgorged I hope to see a sample with more compatible dosage, because the base wine is full of potential.)

Jean Milan "Symphorine" Brut, 2013

12/750ml | KML-413

Their regular vintage wine is a cuvée from four parcels, and is often delicious. This is a preview; the existing vintage is <ulp> 2011. The '13 comes out in the Fall, and was just disgorged a few days before I tasted it. Promising, for such a thready and elegant vintage. Skeins of mineral, but impossible to otherwise detail.

Jean Milan "Grande Réserve" Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KML-11

Aged *agrafé* i.e., under a cork rather than a crown cap, which means both more oxygen-derived tertiaries and also more bottle variation. But good bottles? Whoo boy.

It's a barrel-fermented cuvée combining 2008-2009, disg. 11/2016, and such a wine is the *very reason* for wood-aging, and when it recovers from disgorgement it will make a soulful "antique" tasting Champagne; salty and vinous and full of personality. Treat it like a reticent old-school Chablis, serve it in a large glass, not too cold. But please, don't decant. 99% of the time, decanting Champagne is a silly affectation.

Jean Milan Terres de Noël Vieilles Vignes Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KML-512

Very fresh disgorgement—1/2017—made this obscure to approach, yet the adamant '12 character was pronounced (and weighed somewhat on the usual elegance of this wine), yet the flavors seemed pronouncedly herbal and smoky rather than peachy, as usual. The finish is stern, chalky, categorical. It improved sip by sip, yet I'm certain I received a distorted impression. It remains a single-vineyard old (72 years) vines cuvée, which at its best is a standout wine of the Côte des Blancs.

Jean Milan "Transparence" Brut (Nature), N.V.

12/750ml | KML-213

All 2013, and all from two hillside parcels facing south: *Chenêts* and *Beaudure*. It's nearly bone-dry. This new '13 is coiled, and only needs time. The balance is there, and the fragrance emerges along with a piquantly floral saltiness.

Jean Milan "Tendresse" Sec, N.V.

12/750ml | KML-4

It is, as always, the basic NV with 20g/l RS, and it's a wonderfully attractive example of the forgotten genre. Many "sweet" Champagnes are yucky and sugary, but this is essentially *Feinherb*, and it's not a dessert-Champagne, it's a food-wine and would make a wicked effective pour in nearly any pairing menu.

+ (+)

(+)

(+)

PIERRE PÉTERS



REGION / SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs / Le Mesnil-sur-Oger

VINEYARD AREA

20 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

14,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru,
Oger Grand Cru,
Cramant Grand Cru,
Avize Grand Cru,
Vertus 1er Cru,
Villeneuve 1er Cru
(Cretaceous chalk)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Chardonnay

AT A GLANCE

As many of you discovered these are blow-your-mind Champagnes; you sold them out in a flash! Crystalline, jewel-like firmness and immense mealy depth give these a Krug-like profile nearly unique among Blanc de Blancs.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

Let's put it this way: if Blanc de Blancs Champagne has something in common with Mosel wine in general, then these are like Saar wines, a concentration of the minerally essence of the type, and straining at the leash as though the fruit wanted to burst free and run at full gallop. Lately I have described the wines as starched, for they have that crisp stiffness. Though not exceptionally high in acidity, they are exceptionally low in pH, which gives them their attack on the palate and their trilling high notes of aroma. My best German wine customers tend to prefer these to any Champagne I offer.

This is the guy to catch right now in the Côte. I can't remember a more con-

sistently galvanic and scintillating collection, and if you already thought Péters was outstanding, you'd better buy the air-rights for your palate, because it's about to soar up to the sky.

I think there's a harmonic convergence going on now, having to do with an alignment among several excellent vintages, Rodolphe Péters' consolidation of his *regime*, and some other imponderable thing. After many years doing this "wine" thing, you know when someone's in the zone, just like you know it with a musician or an athlete. Péters is showing a virtuosity that only looks easy, but that actually arises out of years of smart hard effort.

Even the *vins clairs* were the very best I had ever tasted. The Avize cuvée prompted me to write "Wow- a pity to take this through tirage..."

There are a lot of good growers in Mesnil, among whom Péters is—at the very least—first among equals. His wines are firm and starched and profoundly vinous. They aren't soft or fluffy. They're Champagnes for people who love *wine*.

Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | KPP-1

The 2013-based cuvée draws down; good, because that wine really *pisses me off*. How dare it be that fucking good?! It spoils you, me and anyone else who thinks that anyone’s “NV” should be this stellar. The latest disg. is 9/16, and if you have it, lucky you because I’ve never tasted anything that came close.

Well, except maybe the new one. Based on 2014, it has a riotously attractive aroma and a richer, more *pâtisserie* palate; napped with Satsuma marmalade; more exotic, with a clinging brown-butter finish. I think the “average drinker,” (whoever that person is...) will like it even more.

Péters does the “perpetual reserve” with his NV, which means that the current wine is 50% of (the latest vintage) and 50% *the previous blend*, so today’s wine is half-2014 and half last year’s wine, which was half-2013 and half the previous year’s wine. The wisdom of this approach is manifest and tangible; it assures “house style” without creating uniformity, because vintages differ.

Rodolphe continues to clarify his preferences the longer we know each other. For example, he hates the “quince” flavor and wants it nowhere near his wines. And he’s suspicious of the “saffron” descriptor because, he says, it results from botrytis, and he prefers his wine from pristine fruit.

Pierre Péters “Rosé for Albanne” Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KPP-4

The 2013, about to leave the stage, remains unique, high-strung and with a hyperactive interplay of rose-hip, marjoram and chalk. I had a bottle several nights ago, and it’s still ++.

The 2014 shows more fruit per se; it’s deeper, spicier, a more intensely exotic diva who does not deign to concern herself with “chalk.” Richer vinosity than the ’13, but perhaps less tension. And still original and indelible. Disg. 12/2016.

Pierre Péters “L’Esprit” Millésime Brut, 2012

+

12/750ml | KPP-212

Explosive aromas! Disg. 1/2017 and available by mid-summer. Palate is curiously moderate in RS; Petit Beurre cookies, broad shoulders, yet not heavy—just weighty. Like 2002 on steroids and tight-fitting clothes. A dark smoky finish starts like root veggies and yields to chalk.

You guys know, right, that the NV is two-thirds Mesnil and one-third other (Grand Cru) communes? And that this wine reverses that system? So it isn’t a matter of “the best lots” making the vintage wine, but instead a carefully considered combining of diverse site characteristics, consistent over the years.

Pierre Péters “L’Etonnant Monsieur Victor” Brut, 2010

+ +

6/750ml | KPP-510

There is a droll and touching story about the label concepts, which entail a series of pastiches of various “famous” works of art in the style of Takashi Murakami. Think Manga graphics meet Pop-Art style; they’re funny and vivid. The wine is “based on a blend of our best Perpetual Reserve’s vat and our best Vin Clair’s vat, aged on a natural cork while on the lees, it matures for more than five years before disgorgement.” As you would expect, production is tiny.

If there’s a case to be made for 2010, Péters is the man to make it, because this wine is *wonderful*. High-toned, “sweet” fruit, notes of vetiver, chalk and lemon-blossom in a texture both taut and like a tapioca pudding, yet there’s also a crunch like a meringue with flecks of meyer-lemon rind.



Pierre Péters Les Chétilons Brut, 2010

+ (+)

6/750ml | KPP-310

I was actually glad to see “competition” for this in the form of a truly lovely 2008 Chétilons from another grower in Mesnil, because otherwise I couldn’t limn what part of this wine is “Péters” and what part “the vineyard.” Mind you, parcels differ; Péters has five, and they don’t all go into the Chétilons cuvée in any given year. Rodolphe has a definite paradigm for what this wine should be, as his father did also. I remember the first vintage I shipped, a monumental 1990, and thinking “Is this really Champagne any more?”

If Chétilons is regal, which I think it is, then Péters’ bottling is kingly. It is proud, “masculine,” always makes me think of the Chassagne side of the Burgundy Grand Cru whites. If it’s Chablis then it’s Les Clos. This 2010 is conspicuously open for a Chétilons at this stage, showing insanely expressive back palate mineral; the whole wine is fervid and will ambush you with its steel and umami and its icy mass of terroir. And yet I am almost sure I could write a completely different note the next time I taste it.

MARC HÉBRART



REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Mareuil-sur-Aÿ

VINEYARD AREA

15.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,750 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Avize Grand Cru,
Aÿ Grand Cru
Oiry Grand Cru,
Chouilly Grand Cru,
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru,
Bisseuil 1er Cru,
Avenay Val d'Or 1er Cru,
Dizy 1er Cru,
Hautvillers 1er Cru,
Bisseuil 1er Cru
(chalk)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Pinot Noir
30% Chardonnay

AT A GLANCE

Exciting producer in the Vallée de la Marne producing 75% Pinot Noir from the great 1er Cru vineyards of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, Avenay Val d'Or and Bisseuil and 25% Chardonnay from the Grand Crus Chouilly and Oiry in the Côte des Blancs. Hand selected grapes, Bucher pressing, fermentation in petite cuvée, malolactic, hand remuage.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

Hébrart represents a departure from the other producers in this portfolio, for Jean Paul's wines marry the top Pinot Noir sites of the Vallée de la Marne with Grand Cru Chardonnay sites in the Côte des Blancs. Hébrart's wines are buoyant and lithe with deft integrations of minerality and juicy fruit. That said, he does produce a Blanc de Blancs from Oiry and Chouilly which I really like.

I'll use an old coinage I didn't invent but which I find helpful: Marc Hébrart may not be the "best" grower in Champagne, but no one is better.

This was brought home in dramatic fashion a few weeks ago while tasting his

Vins clairs, which were the 4th group of young pre-tirage Champagnes I saw, as we made this, our 7th visit overall. Sitting in Jean-Paul's mint-condition tasting room with its expanse of natural light and its lyrical view to the Marne canal—all part of a new facility one member of my "entourage" already dubbed "Chateau Hébrart" for its neoclassical exterior – I got the second of the wines in my glass and was so amazed, literally amazed, I said out loud "I mean, shit; even his *Vins clairs* are in a class by themselves." Nods of assent and smiles around the room.

Jean-Paul Hébrart, (or "JP" as he is known to his wife), was always a wonderful producer. When I began with him, the wines really walked a scintillating edge between strength of fruit and the utmost etching of flavor, so that you got deliciousness and precision. But now I think JP is in the zone, and notwithstanding "issues" around the most issue-ridden vintage of modern times (our cabbagey friend 2011) the man has reached that odd silent place where every note you play is true (even the ones you didn't think you could grab) and every swing you take hits the ball square.

Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | code

First of all this is *utterly SUPERB*, and along with Péters' NV it's the best non-vintage BdB in this collection.

65% 2013, 29% 2012 and 6% 2011, it's 85% Mareuil and 15% Oiry and Chouilly, only *cuvée* (the first free-run juice; in fact only the basic NV has 10% 1st-press [*Taille*] used), and disg 10/2016.

It shows everything a person could desire from a young BdB; grace, length, structure, detail and fruit.

Marc Hébrart "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut, N.V

+

12/750ml | KMH-1

12/375ml | KMH-1H

This is the most precise articulation of PN you'll ever taste in Champagne, and this is a glorious edition of this (absurdly) "basic" NV. The fruit is ample yet weightless, the flavors are written in calligraphy yet not "precious," and this ostensibly ordinary material occupies an ether, until it returns with a spider-fine yet Pinot-earthy finish.

It's complex. 47% 2014—31% 2013—22% 2012. Disg 8/2016. 82% is PN from Mareuil, Avenay Val D'Or, Bisseuil and Hautvillers. 18% is CH from Mareuil.

Marc Hébrart "Sélection" Vieilles Vignes Brut, N.V.

+ (+)

12/750ml | KMH-2

The vines range from 40 to 55. The *cuvée* is 85% 2012 and 15% 2010. Disg 8/2016. It's 70% old-vines PN from Mareuil. 15% CH Mareuil. 15% CH from Oiry and Chouilly.

Because it's based on '12 it's a drier and fuller bottling. It also has a lower than usual dosage. Still shows its characteristic chalk-jasmine-freesia, but the weight is so elegantly dispersed and rides such an endless vein of clarity and energy; it's like a mirabelle liqueur from which the sugar was removed. And by the way, this enticingly seductive Champagne can be laid away for much longer than anyone ever does; I'm drinking the 2008-base at home these days, and feeling kind of guilty about it.

Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | KMH-5

Not surprisingly, sleek, comely and digitally fruity, yet it shows its fruit on a high white wire, like some iridescent filament snaking through darkness. Sitting in the glass it starts to smell like those little pink cookies ("*Biscuits de Reims*") you see everywhere in the region. I'm always torn between feeling this is a smart wine that also wants to show you how sexy it is, or a sexy wine that wants you to know how smart it is. Yet of course, smart is sexy. I heard that from Noam Chomsky.

Disg. 7/2016, we have 50% CH from Mareuil, vintage 2014—then 43.5% PN from Mareuil, vintage 2012-13—then 6.5% still PN from Mareuil vinified in neutral cask, vintage 2013.

Marc Hébrart "Spécial Club" Brut 2012

+ + +

12/750ml | KMH-312

The wine stole into the market late last year and I could only glance at it; this was my first real taste. It immediately takes its place among the elite Club bottlings in the 20 years I've been doing this, Gimmonnet 2002 and 2008, Chiquet 2008, Hébrart's own 2002 and 2008, and to me it offers every single thing we can wish for from young Champagne.

An astonishing fragrance, a little like the 2006, actually. Masterly and serene, with a freaky-long finish that runs a pure fruit throughout its many octaves and registers. Ur-fruit and all fruits, with chalk as a discreet fellow-traveler, but only at first; with the second pour the chalk soars to the front. For a wine of such repose this has hyperactive interplay, like somebody doing an incredibly complicated trick and making it look easy.

The wine: Disg. 7/2016. 35% PN Mareuil old-vines from the climats *Faubourg d'Enfer*, *Croix Blanche* and *Pruche*. 20% PN from Aÿ, from *Cheuzelles*, *Les Pierres Robert* and *Le Léon*. 25% CH from Mareuil old-vines, from *Beauregard*, *Ramonette* and *Buisson Saint Loup*. Finally 20% CH, a *Coeur de Cuvée* from Oiry and Chouilly.

And when you get your copy of Peter Liem's stunning new Champagne book—out this Fall—you'll get maps that show where these sites are.



Marc Hébrart “Noces de Craies” Aÿ Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs, Extra Brut 2012

+++

12/750ml | KMH-8

It's the best Blanc de Noirs I have ever tasted.

Last year I pre-screened a sample without dosage and found it immensely promising. The promise has been kept. It's not a wine JP will make every year; in fact the next one isn't until vintage-2015.

It means “wedding of chalk” and is the fruit of his passion for PN. Massale selection of 44-year vines, hailing from five parcels (*Cheuzelles, Longschamps, Pruche, Chauffour, Les Pierres Robert*), and it's also a *Coeur de Cuvée*.

It shows all the creamy malty grace of great Aÿ allied to a jet-blast of manic chalkiness, with incomprehensible length and command. A gliding titan of Champagne.

Marc Hébrart “Rive Gauche Rive Droite” Grand Cru Brut, 2010

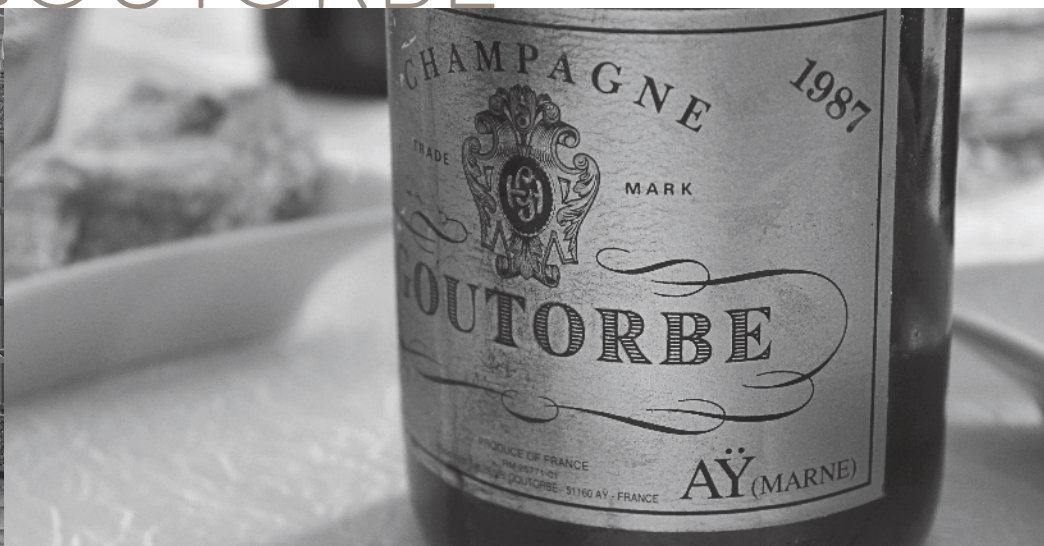
+

12/750ml | KMH-710

This is his nod to the old school. Another *Coeur de Cuvée*, made in barrels, natural yeast, unfiltered and never cold stabilized. It's 50% PN Aÿ (*Pruche, Cheuzelles, Longschamps, Chauffour*) and 50% CH old-vines from *Chouilly, Avize* and *Oiry* (*Justice, Montaigu, Les Robarts*). The *Avize* parcel is new for Jean-Paul.

Disg 5/2016, it remains a fine woodsy Champagne. It's sleek and silvery, not “below” its oak but atop it. Malt and salt, mint and herbs, the 2010 vintage is very good to it. I respect and appreciate this wine, which is less oaky than the last bottle of Bollinger I drank.

HENRI GOUTORBE



REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Aÿ

VINEYARD AREA

22 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

10,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Aÿ Grand Cru,
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru,
Mutigny 1er Cru,
Hautvillers 1er Cru,
Cumières 1er Cru,
Chavot 1er Cru,
Bisseuil 1er Cru
(Cretaceous chalk, limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Pinot Noir
25% Chardonnay
5% Pinot Meunier

AT A GLANCE

"Venerable" might be an apposite term for an estate that's existed for less than 60 years, but Goutorbes are a Grand Family of Champagne, and this domaine embodies the generous and vivacious side of the region.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

They are ripe and extravagant; they are seldom mystic or searching, but instead direct and delicious. This doesn't preclude a great refinement and class! It means they are oh-so-easy to love.

Stylistically speaking these are somewhat "mainstream" by grower standards. When they're in form they offer a sumptuous yet focused Champagne that shows textbook flavors of brioche and saffron, and textbook Aÿ flavors of malt and blueberries. They can be vivid and bright and loveable. Yet the last few years have been somewhat pitiless toward them, starting with the bad-potato thing of 2005 and somehow clinging. There is also a generational transfer to young Etienne, though

his father is not only still engaged, he's the president of the Club Trésors. I have the sense Etienne has plans, and wants to do great things, and I also have the sense this handoff is a work in progress. So, I'm picky. You won't find old-vines Petit Meslier fermented with grasshopper antlers in an underground amphora shaped like your large intestine. So yes, the wines taste like Champagne "should." But as with any grower, there are quirks and specificities.

Indeed I hardly know *what* I'll find when I make this visit. This year's wines were, as a group, the most encouraging in quite some time. And yet we were treated to a genuinely peculiar bottling called "Brut Percussion" which has a glow-in-the-dark label. I mean, for all those times you drink Champagne in the dark. I guess. Turns out it's designed for Discos and such. The young man has every right to make Champagne for any *milieu* he wants —maybe he'll make a special wine in splits for our New England Candlepin-Bowling centers. He could call it "7-10, *ouch!*" perhaps.

Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KGO-1

Yes, a plus. Shocked me too. This is 65% 2008, so maybe not so shocking after all. The rest (35%) is 07-06-05, deg. 9/2016, it's unsurprisingly delicious, with '08's silvery lift and a white-flower talc-y coolness. This is the best NV I've tasted here, and yes I did notice a small note of oxidation but I saw it as “antique” rather than decadent. And let's remember: how many NV grower Champagnes have an 8-year old wine as the youngest year in the blend???

Henri Goutorbe “Spécial Club” Brut, 2006

6/750ml | KGO-206

Many '06s are showing premoxy, and this one's no exception. You could call it “old-school” and it's certainly *of-a-type*. Markedly malty, concentrated and flourishing. They say they're lowering the dosage for the next disgorgement, which is worrisome—not because I crave sweetness but because the oxidative notes will be even more stark with lower dosage. This one's disg. 12/2016

Henri Goutorbe Millésime Brut, 2007

+

12/750ml | KGO-407

In many ways this is nicer than the Club—that's right, I'm suggesting you *trade down*—it's fresher, more spry, though still with Aÿ's classic malt and blueberry, and showing a suave brown-butter finish.

Henri Goutorbe Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KGO-6

I had to ask to taste this. Either they forgot it, don't have enough of it, or just like hearing me ask. In any case it's all 2012 and we also get to taste pure Bisseuil, which is rare. It's 1er Cru and seems to have a winsome fruit. The wine is lissome and interesting; a sorrel and balsam driven terroir with notes of quince and white peach. Has charm, freshness and articulation. Disg 11/2016.

Henri Goutorbe Rosé Brut N.V.

12/750ml | KGO-3

It remains the 2012 base (with still red from 2010), it continues to be a lovely, fresh, elegantly down-the-middle Rosé. It'll be shipped as a 1/2017 disgorgement though I tasted 8/2016. Curiously, it's the freshest wine in the whole range.

Henri Goutorbe Aÿ Rouge, 2012

12/750ml | KGO-001

Done in steel, from a steep parcel, Dijon-clone 115, it gives a close look at the blueberry profile of Aÿ, driven by silky attractive fruit.

ANTIQUES

These were controversial. I liked them quite a bit more than a couple of my colleagues did. The wines are quite expensive but where else do you find such vintages? There's two, from very different types of vintages.

Henri Goutorbe “Collection René” Brut, 1997

++

12/750ml

I felt was a ++ wine (which will flummox at least one fellow taster at the table), but I liked its genial lavishness yet also its stately reserve. Five years on the cork, it's a regal Aÿ fizz that doesn't gush but covers you in long, nutty beauty.

Henri Goutorbe “Collection René” Brut, 1987

++

12/750ml

Was even more controversial and to me even more remarkable. A ++ wine, from a cool, grassy vintage, it's 50-50 PN-CH and doesn't taste green or unripe, but shows a compelling equipoise of depth and freshness. Unusual to see tertiary Champagne complexity delivered in such an icy stream.

GASTON CHIQUET



REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Dizy

VINEYARD AREA

23 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

18,300 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Aÿ Grand Cru,
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru,
Hautvillers 1er Cru,
Dizy 1er Cru
(belemnite chalk);
Crugny, Nanteuil-la-Forêt
(chalk and clay)

GRAPE VARIETIES

45% Chardonnay
35% Pinot Meunier
20% Pinot Noir

AT A GLANCE

23 hectare estate means we can get some wine to sell! Which is lucky for us, because these are sensually gorgeous, hedonistic wines that everyone can cozy up to.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

They taste focused, refined and friendly. Even at their ripest they're slim and even at their tallest they're willowy. They taste like the wines of a man who respects his land. They split the difference between the really adamantly mineral Champagnes and the overtly fruity ones. They are classical, not romantic. They are thoughtful but not aloof, like their maker!

I drank a glass of the NV while out to dinner recently. And as I did I felt the same admiration and affection I always feel for that wine, because it so perfectly threads the needle between its silken precision and its forward fruit. It's not jumping through hoops of fire or terroir, it's just saturated with caring and craftsmanship.

And yet in a way we're tasting pure terroir in Chiquet. Except for the definite Meunier fruit of the NV, nearly all of the other wines are anti-varietal, even the Chardonnay from Aÿ, which is less a Chardonnay and more a dialect of Aÿ we don't usually hear.

Peter Liem writes: "This is one of the finest grower estates in the Grande Vallée de la Marne. Chiquet's wines combine a generous depth of fruit with a pronounced character of place—if you want to know what the wines of the Grande Vallée should feel like, these are an ex-

cellent introduction. Chiquet's wines generally show well young, thanks to the forward fruitiness of their Marne terroirs. Yet with their balance and depth they can also age extremely well, even the non-vintage Brut Tradition, as I've seen from several old examples dating all the way back to 1964."

We sell a lot of Chiquet, though I sense the Champagne is in some way misunderstood. By me as well. I am struck by how chiseled and articulate Nicolas' wines are. I usually think of them as either chalky or fruity, but really they are precise, careful and thorough. I wrote they were "quiet heroes," because they don't often get the attention some of the others do.

This is a large estate as Récoltants go, with 23 hectares. Chiquets have vineyards in Hautvillers, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ and in Aÿ, from which they make what is probably the only all-Chardonnay Champagne to emerge from this Pinot Noir town. Their base wines always undergo malolactic, but the Champagnes are quite low in dosage, yet they have a suave caramelly richness.

I was about to write that Nicolas is my "hero," but that isn't quite accurate. Nicolas, rather, is a thoroughly decent, candid, kind-hearted and honorable man, a perfect business partner and a very good friend. Between him and me there are no "politics;" we can relax together, nothing is fraught, no words are mined and parsed for subtext. It is like a balm to step over the threshold into his place in Dizy. And all of these things find their way into the wines. Nicolas has nothing he needs to "prove," nor must he demonstrate some

facile edgy “cred” by performing sci-fi experiments with his wines. Believe me, I taste most of the cool-kids’ wines, and a few of them are very good, but none

of them—*none*—have the integrity of these, or the poise that only *seems* effortless, or the sheer quality of flavor. In the final analysis, what makes any wine

“interesting” isn’t some desperate effort at reinventing something already perfect; it’s that it *fucking TASTES GOOD*.

Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-1

Nicolas was the *only* producer who made sure I didn’t have to sell a 2011-based NV. He moved some allocations around so that we had the 2010-based wine for an extra year, and now we’re leapfrogging to the 2012. Look for disgorgements starting with 5/2016 (and moving forward, of course).

In essence this wine combines the pumpernickel-sweetness of Meunier with a walnuty richness typical of this part of the Marne, and what makes it most wonderful is that it’s both extremely articulate and openly friendly. It is *class* defined and enacted. If you think such qualities are “mainstream”, shame on you. Such qualities are *rare*, my friend, and you do not have the privilege to take them for granted.

It’s 40% PM, 35% CH and 20% PN. There’s 30% reserve wine, which includes some 2011, which one does—alas—notice. Otherwise the wine is saltier than usual, with somewhat more power and length.

(Note on the “Cuvée Réserve,” which is the NV with much greater age; the current wine is a 2009-base, and I was unsure, as it struck me as too dry; the usual savor was constricted. I’ll taste it again, and if I was wrong we’ll make it available.)

Gaston Chiquet Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-8

Disg 1/2017 and all 2013 – the 2012 that’s now on the market will last until summer, and then this. That ‘12 was disg. 3/2016 and is quite overt and adamant, with assertive fruit, easy to like but not typical for this wine. The ‘13 is a silky beast with a really *fine* fragrance, elegant and gauzy, down-the-middle and enticing. It’s the NV blend without reserve wine, and with 12% still PN.

Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2007

12/750ml | KCQ-307

(+)

When it’s on, this is both an outstanding value and also one of the most interesting PN expressions in all Champagne. Typically 60-40 PN-CH, Nicolas plans to move to 50-50 with future vintages.

Disg 11/2016, it’s 40% Aÿ CH and 60% Dizy and Mareuil PN. The wine is smoky, with the ferrous notes of ‘07, and also the brassica-leaf snap; these are most pronounced in drier cuvées. It opens in the glass to show its more common shoot-smoke and sandalwood notes, and there’s an excellent chance this will grow suave and vinous over the next few months.

Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d’Aÿ Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-2

+

Of course the first all-CH wine ever bottled from Aÿ; it’s like the poster child for farmer-fizz.

And it’s a wine that loves time on the cork. Not decades, mind you, but 3-5 years, after which it tastes like an ether of Bollinger. This is now all 2012, disg 7/2016, and it’s a round and doughy iteration of this always-fascinating wine, expressed with force and conviction.

You could do a KILLER horizontal tasting of BdB Champagnes, using this (for Aÿ), Goutorbe’s (for Bisseuil), Chartognes *Heurtebise* (for Merfy), Moussé’s (for Cuiles) and Geoffroy’s “*Volupté*” (for Cumières) and have five radically different expressions of Chardonnay *without* even setting foot in the Côte des Blancs. Let me know if some nimrod in the audience still insists terroir is a myth....

Gaston Chiquet “Spécial Club” Brut, 2009

6/750ml | KCQ-409

+ +

70% CH, 30% PN, disg. 5/2016, it’s a roaring bellowing Club and I lost my heart to it. This wine always has a crazed minerality, and this one’s like a “normal” 2009 stretched taut, and someone flicked a switch on a machine that shoots a lightning bolt between two poles; it’s like phosphorescent, wailing, shrieking chalk, napped with a *nage* of lemon rind.



Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Brut, 2005

+ + (+)

3/1500ml | KCQ-2M

Disg 3/2016, this is a truly extraordinary vintage, and not “taking ‘05 into account;” it’s plain fabulous. It begins with a rampantly doughy fruit and straw, and morphs into spices and mineral and flowery peppercorns. The vintage shows in its weightiness but it’s undergone some apotheosis, some forgiving divinity that *really* shows on the finish, a mélange of fruit, cake and brown-butter that will rend your heart.

We had three old wines to end the day. I’m saving those notes for a chapter in my upcoming book, but one of the wines was a 1966 Blanc d’Aÿ, and we disagreed about it. I found it a sweet old fellow, all vetiver and armoire, yet it was also overt and even clamorous, which didn’t bother me—the melting orange-rind nuttiness was such as to subdue any inclination I had to nit-pick. Indeed over a few minutes the overtness itself became beautiful, as if it were aglow for having been forgiven. Nicolas found a disequilibrium, but how do you ignore the larger flavor? The fragrance was perfect. The salty assertiveness on the palate made the wine ungainly to Nicolas, but I loved its orneriness. It was like a beautiful face with a large *schnoz*. A little restless, not entirely well behaved, but mellow for all that.

GEOFFROY



REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Cumières

VINEYARD AREA

14 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

10,400 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Cumières 1er Cru,
Hautvillers 1er Cru,
Damery 1er Cru,
Fleury-la-Rivière 1er Cru
(calcareous soils, sandstone and clay)

GRAPE VARIETIES

41% Pinot Noir
37.5% Pinot Meunier
21.5% Chardonnay

AMPELOS CERTIFICATION

lutte raisonnée

AT A GLANCE

Red grape dominated cuvées from a locally warm microclimate create thrilling, vibrant, fruity Champagnes. Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy is the most fanatical wine freak I know in Champagne and his wines reflect his enthusiasm.

I think we're now starting to see the full effects of Jean Baptiste's move to Aÿ from his earlier cellars in Cumières. He has much more space now, and many technical and logistical capabilities he didn't have before. Because this was **the best group of Champagnes I've yet tasted at Geoffroy**, and you'd be well advised to ZERO IN on them.

This also has, I think, to do with a somewhat less puristic view of dosage, which is never very high but which for some years had been extremely low. "JB" would disagree with this interpretation, arguing that he judges dosage levels for each wine individually by *tasting alone*, and does not work from systems, recipes or dogma. He's right, that's true. Yet I think most tasters go through phases, and for a few years we like really dry stuff and for the next few years we seek more fruit. Whatever the cause, and even if there is no "cause," the wines are *singing* today.

Arriving at Geoffroy is sometimes like stepping onto a fast-moving treadmill. One year we were greeted with the prospect of a fascinating tasting of dosage, but Jean-Baptiste (or "JB" as we know him) added a twist.

We would taste a single Champagne

with five different dosage levels as well as different types of dosage: traditional liqueur and "MCR" (basically must-concentrated-rectified), the method JB prefers, and one about which I have voiced a certain wariness.

To remind you, I know that MCR is easier and cheaper to work with, and it conveys a heavier sweetness, so you can use less and still obtain the sense-of-sweetness you desire. I worry that the only source is the Languedoc, and it troubles me that conventional Languedoc grapemust concentrate is going into Champagnes whose producers are want to speak of terroir and sometimes of organics. Up till now, when I've been able to taste direct comparisons, I've preferred the traditional liqueur. So JB put me to the test. We would line up the wines in order of perceived sweetness and would guess which type of dosage was used.

We were five: my colleagues and me and Peter Liem. We were almost perfectly aligned in the sense-of-sweetness, i.e., sample #4 tasted sweetest to four of the five of us. But it wasn't. And though it was my personal favorite, it was drier than I'd have preferred in theory, and it used MCR. So, time to modify my hypotheses! Interestingly, three of the five of us liked sample #1 best, and this was in fact the least dry of the range, and was made with traditional liqueur. All of which demonstrates there is no substitute for tasting, and rigid philosophies that don't account for the different needs of different wines are fatuous and intolerant.

Geoffroy “Expression” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KRG-11

We are “between cuvées” here, as is often the case throughout the winery; Geoffroy is successful and wines move quickly. So, the existing wine was disg. 10/2016 and remains classy and elegant, notwithstanding the discernible (but not objectionable) presence of 2011 in the blend. Still for me a + wine.

The next one combines 66% 2013 and 34% 2012 and will be disgorged 4/2017. I tasted a sample disgorged *à la volée* without dosage, which tasted racy and taut, a good thing at this stage. It's 41% PM, 31% PN and 28% CH.

In general this is what one might call a “party wine,” if the people at your party were all Mensa members. It's extroverted and flavorsome yet also detailed and silky. Meunier shows as soy and shiitakes. The Chardonnay component is increasing over the years. The wine is classic Cumières, ripe and smoky—it's some of the steepest and warmest land in all of Champagne—yet it's also high-energy because Jean-Baptiste almost never does malo.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, 2009

+

12/750ml | KRG-209

You won't be disappointed with this generous '09. 75% PN, 20% CH and 5% PM, deg 10/2015, and this really blasts those RED Cumières aromas right out of the glass; they're nearly rugged and certainly ripe and meaty but with an intriguing vein of steel; big-scale juiciness and mouth-filling PN warmth doesn't prime you for the lemony brightness. A buzzing chatter among its elements. The wine remains available, which is good because the next one will be a 2011, which is among the better examples of that benighted vintage but still.... This 09, disg. 11/2016, remains silvery, tasty and satisfyingly burly, yet I suspect it will slim down in the bottle, if you have the fortitude to keep it.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut, 2008

+ + (+)

12/750ml | KRG-808

Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut, 2009

(+ +)

12/750ml | KRG-809

The last disg. Of 2008 is 11/2016, and this already gorgeous wine has actually *improved* in the last year. We hope—we *really* hope to have it through the summer, but seriously, **DO NOT DELAY** scoring what is not only a great young masterpiece but also a **killer value**. Tasted alongside the embryo of the 2009, it's cooler, more “green” and shady and pale; complex minerality and with aromas of iris and plantains and wet straw; the wine is nearly heart rending, and the finish is gentle and glowing.

The 2009 was also disgorged *à-la-minute* and we tasted it without dosage. It's 69% CH and 31% PN; exotic, fragrant and beautiful—and balanced even without dosage (though it won't be bottled quite so naked); yellow fruits, white flowers, almost sumptuous. This is establishing a track record as one of Champagnes great wines, offering character, yumminess and value.

Geoffroy Les Houtrants Brut, N.V.

(+)

12/750ml | KRG-617

This is a field blend (Champagne *Gemischter Satz!*) of every grape permitted in Champagne. I know of no other. *Tirage* 2012, it blends 2008, 09, 10 and 11. Disg 2/2017 without dosage. Exceedingly complex and original, recalling Ziereisen's old-vines Chasselas; though it's stiff from disgorgement it's really nutty and bready; 2011 is a weirdly pleasing nuance here (and Arbanne is green-beany in any case), it's also markedly long, with a finish of dark bread and green herbs. All steel. The mind wants to identify the flavors of each variety but the wine refuses to allow you. It is holistic, a *mélange*. Very small production of an entirely original wine.

Geoffroy Millésime Extra Brut, 2006

(+)

12/750ml | KRG-606

Again a preview disgorged for us without dosage, it'll be available late 2017. It seems woodsy and bone-brothy, as if it had Pinot Gris (which it doesn't); it's a lovely generous manly-man's Champagne; satisfying and consoling, yet also articulate.



Geoffroy Millésime Brut, 2004

++

3/1500ml | KRG-604M

It was superb in bottle and it's astonishing in Magnum. Even with a bracingly fresh disg (2/2017) there's a searching, open aroma. On the palate everything fits, in multiple registers of flavor; straw, herbs, tertiary smoky notes, a cool silvery stream of freshness and a perfect unity of the sophisticated and the artless, all leading to a fabulous intricate interior finish.

Geoffroy Millésime, 2002

(++)

12/750ml | KRG-602

APPLAUSE for holding even a few bottles back for late re-release. This was a below-threshold cork, enough to subdue its brilliance but not so opaquely we couldn't taste, not had we the heart to ask for another bottle to be opened. 2002 is in a fascinating moment; the early floral exuberance is subdued, the chalk is visible but not brash, and there are high notes of talc and malt suggestive of botrytis. The finish is extravagantly beautiful and complex. From a perfect bottle this will be indelible.

Geoffroy "Blanc de Rose" Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KRG-13

All 2012, and as before it's 50-50 PN/CH co-macerated, and in this vintage it starts to justify its price. Smells like those *novella cucina* strawberry-risotti you might remember, fruity-starchy. This is the first time I've groked his aim for this; it's a rare kind of fruit-flower amalgam that recalls, actually, *Cristal Rosé*, though this is riotously more berried.

Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KRG-913

Now 2013, disg. 11/2016, and it's a silky lusty beast, exceptionally vinous, finishing bigger than it begins. Fine vintage for this, on the heels of the riotously extroverted 2012.

MOUSSÉ FILS



REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Cuisles

VINEYARD AREA

5.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,100 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Cuisles, Jonquery,
Olizy-Violaine,
Châtillon-sur-Marne,
Vandières
(chalk, marl)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Pinot Meunier
16% Pinot Noir
4% Chardonnay

AT A GLANCE

Our favorite among the Meunier pilgrims in the Marne Valley (and elsewhere), an up-and-coming young grower who's a member of the Club Trésors.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

Classy Meunier beauties; savory and dark-bready and with the sorghum-sweetness of the variety, but also with a certain reserve and containment—elegance is the right word.

In the process of establishing his own identity, Cédric Moussé is recasting his production, in some cases by name only and in other cases by an entire re-imagining of the nature of the cuvées.

I have the impression he is a tinkerer in general. He made a visit to see where his corks were produced, having contracted with a service consisting of two women who would sniff every cork off the line, looking for TCA. (I believe they're out of business now, but imagine having that job....) During that visit he noticed a disagreeable aroma wafting through the air, and upon investigation he learned that it came from the process of stamping the corks, which entailed both the smell of the ink and also the heat from the branding. Next time you open a bottle of Champagne, look at the bottom of the cork; it usually has either the name of the estate or the fluff "Vin de Champagne." So, Cédric decided to experiment with using non-branded cork, which entailed a trial in which tasters were asked if they could tell the difference. I took part in one

such, along with three other tasters, all professionals. One of the wines, we were told, was different from the other three; which one was it, and how did it differ?

All of us were more or less wrong, and I wondered whether this was all a bit too persnickety. But what's the harm? It certainly indicated the lengths a guy will go to, to ensure his wine is flawless.

Several years ago Didier Gimonnet told me there would be a new member of the Club Trésors (of which he was then president) who would provide the very first Spécial Club bottling entirely from Meunier. He added that the guy was still below-the-radar but definitely an up-and-comer, a super-nice man, young and ambitious.

So I made a beeline. And all of it was true. I had long been aware of the Meunier Renaissance taking place way up valley in the Marne, in all the terra incognita near Château Thierry, an ad-hoc group of growers who'd rediscovered their old vineyards and wanted to give Meunier the respect it almost never got. I went first to Loriot in Festigny, liked the people and the wines (and especially liked the landscape, the loveliest I think in all of Champagne), and mixed a case to ship back and drink. I then went to Cuisles, to find young Cédric Moussé. Getting to Cuisles is no simple matter. You make one turn off the Marne into a side valley, and then another turn off the side valley into an even smaller valley, and then another turn to the quietest most out of the way village, one of those places where you can hear the chickens clucking in the next village, it's so still.

What I liked and admired about Moussé's wines was their poise and polish. They were refined, even intelligent for Meunier wines. As a rule the Meunier Champagnes go either into deeply earthy areas (e.g., Chartogne's Les Barres) or they're hedonistic fruit bombs, but Moussé seems both to thread the needle between those profiles and to add something of his own. I would call that thing "good posture," but that's a silly Terry-image and you may not know what I mean by it. Put it this way: the Champagnes are highly flavory and loaded with Meunier charm, but they're also put together, color-coordinated, all the flavors "drape" perfectly; they're fit, symmetrical, contained. They don't sprawl.

Finally, the MAGNUM is the same wine as the 2013-based NV, and was disgorged the day before my visit. It's not at all forbidding, but needs 2 years or so to soften its starched crunchy profile.

The estate is 5.5 hectares. "I don't want it to be too big; then I couldn't go to the vineyards," he says. The new winery is

indeed impressive, especially from the environmental standpoint; get in touch with us if you want the details. Cédric grows a little Chardonnay but only uses it for a Blanc de Blancs; everything else is all noir.

The project I described in last year's catalogue will come to fruition starting this year. It involves a 1.07-hectare plot, entirely in Cuisles. The plot belongs to a neighbor of Cédric's, who will pay Cédric a fee to work it. At harvest, Cédric will purchase those grapes—from the vines he himself tended—from the neighbor who owns the land. This will increase his capacity, which he needs (as it seems we're not the only thirsty sybarites on his client list), but which will make him, technically, an "N.M." Yes, ... a Négociant, because if you buy more than five percent of your grapes, that is what you are. Cédric was worried I would object, but I've never been the guy who said "Look for the tiny letters R.M. on the label," because that is mostly a bureaucratic construct. But why is he doing it this way? Because it

saves him a substantial tax burden, and because it is not uncommon for French people to pretzel themselves into exotic contortions in order to escape their onerous taxations.

In other news, vintage 2014 is the first fully organic crop, but I'm not certain if/when he'll be able (or wants to) certify. Even more interesting, Cédric performed a direct comparison of natural vs. cultured yeasts over a three year period, and discovered rather to his surprise that he preferred the wines from cultured yeasts. He learned this empirically, and didn't resist the conclusion. He felt the cultured yeasts gave him a cooler, more reserved wine, with superior aging potential and better suited for the sometimes-heavy Meunier. To which I can only say BRAVO! Not because I prefer cultured yeast fermented wine—I have no preference—but because I prefer a person whose mind is open to his actual experience and who isn't yoked to a creed.

Moussé Fils "Anecdote - Les Varosses" Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut, 2012

+

12/750ml | KMS-7

We, ah, looked the other way with the 2011, but this all-Chard Champagne is delightful once more. Deg 2/21/16, it isn't quite the *charmeur* it once was—when it was less dry—but with 2012's power it renders a stern, stony Chardonnay in a convincing and balanced form. Lovely apple-flesh aroma (red gala, Fiji), a mouthfilling palate; tastes *consequential* and washes into a huge minerally finish that reminded me of Chenin Blanc. We bought all he'd give us, which isn't much. This benefits from air, by the way; it tasted better from a bottle opened two days previously.

Moussé Fils "L'Or d'Eugene" Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMS-8

I'm sure we'll start referring to this as "Lord Eugene" at some point, we're such wags. It replaces/updates the old NV (which was called "Noire Réserve").

With this (and with his superb *Vins Clairs*) you can really see how Cédric has reached cruising altitude. It's now 2013/2014, 80-20 PM-PN. I think and have always thought it's the *ideal* for Meunier NV; thoroughly delicious but not an avalanche of chocolate and pumpernickel. There are even hints of chalk. It doesn't pander with "big fruit" but stays bright and clear, and has a long yummy finish. Meunier for the thoughtful hedonist.

Moussé Fils Millésime "Terres d'Illite" Brut, 2012

++

12/750ml | KMS-512

This is Cédric's best wine to date, and gives a thrilling glimpse of what lies ahead for this outstanding vintner.

This is 100% from Cuisles, which a local broker calls "The Grand Cru of Meunier," and with this wine you can clearly see why. Disg. 2/2016, it's actively *minerally*—Meunier! It has the most intricately non-fruit profile I've ever encountered from this variety. Salty, long, fascinating, the core of Meunier that's hidden below the pretty stuff. A dignity. It's para-sensual, beautiful and serious, with herbal notes and spelt bread.

Moussé Fils “Effusion” Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMS-9

You’d assume Meunier Rosé would be a fruit bomb. Think again, Skippy. A solera of 2003/2014, it’s 92% PM and 8% PN, disg 12/2016. It has an obdurate solid dignity and a ton of complexity from the red wine. A Champagne you don’t drink so much as *chew*.

Moussé Fils “Spécial Club” Les Fortes Terres Brut, 2012

6/750ml | KMS-612

Cédric, of course, made the first 100% Meunier Spécial Club, and I’m happy to still offer this generous vintage. Disg 5/2016, it remains a high-water mark for Meunier; amazingly classy, silky and lovely; like inhaling a potion of rose-petals, meyer lemons and cloves. It widens our understanding of what Champagne can be

Moussé Fils “Spécial Club” Rosé de Saignée, Le Bout de la Ville Brut, 2013

12/750ml | KMS-613

All Meunier, and the first-ever all-Meunier Club Rosé. We did dosage trials for this wine, but as it turned out I think Cédric was hoping we’d affirm the choice he’d already made. We didn’t. He’s looking for 3g/l RS, and if he insists on that he’ll have a chunky masculine Champagne that reflects the spirit of the domain. If it were all I tasted I’d have selected it, though it isn’t a wine I’d drink for sensual joy. He showed us a blend with 5g/l RS—still Extra Brut—and it was immeasurably finer and more complete, and of course it did not taste “sweeter,” just *better*. Cédric was fearful the wine would be “anonymous,” but a balanced wine is never anonymous. I’ll offer it either way, but 5g is **+-quality** whereas 3g is “interesting and worthwhile.”

Moussé Fils “L’Extra Or d’Eugene” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMS-625

80-20 Meunier-PN, disg. 1/2017, a “superior” NV with longer tirage from older material (solera 2003/2012), I am offering this extremely dry Champagne both for those pathologically averse to RS and also to show Cédric’s “serious” side. It has a certain depth and is certainly aligned with the *Zeitgeist*.

Moussé Fils “Les Vignes de mon Village” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMS-624

100% Meunier, and a lower pressurage. It is, touchingly, a tribute to Cédric’s father, who was mayor of Cuisles and who “loved Cuisles.” 50-50 2014-2015, available late summer, zero dosage; it’s a rugged, muscular Meunier, showing more locality than fruit. Water drains into the soil’s third layer, the green clay *Illite*, which occurs nowhere else in Champagne. If you want a solid contained Champagne (and fear a drop of sweetness will kill you) this one’s pretty impressive.

HENRI BILLIOT



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Ambonnay

VINEYARD AREA

5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,750 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Ambonnay Grand Cru
(limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

75% Pinot Noir
25% Chardonnay

Laetitia Billiot's life the past few years has been akin to taking a walk in a stiff wind; it takes an effort to stay upright. Her father, the estimable and enigmatic Serge, appears to have had short-timer's disease in the few years before he retired; he grew sloppy and inattentive, and he was inexplicably stingy with information. Once retired, he buggered off, maintaining very little contact with his kids, apparently irked that it was his daughter and not his son who'd continue the domain.

So Laetitia had rather a mess to clean up. During those years, when the extent of the challenge was slowly growing apparent, she had other personal issues as well. At this point she's basically doing the estate alone—which I ask you to understand if orders are tardy or logistics aren't spic-and-span. There is also a legal issue consuming the time such things do.

She's continuing the Champagnes as they were, not reinventing them. She still doesn't filter her base wines, she still avoids malo, and so these *rouge*-styled Champagnes are remarkably buoyant and energetic. Her most intractable challenge was to rid the cellar of a volatile-acid and nail-polishy infection caused by her Dad's slipshod work at the end. The problem was exacerbated by a bad batch of corks; it hasn't been easy to be her.

But I admire this smart, resolute woman, and her Champagnes are slowly improving, at times perhaps a bit too slowly. Full disclosure; I am sentimentally attached to Laetitia because she is one courageous and tenacious person. I will, though, give you my candid views of the wines.

Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V.

12/750ml | KBA-1

50% 2014 and 25% each of '13 and '12—we are finally rid of 2011 here. Disg 11/2016. The color is curiously dark (shallot-skin) and the wine approaches rusticity. That said, it's clean and the RS it carries is needed to balance the brisk acidity. Still, this is the cuvée with the greatest distance still to travel.

Henri Billiot Millésime Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KBA-212

A new disgorgement of 10.2016. A year ago I wrote "as always 70-30 PN/CH from older parcels. Deep color again, but here's a nice fruity aroma, recognizable as Billiot; stiff and young of course, but will do its thing in 8-12 months; some salty strength and Grand Cru backbone, but time is needed." This year it's more chalky, and well suited to its drier style, with a deep *noir* fragrance.

Henri Billiot Rosé Brut, N.V.

(+)

12/750ml | KBA-4

This, on the other hand, is definitely indicating the direction our heroine needs to move in. It's the same assemblage as the NV, disg 9/2016, yet it's actively delicious, the best wine on the table—potentially. Distinctive fruit, vigor and tension, and nothing clunky. I only hedge the star to study whether the dosage is correct. I also can't fathom why the wine is so much nicer than the NV, which comes from the same juice minus the still red.

Henri Billiot "Cuvée Laetitia" Brut, N.V.

(+)

12/750ml | KBA-3

The back-story: This was always a profound, sometimes inscrutable but reliably significant Champagne, a tête-de-cuvée consisting of the best lots from every vintage. There were two of these "soleras," the first one started in 1967, and when that one was gone, another one that began in 1983. It was a leviathan of Champagne when it was on form, as it was for many years. Then about 3-4 years ago it started to show a weird cidery or pear-drop flavor that annoyed me, yet wasn't annoying (or perhaps even discernible) to other tasters. Still, I fussed at Laetitia, and learned that the cuvée had historically been aged in many small tanks, but for some reason her father—on the eve of his retiring—decided to blend them into two large tanks. Alas, one of the component tanks was the source of the flaw, and now it was there to stay. Laetitia set about to be rid of this wine, and to create a renewed and "fresher" version of her namesake wine, "without this apple taste."

The youngest vintage (30%) is still 2013, newly disg 10.2016, and still majority CH; the wine's more open and accessible than last year, showing wet straw and tropical fruit and doughy Chardonnay richness; a nice thread of chalk runs through it. The "apple" thing (more like pear-drop) is fading fast but not entirely erased.

Henri Billiot "Cuvée Julie" Brut, N.V. (2008)

+

12/750ml | KBA-7

It seemed Serge wanted a second Tête-de-Cuvée and that it should be oaky. Laetitia agreed with me that it was too oaky, and she's set about to create a better-integrated wine that still distinguished itself from its sibling. This is pale pink in color, and it's all-in, round and precise as the '08s are. She reduced the proportion of PN as the '08 was so intense—it's 50-50 now—and this is delicious Champagne, woody but not "oaky," generous and flowery, with 2008's silvery high notes. It will only improve. Indeed it has improved, and the latest disg 10/2016 is just a fun Champagne. Yet it's not merely fun; the wood is balanced, the dosage is correct, it makes you smile, it's mood-altering, plus savory and long. It's the Billiot I remember, and whose return I am waiting for, somewhat impatiently.

JEAN LALLEMENT



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Verzenay

VINEYARD AREA

4.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

1,700 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Verzenay Grand Cru,
Verzy Grand Cru
(limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Pinot Noir
20% Chardonnay

These have always been my subjective favorite Champagnes, not just in this portfolio, but among them all. I love the equipoise between their crystalline polish and the most ornery possible terroir flavors. At their best these are legitimately stellar wines.

However neither 2010 nor 2011 showed them at their best. '10 was just stingy in ripeness, while '11 was '11. I winced to taste them at times, like looking at a friend who just got an atrociously awful haircut. He's still your BFF but dude, that *hair*.

Trust that I know whereof I speak. I always have a lot of Lallement in my cellar—I *love* the wines—but Jean-Luc is sometimes careless about which disgorgements I receive, and of course only the export label shows them. These days when I open any given bottle it's either *stellar* or it's ridden with pyrazine. He knows all this, we talk openly about it, yet there seems to be inventory ambiguity in the sample room, because he presents what they *say* is a new cuvée with no 2011 yet the wine reeks of 2011, yet *yet* the next sample is the right one and the wine is superb.

Just four wines—but what wines! Original, complex, inimitable and yummy.

Starting with his 2004s the wines were not filtered or cold-stabilized, and they are fermented with ambient yeasts. This tiny little winery, producing all of 1700 cases, is showing how things should be done.

Let's talk about this Grand Cru Verzenay.

It's a singular flavor and Lallement's virile style exemplifies it. This doesn't

seem the terroir for someone who wants to make gracious or delicate wines. If it were Burgundy it'd be Nuits-St.-Georges, animal and sauvage. Juhlin accords it special praise, saying "The village produces the blackest grapes in all Champagne... rich, peppery and virile. As a Pinot village, Verzenay is definitely the genuine star of the Montagne de Reims... pepper and iron notes... persistently long and hard for many years before it settles down to utter perfection."

Lallement's vineyards are spread between Verzenay and Verzy both Grand Cru. It's 80%/20%, Pinot Noir/ Chardonnay, as you'd expect in these parts. There are twenty different parcels, about half of which are older than 40 years. Yes to malolactic.

I had hoped at one point to see the estate grow. I was told that a contract to deliver grapes to a *négoce* was expiring. But here's what happened. Jean-Luc wanted to reclaim just two parcels for his own production. Just two! It was about 15% of what he was selling the Big Boy. But the *négoce* did what they're trained to do, and leveraged like a punk. "If we can't have those grapes then you can just keep all your grapes."

And this is one of the *négoce* we actually approve of—one of the good guys. But this sort of behavior is hardwired in them. Still, it would seem to be child's play to either call their bluff or just sell your grapes any old where. It's not like there's a soft market for Verzenay Pinot Noir. But I didn't feel it was my place to ask. There was no way to phrase the question that didn't amount to "No *juevos*, huh?" But

there was one thing I could do, and I did it. “Jean-Luc,” I said, “If you kept your entire production, and are concerned there’s no one to buy all the additional wine, I’ll

buy it. We can never get enough Champagne from you as it is.” This seemed to register. Of course there’s more to it than that. To vinify another 800 cases would

entail a large investment in space and equipment, not to mention a radical change in cashflow and quality of life. Still, I hate to let the bully win.

Jean Lallement “Tradition” Brut, N.V.

+ (+)

12/750ml | KLT-1

It’s the green label, and when it’s on form there’s no other Champagne like it, and very few as good. Its signature flavor is apple-cellar, buttered nuts, sorrel and mead, and if that sounds unusual, it is. Yet it’s so refined and crystalline that you’re gobsmacked with the purest ornery terroir alongside the finest texture you can imagine.

Disg. 9/2016, it’s 80% 2013 and 20% 2012, and as always 80-20 PN-CH. And Lallement’s ba-a-a-ck! A classic beauty in its gorgeous silky terroir-saturated style; compellingly lopsided, with more character than a dozen other wines combined. Be the first to discover how freakin’ amazing this is again. The most absurdly complex finish.

Jean Lallement “Réserve” Brut, N.V.

+ (+)

12/750ml | KLT-2

The blue label, disg 9/2016, 80% 2012, 20% 2013, still 80-20 PN-CH. Just drank a back vintage of this two nights ago, with pleasure and admiration. This one’s almost chocolate-y, full of spices and star fruit; rugged and roasty but—as always—glass clear and beyond polished.

It reverses the proportions of vintages, and also hails from superior parcels, and is a little drier—though all of these qualify as “Extra Brut.”

Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KLT-3

All 2013, disg 9/2016, assemblage with 8% still PN. The wine itself is 100% PN; taste it some time aside the Gimmonnet and wonder that the two utterly disparate wines are both Champagne.

This is an almost civilized Rosé by Lallement’s standards; marked by clove and Sockeye but also rose petals and straw; a marvelous vintage of this, better than the ’12 was at this stage. Savory finish, umami and meadow flowers.

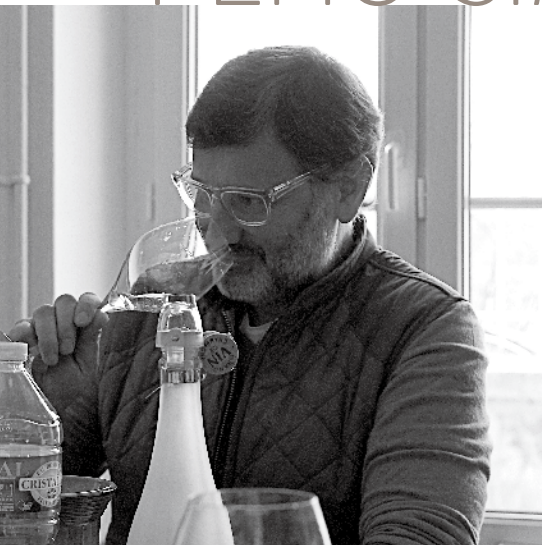
Jean Lallement Millésime Brut, 2010

+ + (+)

12/750ml | KLT-410

This smells like a perfume you’d apply to a Bengal tiger. It’s the best 2010 I’ve tasted anywhere. The ’10s at the sharpest tip of the iceberg can recall 2004, but there are fewer of them and they’re rather less lavish than the best ’04s. This has a fetching yet also “important” aroma, fluidly spicy and utter Verzenay; the palate is both linear and aerial yet with a clotted-cream concentration, leading into a superbly animal-smoky finish. Pheasant stock, parsnips, beeswax, Ceylon tea, Timut pepper, black salt on a beef-tallow sautee of morels... OK, babbling, yes. But <wheh>... this is some wine. Disg. 7/2016, and 80-20 PN-CH.

PEHU-SIMONNET



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Verzenay

VINEYARD AREA

9 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Verzenay Grand Cru,
Verzy Grand Cru,
Sillery Grand Cru,
Mailly-Champagne Grand Cru,
Villers-Marmery 1er Cru
(limestone);
Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru
(Cretaceous chalk)

GRAPE VARIETIES

78% Pinot Noir
22% Chardonnay

David Pehu – who with his new beard looks unnervingly like Ricky Gervais—is on the cusp of a breakthrough. He has, however, stood on this threshold for several years now. Partly he was stymied by 2011, as most Champagne producers were. Partly it's because things take time in Champagne, due to the lag between hatching an idea and having the wine for sale. Partly it may have been a family matter that I'm sure was distracting.

The wines are certainly fine in the interim—notwithstanding a few rogue '11s—but I know what's in the pipeline, and patience is not paramount among my meager virtues. At least the label was changed!

As David Pehu's wines are a bit more mature than his neighbors at Lallement, we're still dealing with more than echoes of 2011.

The new label (not a moment too soon) for the “normal” Champagnes will say Face Nord because of the anomaly of these unusual north-facing Grand Crus. David Pehu is also putting dosage levels on his back labels, so now the Champagne hipster can reject a wine without having to taste it!

Apropos hipsters, if this estate were just now being introduced to the market, it would be perceived as cutting-edge, jumping through all the right hoops,

doing all the “radical” things considered alien to my portfolio of mastodons. And yet, here it is. The Champagnes improve year to year and they were already PFG. Many of the wines you see below will have been broken down into their component parcels with future bottlings; they're on the lees as we speak. One of them is an organic parcel in Mailly called Les Poules. He will also offer a trilogy of Chardonnays, from Villers-Marmery, Verzenay and Le Mesnil, alongside of mono-commune Pinot Noirs from Mailly and Verzy.

In this context, I'm not sure what cutting-edge is supposed to mean. I'm less interested in cutting edges than in digging deep. How much telling detail can be shown? Why do wines taste as they do? Are there unsuspected flavors, new things to taste that come not from the cellar but from the land?

The wines are quite different from Lallement's in every way except basic essential flavor. Verzenay is, after all, Verzenay. But Pehu's wines are rather more glossy and fleshy, and correspondingly less sleek and filigree. He has 9 hectares of which 6 are Grand Cru; the balance is Chardonnay in Villers-Marmery (home of our hero Arnaud Margaine). His vineyards are a remarkably ecumenical group: Verzy, Verzenay, Mailly, Sillery—and Mesnil!

Pehu-Simonnet “Sélection Face Nord” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KPS-1N

The base (70%) is 2013, and the rest is a perpetual reserve that was begun in 2005. Disg 2/2017, and the wine is back in form, even with the fresh disgorgement. Pinot Noir aromas lead to a highly vinous palate; round yet glossy and salty, with a ton of potential. The wine is 70-30 PN-CH, with the CH hailing from Verzenay.

By the way, previous editions of this wine suggested that at least some of the Verzenay aroma is actually the smell of *Chardonnay* from the commune.

Pehu-Simonnet “Sélection Face Nord” Extra Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KPS-5N

Not just the NV with less dosage, this is different in several ways. It's all 2012. It's 100% Verzenay. 67%PN, 33% CH, and the only wine David takes through malo. Disg. 9/2016, the aromas are enticing and the palate surprisingly rugged, kind of like skirt steak. In my view this wine is too dry, but some folks will prefer it like this. Also, I felt the same way about the 2006, and came to change my mind. So we'll see.

Pehu-Simonnet “Face Nord” Rosé Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KPS-3N

All 2012, 76-24 PN/CH with 6% Verzenay red. *That's* what I'm talking about! 2012 Rosés are apparently all gushing with deliriously pretty fruit, and now that it's beyond the disg concussion (9/2016) it shows all its seriousness and gliding sumptuous vinosity.

Pehu-Simonnet Mailly Les Poules, Brut

+

12/750ml | KPS-8N

This is a single-parcel Mailly Grand Cru—rare enough in the Champagne world—and the first plot David farmed organically. He disgorged a bottle for us—the wine will be offered late summer—and the maiden vintage is—*ulp*—2011. And yet! This bottle is good. Lots of chalk and really salty; oak is a player but not the loudest guy in the glass. Mailly seems like a somewhat more herbal Verzy; this site is on the border to Verzenay. The wine has a curious florality, like osmanthus, and its overall impact is plums, herbs and stones.

Pehu-Simonnet Millésime Extra Brut, 2008

(+)

12/750ml | KPS-408

50% Verzenay PN in wood, 50% Mesnil and Verzenay CH done in steel. Disg 2/2017, available late summer. It's potentially wonderful but starkly affected by disgorgement, which isn't helped by the very low RS, but the larger question is: why so dry? David turned out to be right with his 2006, about which I had similar doubts. But '08 is not '06; its acids are far more prominent. So, jury out. Leaving the wine in the glass awhile, the Chardonnay grew more conspicuous and the wine's components seemed to knit, so this fascinating wine is a coalescing being—today.

NOTE: there is also a Blanc de Noirs (2011, and obtrusively buggy) as well as a tragically compromised 100% Mesnil ('11) that's also beneath a shroud of pyrazine. The latter has a record of excellence, and we are eager for the 2012.

A · MARGAINE



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Villers-Marmery

VINEYARD AREA

6.2 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,600 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Villers-Marmery 1er Cru
(clay-limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

90% Chardonnay
10% Pinot Noir

It's like welcoming them back home, all the growers who are shedding the affects of 2011 and making "their" wines again. I wonder whether other importers feel the same. They should. No one (or very *very* few) escaped the torments of the ladybugs. It was not only a markedly lovely group of wines at Margaine this year; it was, once again, his particular wines in all their particular loveliness.

The redoubtable Brad Baker wrote a very flattering report on Margaine in issue 17 of his Champagne Warrior e-zine. It goes into great detail, and is exceptionally well researched. Visit www.champagne-warrior.com/ChampagneWarriorIssue17.pdf to read it.

Brad was accurate describing Arnaud as "humble," though I myself would say he's exceptionally thoughtful, and humility follows naturally from that temperament. His wines, also, are careful and focused, not especially gushing. A curious facet of a visit to this domain is how good the Vins Clairs are. Two of the '14 Char-

donnays reminded me of tasting Riesling at Geil, which I had done less than two weeks earlier. There were lots with malo and others without, and pH ran between 3.06 and 2.95 (!) and of course this translates eventually into Champagnes that the palate can "read" as phenolic, especially when you rush-taste through a bunch of them. You know the old trope about Champagne with oily food? These boys will sandblast any goop off your tongue, believe me.

He experimented with cover-cropping in his vineyards. It's trendy, and the results seemed to be favorable. Plus it gives a grower a chance to say a fashionable thing. But it didn't work. The first few years he tried it, it depleted nitrogen and potassium inputs into the vines, leading to reduction flavors in the wines. Equilibrium is since restored.

I would never claim this is a sacred Truth engraved in stone; it's just one guy's experience. To be considered, whenever sacred Truths are asserted.

A. Margaine Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut, N.V



12/750ml | KAM-7

The best ever iteration of this wine, it's a **not-to-be-missed** item. It also shows how dry Champagne *ought* to be— in other words, effing balanced.

80% 2013, 20% 2012, it's the same wine last last year but with longer *tirage*—disg. 10/2016; seriously refined and tasty; is cool and brisk, acres of chalk-dust and starchy basmati; it has a cool temperament but there's just too much sheer flavor for it to feel aloof or diffident. It's very *white*—chalk, flowers, jasmine, soy milk. Fantastic detail and class.

A. Margaine “Cuvée Le Brut,” N.V.



12/750ml | KAM-1

I wish I were named “Cuvée le Brut” instead of my actual name, Gibbery Wobblestein (“Terry Theise” is a pseudonym). In the early days of this portfolio—jeez, 20 years ago—this was among my most beloved NVs, and then there seemed to be a kind of trough, and now it's gorgeous once more. It's gorgeous, and there is *nothing* remotely like it.

91% CH (Villers Marmery is an island of CH in a sea of PN a.k.a. the Montagne de Reims) and 9% PN, it's 48% 2014 with the remainder blending '13, '12, '11 and '09. Another lovely edition of Margaine, that will improve with more time on the cork. Still pale, with an almost ghostly, eerie clarity, a high-register shimmer, diaphanous and spectral, and the finish is like tiny white sparks are shooting from your tongue. The customary flavors of jasmine and talc are certainly present, but it's the haunting ethereal peeling that you'll remember.

A. Margaine Rosé Brut, N.V.



12/750ml | KAM-2

Arnaud's energetic daughter Mathilde hinted she might wish to change the label on this wine, whereupon we all made Edvard Munch *Scream* faces and pleaded with her to leave it be. In any case the wine, after suffering from 2011's predations, is strongly back in form the past two years. Base of 2014, it's 75% CH, 13% PN and 10% still red PN. Disg 12/2016, this is a sheer version of this dewy-fruited being, all class and spring water purity. It's as pretty as strawberries you never forgot because they were so divine.

A. Margaine “Cuvée Traditionelle” Demi-Sec, N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-5

12/375ml | KAM-5H

Well don't you smell good! Deg 1/2016, it's identical to the NV Brut, with more dosage but not a ton more—30g/l—and it's completely successful. C'mon somms; this needs to go on your tasting-menu pairings, between the sorghum ale and the amphora sake!

VILMART & CIE



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Rilly-la-Montagne

VINEYARD AREA

11 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

9,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Rilly-la-Montagne 1er Cru,
Villers-Allerand 1er Cru
(calcareous clay and limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

60% Chardonnay
36% Pinot Noir
4% Meunier

AMPELOS CERTIFICATION

lutte raisonnée

Of all the producers whom I started out with, Vilmart is the one that's changed most profoundly and decisively. In the early days I think Laurent Champs wanted to make wines of Statement. One of the gestures was oak, one was concentration, one was power, and all together combined in such a way as to *urge* a sort of authoritativeness reminiscent of big White Burgundy. The wines were always impressive, sometimes markedly assertive, other times more placid, but always classy and singular.

The 1993 Coeur de Cuvée was, for me, the first glimpse of a higher potential. That wine was all-in Vilmart and yet its impact was to *have* no "impact" but just to be beautiful. It is rare, always, to drink a wine that's entirely enveloping and rich and yet somehow weightless. Laurent also indicated a curiously unnerving capacity to make dazzling wines even in "off" vintages. His '97s, '01s, '07s were arguably the best wines of those vintages in all of Champagne. When a vintner is that consistent, there has to be a guiding ideal—and Vilmart's are wines of the Platonic Ideal.

I'm not inside Laurent's head, and for all I know he wouldn't agree with me, or he'd say things in very different ways. I merely report what I experience here, and this estate has undergone a subtle but profound ascension from the earthbound to the celestial. Yet even so, they are mortal after all; the issues with 2011 were not infrequent visitors. If Vilmart were perfect I'd be suspicious.

In my Germany catalogue I wrote a text about Theresa Breuer's wines in

which I tried—again—to describe a facet common to the wines I love the most. If I could sum it up—if—it would begin with texture, and specifically it would begin with the paradox of wines that are numinously expressive in flavor yet rendered with such tenderness you feel the wine is consoling you. It's a phenomenon elusive of language (which may be why I keep attacking it) and yet it is powerfully affirming to me. To be clear, I don't need reminders that beauty exists. I know it does. But when the world piles on, it's striking to stumble upon a beauty that doesn't shout, that simply is there, breathing and waiting to be seen.

And so, what moves me most about the wines Laurent is making today is their serenity, even as they convey a quiet radiance. You know how people say that vinyl is "warmer" sounding than CD? You know how people say that old incandescent light bulbs cast a gentler glow than compact fluorescents? That's what I mean. Radiant rather than glaring. Flavor that surrounds you, like a vapor you can't escape. A beauty that feels calm, that needn't clamor, that feels loving and friendly.

The essential *tastes* of Vilmart run toward vanilla and yellow fruit, and these seem to be facets of Rilly-la-Montagne (based on other growers' wines) at least for Chardonnay. Laurent's Pinot Noir shows the floral side of the variety, so that his Rosé makes you think you're consuming an ether of Chambolle or Vosne. All of these are Champagne from wines-made-in-oak, and yet they are not "oaky" wines. This may be the most tangible change of

the last decades—the taming of the barrel. Laurent has learned how to make the flavor work *for* him, to put it in its place and then rejoice that it is precisely *there*.

The oak is subtle because it isn't plastered on. It rather permeates the wine so as to elude identification. Indeed, all of Vilmar's wines consist of flavors that per-

meate one another in a gently whooshing circle.
But I babble.

NOTE: All the wines were tasted from many different stems including the Juhlin, two forms from Jamasse, one from Zalto, and the terrically expensive Lehman designed for Chef Lallement at the local 3-Star. When variations or discrepancies occurred, I'll reference them in my notes. The big-picture take-away is—as always—that crucial differences exist from stem to stem, yet there's no consensus as regards a "perfect" glass.

Vilmar & Cie "Grand Cellier" Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVM-1

The new edition of this is 50% 2014 and 25% each '13-'12, disg 6/2016 and available summer 2017. This smelled good in every glass, and the palate was more integrated ("*fondue*") than is often the case at this stage. The palate was somewhat ragged in the Juhlin but from the Lehmann it's all buttercakes and vanilla bean and salted white chocolate. The best young Grand Cellier in many years. It bears mentioning that many tasters find this wine hugely impressive and high-impact. I like and respect its energy and originality, but I have—alas!—had 4-5 year old examples, and they spoiled me.

Vilmar & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or" Brut, 2012

+ (+)

12/750ml | KVM-611

Disg 11/2016, this was *fantastic* from the Juhlin, which presented its salt and savor—and its acidity. From Lehmann it's prettier, more *patisserie*—but both indicate a vigorous spine. Zalto suppressed the fruit, but Jamesse is *da BOMB*, and this vintage, for all its hale ripeness, has drive and a salty-lemony electricity.

Vilmar & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or" Brut, 2010

+ +

3/1500ml | KVM-610M

Disg 10/2015, it's a cerebral interpretation of what's already a sleek and articulate vintage, and it's glorious in the Jamesse, which shows the woody vinous core. Keep this a few more years, and do not drink it from a flûte.

Vilmar & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2009

+ +

12/750ml | KVM-509

From the "heart" of the free-run juice, this has become one of Champagne's indispensable wines. The 2008, if you're lucky enough to have bought some, is otherworldly—+++.

This '09 is a stunning power-vintage of CdC, recalling the 2003 and 2006 though rather less sultry than either; this wine is greater than any glass it's served in; almost overwhelmingly generous yet finesse-ful, salty and spicy (5-spice mix especially) I think this will grow incredibly complex with time.

Vilmar & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2007

(+ + +)

3/1500ml | KVM-507M

The 750ml was probably the best wine of that vintage in this offering; I've drunk it at home several times and never regretted extolling it as I did. The Mag needs a modicum of patience, but you'll get a potentially great wine of a very particular type tautly energetic, almost galvanic, within which lies a heart rending subdued richness. From the Zalto it was scary-gorgeous. No question, 2008 is objectively great by any reasonable measure, but this 07? Insider-secret bliss, baby! The '08 is mystic, but the '07 is pure primordial energy, sonic boom energy, Husain Bolt energy, 135mph serve energy.

Vilmar & Cie "Cuvée Rubis" Rosé Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVM-3

80% 2013, 20% 2012, available summer, disg 11/2016. It tastes like the purest, ripest heirloom tomatoes, cut in half and sniffed adamantly. The wine is whipping around like a wound-up puppy right now; the Zalto contained it and showed its vinosity, where the Jamesse showed the pulp and seed of the 'mater. Ultimately it will dissolve to its solid core, and it's worth waiting for.



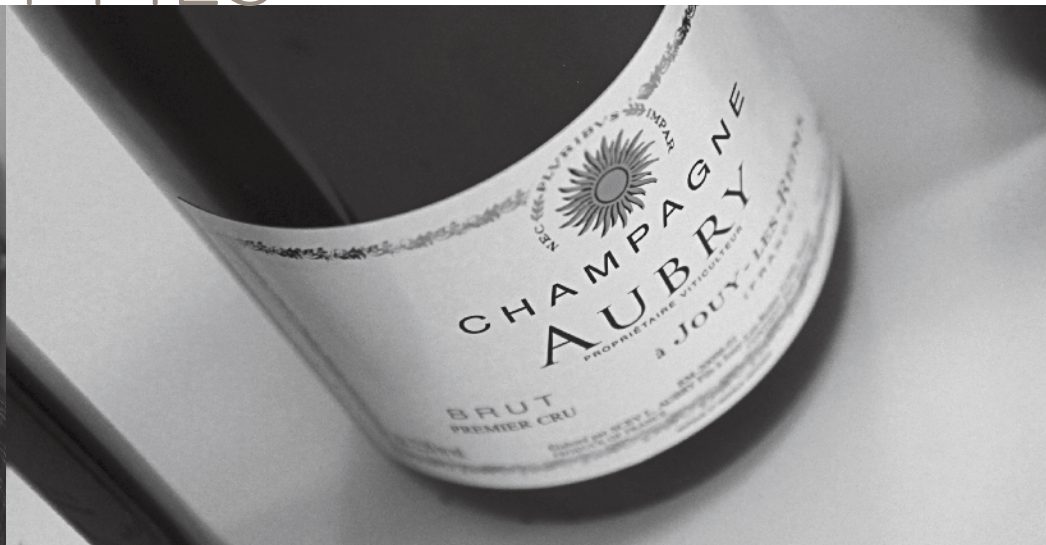
Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier Rubis” Rose Brut, 2010

+ +

12/750ml | KVM-310

This, on the other hand, is profound and quite plausibly “Burgundian.” Deg 10/2014 it’s 60-40 PN/CH; from the Jamasse it’s like an ether of Vosne-Romanée. From the Juhlin it’s more focused, tomato-water and air-dried meat. This is really fabulous rosé in *either* glass; in Jamasse it’s almost overwhelmingly Burgundian, with the highest dewy register of PN-sandalwood and strawberry cream. It actually firms up with air and leaves a deep woodsy farewell with a delirious echo of fruit. Use a wine glass, please.

L. AUBRY FILS



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Jouy-lès-Reims

VINEYARD AREA

17 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

11,700 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Jouy-lès-Reims 1er Cru
(clay-limestone) ;
Pargny-lès-Reims
(clay-limestone) ;
Villedommange and
Coulommès-la-Montagne
(clay-limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

37% Pinot Meunier
27% Chardonnay
27% Pinot Noir
9% Arbanne,
Petit Meslier,
Pinot Blanc,
Fromenteau (Pinot Gris)

The essential point of Aubry is to limn the very fine line between a kind of country classicism and an absolute embrace of the avant-garde.

And they do this in an idiom of naked dryness; the *relatively* mainstream NV Brut is the “sweetest” wine in the range, with all of six grams. But read to the end.

When I first introduced the wines I was thrilled to highlight all the heirloom varieties, and the many ways Aubrys were true originals. I still am, and they still are. But what’s striking me more and more of late is the *dignity* these wines have been showing. My marketing side—as pathetic as that is—keeps wanting to be playful about the novelties of the wines, but my human side keeps pausing before them, noticing their basic and unfussy truths.

The (twin) brothers themselves can seem irascible, and certainly they are colorful. But again, below these flourishes of personality are two very serious people. They didn’t do the heirloom varieties because “it would be cool,” but instead because they were curious. Why were these vines planted at all? What became of them? What do they taste like?? What could they possibly say?

One year we arrived at 1:30 and the first thing Philippe asked was whether we’d had lunch. “No no, we’re fine,” I began, but he cut me off. You see, he wasn’t offering lunch; he wanted to know what condition our palates were in. I’ve been doing this gig twenty-seven years now, and this was a first. And a VERY smart one.

He would calibrate his pouring sequence to account for the change in our palates had we in fact eaten.

It’s a hoot tasting with these guys. They love doing the flavor-association thing; when they pour a sample they are constantly muttering flavors to themselves, having a big ol’ time. If you say an association they stop and say “Yes! Blackberry!” and log it into their book.

After the phylloxera devastation, they say, the growers replanted with more reliable varieties such as the big-3 (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier) and intriguingly also with Pinot Blanc, which is permitted in Champagne, thanks to a regulation allowing “Pinot” but not specifying *which* Pinot. Some growers have told me they dislike Arbanne and Petit Meslier, but all I can say is that’s as may be; what I taste at Aubry is entirely convincing.

I finally got to taste Arbanne and Petit Meslier as still wines. The Arbanne was, as anticipated, fascinating; full of green flavors (i.e. the tastes of green things, not underripeness), along with lemon, litchi, cloves, mirabelle and sweet hay. The nearest cognate was in fact *Grüner Veltliner*.

Meslier is the exotic: musk-melon, here the nearest cognate is *Gros Manseng*; peppermint, exotic apples; the wine had very low pH, and “needs to be blended with Chardonnay” according to Aubrys.

I’m glad there’s Arbanne and Petit Meslier in our world, because each unique thing is another word in the vocabulary of existence.

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAB-1

Meunier expresses here as barley, rusks, crackers, and so the wine is rusky, coppery-saline, *iodé*, mineral and appetizing. It's beautifully expressive of a corner of Champagne, and tastes as though it were fined with *sel gris*.

(I also kinda like that the wine doesn't have a "name," especially the same name everyone else's wine has. If I see another *Réserve*, *Tradition*, *Prestige*, etc. I think I will disgorge myself in the nearest toilet.) In any case, this year the NVB is 50% 2014 and the rest is the perpetual reserve; it's 55% PM (higher than usual), 20% CH, 20% PN and 5% "other" (essentially all the topping-off wines from that-and-that varieties); disg 1/2017, and it's already in stock—we go through a ton of Aubry NV. Crackery, coppery, briny, full of finesse yet pure, pure *grower Champagne*.

L. Aubry Fils "Le Nombre d'Or, Campanae Veteres Vites" Brut, N.V. (2013)

(+)

12/750ml | KAB-4

"The old vines of the country" was probably the first in modern Champagne to include all the heirlooms. "The Pinots were fantastic in '13; this wine has a soul," says Aubry.

It also has a complicated blend: 20% Pinot Gris, 20% Pinot Blanc, 5% Arbanne, 10% Petit Meslier, 20% CH, 20% PN and—<gasp!> 5% Meunier. Disg 1/2017, it was to concussed to really appraise. It doesn't seem as exotic, it does *seem* saltier, it opened up in the (small) glass, so I asked for a bigger glass, from which it was more suave. This should be superb by the late summer.

L. Aubry Fils "Aubry de Humbert" Brut, 2008

12/750ml | KAB-308

Named for the archbishop who laid the cornerstone for the Reims cathedral. And – 2008! Disg. 11/2016, it has the classic assemblage (30-30-30 CH-PN-PM and 5% ea. Arbanne/Petit Meslier), and while I approached it eagerly, adoring 2008 as I do, I found the wine lovely, curvaceous, woody (it's always in oak but seemed more "oaky" this time, maybe because '08 is so slim), and while the dosage is as-always, I felt it might have been too stingy. However, I can be wrong, and hope I am this time.

L. Aubry Fils Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAB-2

All 2014. 40% CH, 40% PM, 10% PN and 10% still PN. Disg 1/2017. Even for a wine in their "classic" series this is original; always very dry and always tasting like ripe blackberry juice from which the sweetness was somehow removed. Iris and berry as always, but an especially fetching and balanced edition of this. The finish is like stirring chalk dust through blackberry juice. It was also more *present* from the larger glass; less overtly chalky than the '13, more *iodé*, ferrous.

L. Aubry Fils Sablé Blanc des Blancs Brut, 2012

+

12/750ml | KAB-812

It uses all the white grapes (hence Blanc des Blancs), deg 1/2017, zero dosage, and "Sablé" is their word for a lower-pressure Champagne—4 instead of 6 atmospheres.

For me this and the Sablé Rosé are the Aubry archetypes. Understand these, and you grok them. This one is a grand 65% Arbanne/Petit Meslier/Pinot Blanc, so their presence is palate-tangible. Aubry describes a "lactic" aroma, like *crème fraîche*, but for me it's the usual fluff and dough, more starch than chalk, pasta-water, anise, physalis, and curiously this was richer from the *small* glass.

L. Aubry Fils Sablé Rosé "Nicolas François Aubry" Brut, 2013

12/750ml | KAB-613

Disg 12/2016, it's 30% Arbanne, 30% Petit Meslier, 30% CH and 10% still PN. Salmon, herbs, cucumber, not really a pink wine aroma; a vinous umami moves into the space the acidity vacates; flowering trees and *sous bois*; for me the one indispensable wine of Aubry, to show who they are.

CHARTOGNE-TAILLET



REGION / SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims / Merfy

VINEYARD AREA

11.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

7,500 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Merfy,
Saint Thierry
(sand, clay with chalk and limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

40% Chardonnay
38% Pinot Noir
20% Pinot Meunier
2% Arbanne

AT A GLANCE

12 hectare estate which occasionally supplements (legally!) with up to 5% Chardonnay from a friend in Avize. Racy, spicy Champagnes at the low end; sumptuous, brioche-y Champagnes at the top.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

Extremely spritzzy and highly leesy—one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronome! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

I hadn't heard about the chickens. There are chickens, who live the lives such creatures were meant to live. Originally they were obtained in order to provide eggs, but observing them one day, Alexandre thought they might be useful in the vineyards also, eating grubs and bugs and controlling pests. So he puts them in a coop from time to time, and carries them to the vineyards, releases them and lets them do their thing. He's already using sheep and horses. The man will have an entire menagerie if this goes on; can llamas and komodo dragons be far behind?

A few recollections... Elisabeth Chartogne went far out of her way to help launch this portfolio in its inception, by being my liaison on the ground in Champagne, and refusing to take any money for it. Yes it was self-interested, but not directly, and it couldn't have happened without her.

At first all I knew was there was a son. Then I learned he was interested in wine.

Then one day, as we sat under a blossoming early spring tree in their garden, schmoozing with Phillipe Chartogne (and drinking some urgently needed caffeinated beverages...) I learned that Alexandre was stage-ing at Selosse. "That's all I need; now he's going to want us to buy three dozen wooden barrels..."

Sometime in those years Elisabeth brought her (then) young son to meet my wife and me at L'Arnsbourg, a remote 3-star in the northern Vosges National Park. I'd been singing its praises to her, that it was stellar and affordable, and she wanted it to be junior's first 3-star meal. Awwww! I wasn't surprised when Alexandre assumed the estate, and I wasn't surprised that he was ambitious. What did surprise me, and continues to surprise me, is that he is the most passionately curious vigneron I know, not only in Champagne, but just maybe anywhere. He is pursuing something that doesn't take the form of accolades—though these will surely come—and hardly even asks for answers.

It's a quest for a kind of immersion, an unquenchable desire to experience.

I believe that Alexandre Chartogne is the most exciting young producer in Champagne. And I also believe he drank from the fountain of wisdom when he said to me, "I do not feel good when I'm sure about something." Because that's how you measure the hunger in a man's soul.

It begins with a new/old approach to vineyard work, bio-dynam-ish, one might say. Critters (sheeps and horses), soil analyses of remarkable detail, each aspect of viticulture challenged and

changed as necessary. Cellar work is also excitingly new. Indeed there's almost too much information to give here. Alexander's blog is a lovely source for info and updates, and the estate's website gives all the basics. Suffice to say there's a vivid spirit of inquiry here, the likes of which I have never seen in this habit-riven region.

Here's an example. Alexander has installed two fermentation/storage "eggs" in the cuverie. He wrote to us one year, parts of which I reproduce (having edited misspellings etc.).

Concerning those eggs, there is a huge vinification difference between the eggs, the barrels, the vats (inox or enamel).

- *In the barrels, the lees from the fermentations are moving casually. The wine-grower decides to make a batonnage or not for many reasons.*
- *In the eggs, the Brownien movement helps the lees to be always in contact with the wine. This really helps me to reduce the sulfur amount (thanks to the natural lees production of sulfur), but also regroup the lees with the wine who are for me two inseparable elements.*

- *The result is:*

In the barrels: more wild in the barrels, more variations, possibility to lose the freshness of the wine, but have a big advantage, let a big oxidation level for the wine, and we often obtain the best result in wood (if it's not woody and hiding the flavors, and also if the parcel is a very good one).

In the eggs: a pure but also breathy wine, more thin and delicate than in the barrels. The lees do not influence the wine too much, but also do not give the wines reduced aspects as it often happens in the inox vats.

I also read in many articles that the eggs make very fruity wines. At home, that's totally false. It could happen on poor terroirs, but when the soil is respected, and the wine isn't only influenced by the grape variety, but also and mainly from the soil, we lose this very easy fruit, and obtain a pure terroir wine, focusing on the mineral, on the stones, subsoil influence (here, the result is more salty or stony thanks to our chalk or from our specific limestone).

Maybe this is all too geeky, but what it really shows is the questing of a restless mind and an ambitious spirit. Which is what the new family of Champagnes shows and then some.

The most important passion our young hero brings is a result of his practicum at Seloisse: biodynamics. Here are his words:

What is the terroir? Some say it's more than just the soil, but the terroir is first the soil. The roots take 46 elements from the soil that give the grapes complexity, finesse, sometimes minerality. The plant only takes 4 elements from the air that give anything to the wine, 4 elements that permit the plant to grow, but that's all; no flavors from the air into the wine. I never try to instruct my soil or my vines, how they have to live or what flavors they have to give. I only want to let the vines live in the best conditions; when the roots stay on top of the soil because the winegrower is too

lazy to work or plow his vines, it's a real shame. I make walls in the soil, to see how the population in the soil is living and how the roots are reacting, and if something needs to change I change it.

With Chartogne-Taillet one appreciates the significance of terroir. Their land, while good (Merfy is "84%" on the Échelle des Crus) is not aristocratic. Merfy in fact lies in the so-called Coteaux de Vesle; it sits on what was once the beach of an ocean covering what is now the Reims depression. Thus its 60cm of sand over the chalk.

We did a dosage seminar at the Fête du Champagne in NYC last November. Co-presented. Alexandre was very kind afterwards, praising my ease with the material, yet it was he who said the wisest things. We do a good gig together; you should book us some time. With him and me there's an ease and comfort that's not only the basis for friendship but also for a working partnership, that's free of "politics" and therefore relaxing. I can't tell you what a comfort that is.

At the end we tasted a 1979 Cuvée Sainte Anne, a wine from a previous era (and generation), made by Alex's father Phillip, who was an unpretentious but caring vintner in an unremarkable terroir. The wine was sensational, buttery, with orange zest and hazelnut (like a Palo Cortado) and blossom all leading into a palate mélange of white chocolate and espresso, leading in turn to a searching estery finish. The wine was *sweet enough*, and all those ass-dry hipster crapwad wines will be in the toilet in five years, while this un-pedigree-d masterly wine is gleaming and noble at age thirty five.

Will we ever learn?

Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Ste-Anne" Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCT-1

I drink a lot of this wine at home, and every bottle makes me glad. It's a Champagne of impact; it's just earthy enough to be marked as a grower but just polished enough to indicate *fine* Champagne. It's full of character, solid enough to be toothsome, silky enough to gliss across the tongue. Disg 2/2017, 60-40 CH-PN, 60-40 2014/13. Base wines are unfiltered. 80-20 steel to wood. Average 32-year vines.

Chartogne-Taillet Les Barres Brut, N.V. (2012)

12/750ml | KCT-712

Ungrafted vines planted in 1952, 100% Meunier, and one of the most profound Meunier statements in all of Champagne. Vinified in old barriques with wild yeasts.

I saw a "preview"—the wine becomes available mid-summer, and dosage is still being determined. '12 is a powerhouse, and the wine is full of carob and leather and earth and morels. Try to resist opening it until at least six months after disgorgement; its truth is in the belly, and fresh disgorgement is a noise that obscures the rumbling signals, and coats the palate in an unyielding steel. In the idiom of the meaty Meuniers, this wine is a paradigm of poise, grace and maturity.



Chartogne-Taillet Les Orizeaux Brut, N.V. (2012)

12/750ml | KCT-812

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Chartogne-Taillet Couarres Château Brut, N.V. (2012)

12/750ml | KCT-931

+

Both are single-vineyard Pinot Noirs. *Orizeaux* is older (55 years), on sandy-rocky soil, while *Couarres* is a mere sapling at age-28, but this is a singular soil related to the Tufa of Vouvray. At 80cm deep, Alex works this vineyard by horse to reduce soil-compaction.

They make an amazing tandem, even with extremely fresh disg of 2/2017. *Orizeaux* seems markedly spicy whereas *Couarres* looks like the better wine—or the one that came through disgorgement less concussed—it's even-keeled, elegant and detailed, with lovely PN fruit and lots of yin-yang. *Orizeaux* is more antique and atavistic, though that's to its advantage: after recovering from disgorgement it will be more soulful and holistic. It's a Rembrandt, and *Couarres* a Seurat.

(Note: I'm leaving the white parcel-wines behind. They're 2011s and I have had my fill of that vintage...)

Chartogne-Taillet Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCT-6

+

All 2013, 50-50 CH-PN, with PN from *Orizeaux*, this is the Champagne most improved under Alexandre, and stands as one of Champagne's most compelling Rosés. This '13 has a charming, and I mean charming aroma, his best bottling yet, delicious and silky, substantive yet gauzy, elegant, forthcoming and classy; on the flowery side but not gushing.

FINAL THOUGHTS



A SHORT WORD ABOUT VINTAGES

I won't report in detail. The place to go for such information is Peter Liem's *Champagne Guide* (champagneguide.net). But I will say we're entering a golden age for non-vintage Champagnes—none too soon after the difficult tandem of 2010-2011—and not only are the vintages good, they blend well *together*. This cannot be assumed in Champagne, notwithstanding the conventional wisdom. For example, excellent as 2008 was, it didn't blend perfectly with either 2007 or 2009. I'm also unsure of the unity of 2013-2012, but '13 and '14 are lovely together, and we have five consecutive vintages of at least *very good* quality, from 2012-2016, and so the quality of NVs is assured for a while.

Vintages differ in nature, of course, and also in microclimate, such that 2013 is gorgeous in the middle of the Côte des Blancs (Mesnil) whereas it's just-OK a few miles away in the north (Cramant). 2014 is focused, 2015 is strong, 2016 is detailed and mineral, but these generalities are belied by any number of exceptions.

The increasingly widespread practice of the "perpetual reserve" makes sense in theory—you have an ever-more-intricate cuvée refreshed by each new vintage—but it's inconvenient if there's a real stinker in the vat such as 2011, from which I am squirming to escape. That said, a truly unpleasant vintage is a rarity.

One final thought: I am ever more

attracted to the idea that the very vintages by which we are most excited at first, can be vintages that don't always age smoothly. Concomitantly, the vintages we question early on—such as 2009—are often the vintages best for aging. Years like 2008, which I love to pieces, are marked by an acid-driven precision that creates a thrilling energetic interplay with florals and minerals, and yet – what does that acidity do as an ingredient in aging? A vintage like 2009 can seem 4-square and even heavy-footed on release, yet these vintages often seem to slim down as they age, appearing to discover an embedded grace and proportion.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON DOSAGE

You may notice I am eliminating information about RS levels in this offering, unless they are implied (or definitively indicated) by the name itself, e.g., "Brut Zero" or some such thing. That's not because I like keeping secrets. I'll tell you if you ask me.

But only if you ask me *after* you have tasted the wine. I understand and approve of that question; you want an objective corollary to the actual impression you've received sensorily. I will not answer you if you ask me *before* you've tasted the wine, because I fear that you want to judge whether the wine will be *acceptable* according to your doctrine. I want no part of that.

Just my luck; I get to have the sugar argument in two areas of enterprise—Germany and Champagne—and after many decades of urging people to just taste with their goddam wits, the foul prejudices persist. Wine people are often smart; we need to be. We have a lot of information to assimilate, we need to attend to what we're tasting, and we need to wrestle language into something it's seemingly unintended to do, describe flavor. Yet on the subject of residual sugar we're as stupid as we can possibly be. Too often we feel we need to stake out a general position on the question, which is then applied to thousands of differing wines each with their own structures, components and profiles. It cannot be done. It's a cruel waste of time to *try* to do it. It leads you away from wisdom. It twists your palate and damages your mind. So just stop it.

The question "What's the right dosage?" is not rhetorical. It's a useful question, but it can't be answered in the manner it is asked. It is too vague. That said, the "right" dosage is *whatever tastes best for THIS particular wine*. Another response is: *as little as possible but as much as needed*. Beyond these, there is no sensible answer that I have ever heard. And no possible one.

So I shall opt out of this dialectic, because it is too sapping, too distressing. It is already fucking with a zillion wines that could have tasted *better* but which were "raped into dryness" by ideologues and chumps.



48 W 25th St.
New York, NY 10010
skurnik.com