

CHAMPAGNE 2016

TERRY THEISE ESTATE SELECTIONS

THEISE MANIFESTO

Beauty is more important than impact.

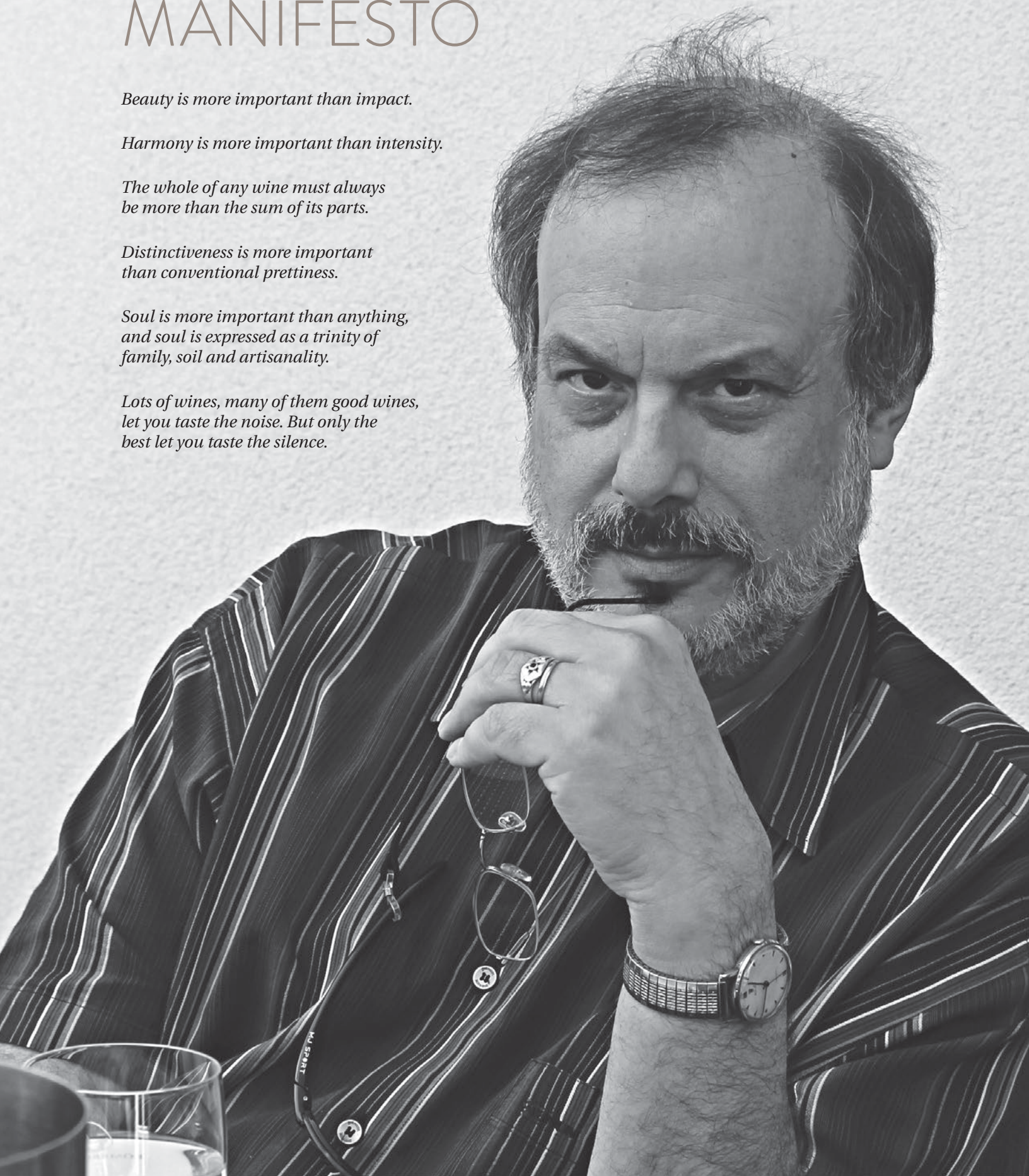
Harmony is more important than intensity.

*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.*

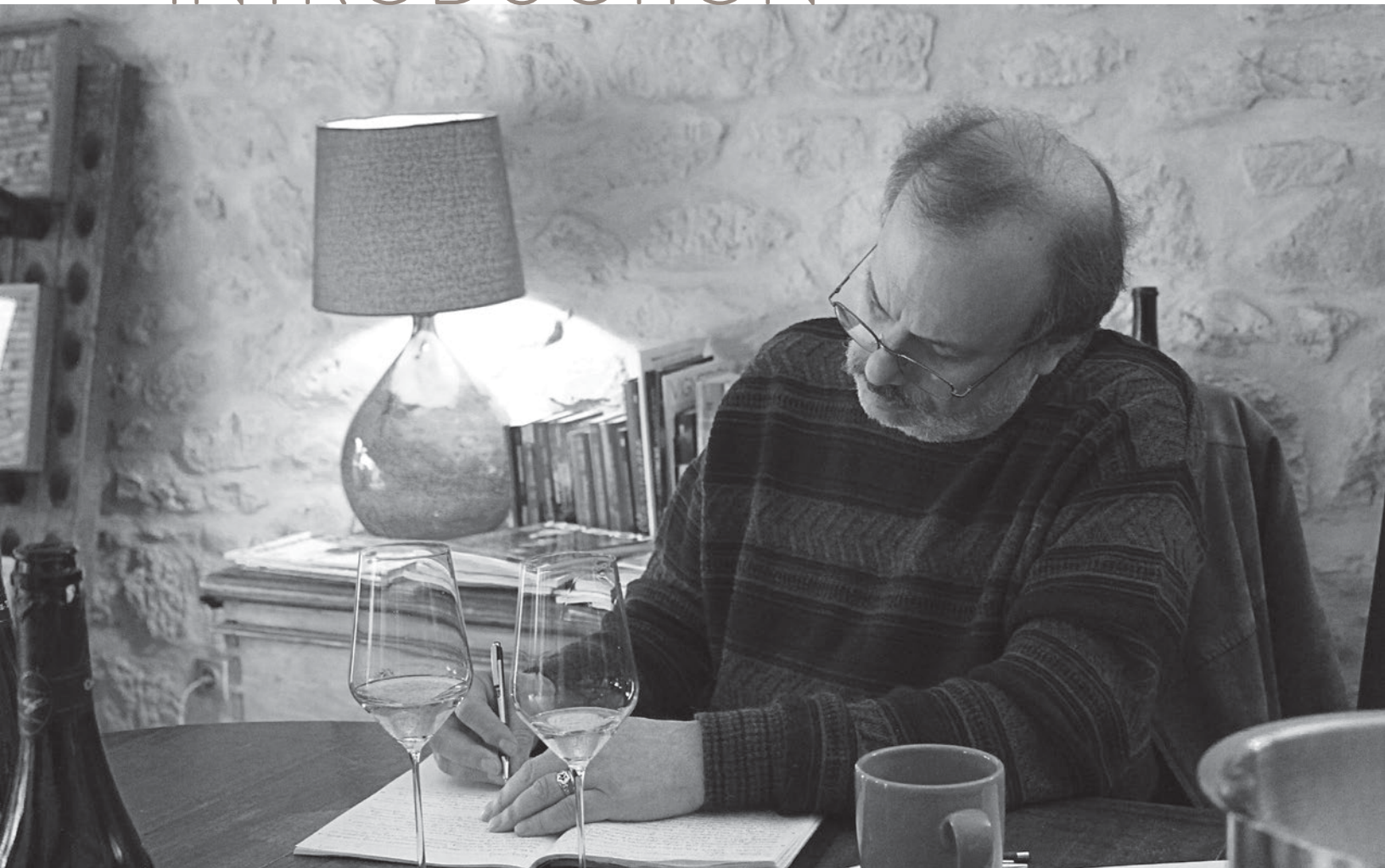
*Lots of wines, many of them good wines,
let you taste the noise. But only the
best let you taste the silence.*



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INTRODUCTION



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—**297** 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 5.2%. 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 5.2% 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.

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 anymore.) 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?

I am very glad to have been one of the guys who opened the door and held it open for other importers to sweep on through. I mean it. I played a useful role in making a really good thing happen. Now everyone wants a grower or a stable of growers. The problem I see is, there aren’t 297 first class growers. Even the second class doesn’t extend that far. I’ve run this notion past a few disinterested observers, and they all say my point is reasonable and accurate.

There are, let’s say, 35-50 really stellar growers. (Even 50 might be pushing it...)

After these, there are easily another 100-125 good to excellent growers, some of them rising stars, some of them just honorably below the very highest class.

That leaves another 100-plus growers trying to squirm into the market, thanks to importers who got here too late to get any of the top producers, but who just need “growers,” because it’s become an easy sale. So, dear customer, you need to discriminate, just as you do in all wine categories. Which of course you can. Even in hyperactively trendy markets like two conspicuously big sophisticated cities on opposite sides of the country, I’ll bet you that quality will ultimately prevail over novelty.

Apropos of this, I heard a droll tale

recently. A sales rep I was working with one day told me, “Around three years ago I had customers telling me *The era of Theise Champagnes is over*. And what, I asked, was the new era. *Now it’s [Joe Blow] Champagnes, that’s what everyone wants*. But get this, the story’s not finished. This same guy, probably forgetting what he said to me before, actually just told me *The era of [Joe Blow] Champagnes is over, and now it’s the era of <insert name here>*.”

Back to Pleistocene me. 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 grower-X just because you’ve had the wines over the years. Most growers are moving targets, and just because someone is new to you doesn’t mean it’s *better* than what’s already available.

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 Special Club that’s 100% Meunier, and the first ever 100% Meunier Rosé Special 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’ Chetillon, Gimmonnet’s Special 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 Gimonnet 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 indiscernible 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.

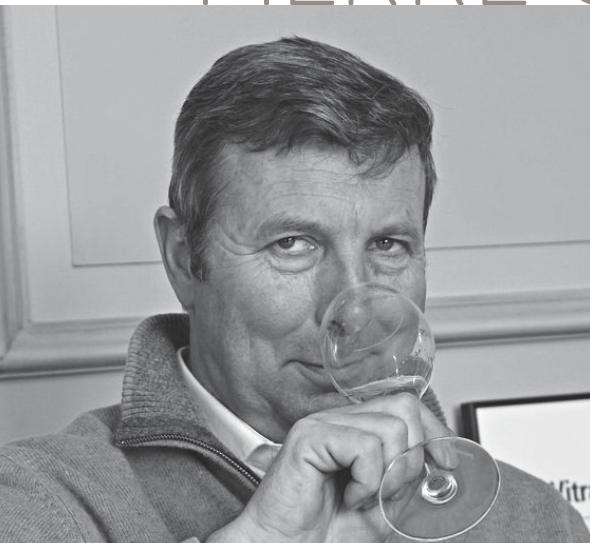
But there started to be a backlash among certain growers. Not because they were shrinking from offering information, but because they believed it was the *wrong* information, and would lead to just the kind of market behavior I described. These growers have proposed UPCs on their bottles, which will 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 Blanc icons, his Special Club. And the wines are actually improving!

You see it as soon as you start tasting the *vins claires*. I'd made a visit to a well-regarded producer in Cramant the day before, entailing a tasting of *vins claires* from various lieu-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 raty 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

12/375ml | KPG-1H

3/1500ml | KPG-1M

1/3000ml | KPG-1J

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 negoç’s Tête-du-Cuvée.

Apropos negoçs, 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 Millesime and Tête-du-Cuvées.”

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

The wine currently in stock (as of late April 2016) is “cuvée 157,” and its base vintage is 2012 (70%); the reserve wines are 6.5% ’11, 12% of ’10, and 12.5% ’09—all kept not in tank but in MAGNUMS on the lees, to give both greater freshness and more autolysis. This entails more cost and more labor, but the wine is better. Disgorged Dec. 3 2015.

Later in the year we’ll see a Feb 3 2016 disgorgement with 2013 as its base—70%, along with 6% ’12, 9% ’11, 10% ’10 and 5% ’09. The wine showed cool and mineral, already expressive and long with a lot of fruit and class. Still very dry, it has half a gram more RS than it’s had recently, which may account for its greater elegance and fruit-driven length.

The MAGNUM is not the same as either of these. It’s an older cuvée (#155) which is mostly (73%) 2011, and is not-untouched by that vintage. The reserve years are 2010, ’09, ’07 and ’06, and what’s good in here is very good, but you’ll have to accept some element of the ’11 vegetality. As a true hater of this vintage, I honestly find this wine to be acceptable, but I won’t say it’s an all-time-great Mag of NV from Gimmonnet.

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

12/750ml | KPG-5

This blew me away, a wine I’d always found to be perhaps excessively polite and discreet has found its inner mojo and is seriously beautiful. **IT IS ONE OF THE DON’T-MISS WINES IN THIS YEAR’S OFFERING!**

It is actually Cuvée Gastronome, with 6% Bouzy PN (from a “name” grower), and it is all 2013. This is crucial because there was no *Special Club* in 2013, so a lot of that material ended up here. It’s 17% Chouilly (from *Montaigu*, a great parcel with old vines), 61% Cramant (mostly *Buissons*, the ancient vines), 10% Oger (including *Terres de Noël* and 6% Cuis *Croix Blanche*). Deg. Dec. 2015. The wine is utterly delicious, the best he’s made; chalky, silky, textured, transparent and coolly enticing.

Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronome” Brut 2010

12/750ml | KPG-210

The concept is a food-friendly Champagne by dint of a gentler mousse. It’s also in effect a “young vintage” but not *the* vintage. It tends to accent minerality; this assemblage is 38% Chouilly, 17% Cuis(*Croix Blanche*), 24% Cramant, 10% Oger and 11% Vertus. Deg. Oct 2nd 2015, it’s a slim cerebral Gastronome until the toasty mid-palate, which will start to dominate after time on the cork. It’s smokier, with more iron than usual.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleuron” Brut, 2009

+

12/750ml | KPG-709

A new disgorgement (1/29/16) of the wine we’ve seen before; it remains a chalky, classy and generous BdB; mirabelles, brioche, a lot of fun to drink. 30% Chouilly, 42.% Cramant (from the heart and the oldest vines), 9% Oger and 18.%% Cuis (*Croix Blanche*).

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

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleuron” Brut 2008

(+) + +

3/1500ml | KPG-708M

One of the great values of this offering, this Fleuron is simply otherworldly; gorgeous aromas, patisserie; it’s all here, core, length, chalk, flowers, focus, light-footed intensity; the empty glass smells of pure Chouilly. Young mags can sometimes be shrill, but not this guy! Deg. 12/2015, it’s 33.5% Cramant, 32.5% Chouilly, 10% Oger, 22% Cuis and 2% Vertus.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Special Club” Brut, 2010

+ +

6/750ml | KPG-410

Deg 10/2015. 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.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Special Club” Brut, 2009

+ +

6/750ml | KPG-409

Back to silk, precision, class and mineral, with less power but more intensity, and with a lot of Cramant herbs, stones and minerals, and a striking pointed jab of spice. One taste and you see why this is an Icon of the Côte des Blancs. It’s 60% Cramant (including vines planted in 1911 and 1913), 24% Chouilly (Montaigu 64 years old) and 16% Cuis *Croix Blanche*. Disgorged 7/23/15.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Millésime de Collection” Special Club Brut, 2008

+ + +

6/750ml | KPG-408

This 10 Dec 2015 disgorgement has fulfilled every hope I had for this supernal wine, one of the handful of GREAT Blanc de Blancs I ever expect to drink. It’s a reference for both the domain and for the entire Côtes. The serpentine movement of intense complex flavor defines greatness in a young Champagne. Poised on a platform of unyielding stone, its manifold flavors soar off into a high sky. Mineral, balsam, oolong, graphite, pepper, dandelion greens, and more fruits and flowers than will fit in my puny mind.

57% Cramant, 29% Chouilly, 12.5% Cuis and 1.5% Vertus

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

(+) +

3/1500ml | KPG-606VM

This is 65% Cramant, 22.5% Chouilly and 12.%% Cuis, deg. 12/2015; it’s a typically elliptical 2006, more analogue—but it’s also a typically cerebral Mag, closer to its unyielding mineral spine. Another overt beauty, it’s more hedonistic than is usual for Gimonnet, and a step up from last year’s ’05.



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

+

12/750ml | KPG-10

AVAILABLE AT THE END OF 2016, this is in fact all 2013: 80% *Terres de Noël* and *Brulis* and 20% *Champs Nérons*, Didier describes it as “A new experience; more masculine, less fruity and more austere...” not to mention it consists of two things he said he’d never do—single-commune wine, and (entirely) Grand Cru wine. I honestly don’t believe this arose from either sensory or philosophical curiosity, as much as from the unsuitability of Oger within the existing Gimonnet blends. So the choice was, either to compromise the vision of the domain, or to isolate this outlier Oger!

Deg. March 8 2016, I found it a round, savory wine; roasted veg, mirabelle, cookie dough, roasted cheese; quite focused for all that savor and quite *present* considering it only had 18 months of tirage. “It’s a lazy man’s wine; we make it and it comes out good.” Transplant this to Oger itself and it promptly joins the ranks of the best.

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

+

6/750ml | KPG-412

Deg 12/17/2015, this will *BE AVAILABLE IN SEPTEMBER*, and is of course a radical departure for Gimonnet, a Club mono-terroir. 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 “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 Aÿ and Mareuil) and 19% Chardonnay (of which 7% is Mareuil).

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.

I'm on a total Varnier kick these days. I don't know how Champagne can give more affectionate pleasure.

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.

I had a colleague with me one year making his first trip to Champagne, and for some reason he hit upon the topic of temperature control during fermenta-

tions. Denis answered the question thus: "For me control of temperature is an industrial way to produce Champagne." Denis is a modern-looking gentleman who gives the impression he could fix your computer, and his domaine is small and so we don't focus on him as we really should. I had friends over for a glass of Champagne and we drank the Clos Jacquin monocru that's the Tête-de-Cuvée for Pierre Callot, another good small grower in Avize. And we admired it as it deserved; it's excellent fizz. Then I opened a bottle of Varnier's 1990 and we got perspective in a hurry. I enjoy drinking "other" grower's Champagnes for recreation (and education) but each time I return to what I already have, I am affirmed and grateful. This 1990 was great wine.

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

+ +

12/750ml | KVF-5

The homage to Gramps is the driest wine in the range (other than two Brut zeroes I don't like) and this is the best edition I've ever had of it. It's now 100% Cramant (*Chemins de Chalons*), deg 12/2015, and amazingly 60% 2011 and 40% 2012. The climat is on the flat land just over the border from Avize—and remember, the locals claim the chalk is most vivid and the topsoil shallowest in the *flat* vineyards, not the sexy-looking ones up on the slope.

At last, a healthy '11—no critters in sight. Superb balance, precise, doughy and creamy, with Cramant wintergreen and green tea; detailed, classy, chalky; the dryness expresses as carbonized mineral and even graphite. I don't know how he did it, but I'm glad!

Varnier-Fannièrre Grand Cru Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVF-1

One of my personal favorite Champagnes. And this one makes me almost blush with happiness. 50-50 '13-'12, deg 12/2015, the wine is *just delicious*; delicate, chiseled, refreshing and perfectly balanced. One-third each Avize-Oger-Cramant “with a little part of Oiry.”

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

+

12/750ml | KVF-2

This is the final vintage from the *Clos du Grand Père*, as it needs to be replanted due to fan-leaf. This was a 79-year old vineyard when this wine was made. It's 60% 2011 and 40% '10, but the delicate hint of grassiness is actually from '10, not '11. Deg 11/2015, it's an extremely high-toned iteration of this wine; essentially naked chalk, bracing, as if they'd made a *mint* of Chardonnay.

Varnier-Fannièrre Rosé Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KVF-4

Deg 1/2016, as always it's the NV blend a year older (so half-half '11-'12) and also as always, it's delicious. I'm getting tired of writing that word, but what makes them that way is their fruit, mineral/chalk etching and filigree laciness. Still PN as always from Dethune in Ambonnay.

Varnier-Fannièrre “Grand Vintage” Brut, 2009

(+) +

12/750ml | KVF-309

Deg 9/2015, it's from a “ridiculous blend” of two tiny parcels in Oger and Avize. Like many (most?) 2009s, what seemed rather heavy-footed 1-2 years ago is starting to slim down and find its chalky essence; it's more savory than flowery, extremely salty and melty, like a *roux* of corn flour and clotted butter. Time will tell with this beauty.

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.

I am very glad to tell you that many of Caroline Milan's health issues appear to have abated. I'm not finished being astonished that she greeted me standing at the door, could accept a big warm hug (which would have been painful before) and is talking about traveling again. Talking, in essence, about being among us again. No more long faces.

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

ied, 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.

In fact there are at least two faces of Oger. One is overtly fruity and buttery, with pear and even stone fruit; they can make you think of Puligny. The other is a shady coolness, with some of the cucumber-saline savor of west coast oysters. What I have yet to find in Oger are the Riesling-like green tea notes of Cramant, the Chenin face of Cuis, the deep earthiness of certain Mesnil, or the orange blossom notes of certain other Mesnil. Oger stands alone—and is better for it. The Champagnes I'll offer you are all 100% Oger.

Milan could be forgiven for wondering how they happened to incur such wrathful attention from the gods. There were quality control issues based on a new cuverie, on late delivered bottles, on corks, on dosage liqueur, none of them due to lapses in attention or conscientiousness—just really shitty luck. And then Caroline fell ill. In a small family estate such as this one, every person counts, and Caroline's diminished capacities arrived just as the wines were improving. They continue to improve—and she herself is "dealing" as best she can, bless her and her courage and grace—and there were highlights on the table here.

Jean Milan “Transparence” Brut, 2010

12/750ml | KML-210

Though labeled “Brut” this is in fact a near-zero cuvée (it has 2g/l RS), now in a green bottle as the previous white bottle was vulnerable to *gout de lumière*. What we’ll receive is a 3/2016 disgorgement but what I tasted—so it could be tasted at all—was from 11/2015. I see it as pure-Oger, doughy, smoky and serious; a wine of a special type that historically has blossomed into a glowy being, as did the lovely 2007. The finish leads the way here, it’s summer truffles and morels, and the wine will catch up.

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

12/750ml | KML-2A

This is the “basic” wine of the domain, very dry, redolent (as they say) of “seaspray and lemon.” Half-half ‘13 and ‘12, deg 12/2015, it’s lithe and streamlined, cool and oyster and refined; it’s like welcoming an old friend back into your life—I remember you! You look just the same! Some palates may find this wine a little aloof while others will relish its saline cucumber-y dryness.

(There are a couple wines I’d normally offer, but which have 2011 to contend with, but watch this space next year for a superior NV and also the return of the vintage wine “Symphonie.”)

Jean Milan Terres de Noël Vieille Vignes Brut, 2010

12/750ml | KML-510

This is what I wrote last year: I think this will surpass the 2009, which always confused me. Of course it’s tighter and more incisive, but it’s also saltier and more scrupulous, and actually densely and impressively mineral; it’s long and conveys a certain icy grandeur; deg 2/2015, and it will be less “icy” with a few months on the cork. This may take its place among a small community of very keen 2010 Champagnes, that impress because they’re so sinewy and focused.

And here’s what I wrote last month, *without having read* the earlier note. Deg 10/2015, this won’t be one of the all-time great vintages, as ‘10 leans a little grassy and somehow not entirely culminated. The mineral *yin* of the Cru is there but the warm doughy *yang* is only implied. Here’s where it hurts to sell them so young, because another 3 years of tirage and four more on the cork would create an unlikely beauty, and I know this because 20 minutes in the glass is hugely helpful, and exactly the thing it will never receive in the taste-spit-decide situation. So, sigh.

Jean Milan “150 Ans” Brut, N.V.

6/750ml | KML-512

Two wines were made (the other is a Rosé) to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the estate. The bottle’s in a funny kind of white wrapper, but the wine is sensational. Equal parts 08-09, some vinification in wood, and leaving everything extraneous aside, it’s a stirring and inspirational Côte des Blancs, and as gorgeous as Oger could ever be.

Jean Milan “Grand Reserve” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KML-11

This wine has really located its soul-essence, and is less *recherché* than in earlier editions, which could sometimes be either woodsy or *sous-voile*. Now a blend of ‘07-‘08, it’s still barrel fermented but oak confers only a soulful seasoning; it’s a cask-seasoned long-aged (on the lees under cork, not crown-cap); it was sleek, forest-y, crunchy and glorious. Deg 11/2015

Jean Milan “Tendresse” Sec, N.V.

12/750ml | KML-4

One of the most pleasant surprises among my tastings, this wine is singing again. It’s the NV cuvée with 20g/l RS, which for a “sweet” Champagne is actually unusually moderate—Feinherb, were it German. I don’t see it **at all** as a “dessert” Champagne but rather as a *food* Champagne when your (savory) food is also a tiny bit sweet. Indeed the Champagne is quite chalky, lithe and rippling, with a lemony edge and osmanthus. I know, I know; WTF is osmanthus? Here, write to these folks and order some; it’s pretty rad, and then you’ll have bragging rights not only to be the first kid on your block acquainted with “osmanthus” but the first person in the world to know what I think I’m talking about (www.redblossomtea.com).

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 Côtes. I can't remember a more consistently 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 claires* 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-1A

12/375ml | KPP-1H

6/1500ml | KPP-1M

1/3000ml | KPP-1J

We’re just finishing up the ‘12-based wine, which will soon be superseded by the even more amazing ‘13, which is the best “basic” NV in the offering this year and one of the best anywhere in Champagne.

I remember tasting the still wines of 2013 and wondering where those aromas and flavors could possibly have come from. Please let me remind you, this wine is made by the “perpetual reserve” method, which is similar but not identical to a solera. Thus, the current wine is 50% 2013 and 50% *the previous blend*, which in turn was 50% ‘12 and 50% of the blend before that, including 1988, ‘90 ‘93 and 1995 through 2012. This wine has a *fantastic* aroma, stunningly complex and floral and like really good cheesecake; the palate is by far the best since the 2008-base, and punches absurdly above its weight. Deg 11/2015, believe me, I don’t need to hype this—we’re already oversold. Just be glad for any bottle you get.

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

+

12/750ml | KPP-4

A new disgorgement (9/2015) of the wine we shipped last year (all 2012) and which continues into summer 2016; it’s a powerful chewy wine, more rose-hippy and earthy than floral or strawberried; an original, food-like Rosé. It arises from a co-maceration of CH/PM, and vinosity is its *raison d’être*. This one’s the Daddy, and Gimmonnet’s is the daughter whom he’s holding by the hand.

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

+ +

12/750ml | KPP-4

Now the 2013, deg 9/2015; a subtle haunting fragrance; the palate is more Chardonnay now, quite a bit more chalky, more filigree and playful; silky, more minty, seems flowery but along lines of a rare orchid, yet the finish is pure Meunier, as the chalk dissolves. A great Rosé, the best since the 2008.

Pierre Péters “L’Esprit” Millésime Brut, 2010

+ +

12/750ml | KPP-210

Superb fragrance! *Again*. Rodolphe says it’s “white: white fruits, white flowers, almond milk...” I had a feeling that the very best ‘10s would show this micro-pixilated focus, as this one does; even the aromas are starched and chalky; the wine is sensational, delineated, powerful, funky blossom; a neon buzz of energy—an incredible vintage. Deg 11/2015—the next millésime will be ‘12, which is awfully promising...

Bear in mind this is Péters’ one wine in which Mesnil is the minority partner (Avize and Cramant dominate), but Rodolphe knows exactly which parcels will give the particular profile of this wine, which is a bit more aerial than the others in the range.

Pierre Péters “Resérve Oubliée” Brut, N.V.

+

6/750ml | KPP-7

This is all a bit of a mystery, and I suppose it’ll be in terribly short supply, but—the intent was to offer an NV that was “mature but not oxidative,” and what I tasted was the “perpetual reserve” based on 2007, kept in tank an additional year, bottled in 2009 and aged on the cork. And the wine was explosive, wonderfully expressive and not “mature” but indeed tertiary; all the things you desire from Champagne but have had to age yourself.

This is 2010 based, and is markedly creamy, with classy aromas, *lots* of jasmine; actually it’s this wine that feels “white” to me, like licking a wall of chalk. Lilies, some sense of not-exactly-coconut, some rice-like starch, enokis—a zen garden of chalk. Deg 9/2015



Pierre Péters “L’Etonnant Monsieur Victor” Brut, 2009

+

6/750ml | KPP-509

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.

We first tasted from an open bottle and then opened a fresh one, just to contrast. I found it a fantastic wine, far more salty and chalky than the average 2009, racier, yet every bit as generous and toasty-brioche-y. The fresh-opened bottle was rather more *interior*, tartly minty, showing an austerity that made me think of Chétillons. Apropos of which.....

Pierre Péters Les Chétillons” Brut, 2008

(+ +) +

6/750ml | KPP-308

I feel like the last guy on earth to have tasted this. You may recall they issued the 2009 first, to give this vintage more time, which turns out to have been wise. Not that this wine is unready; it has an almost unbearably lovely aroma, but the palate is a kind of implosion of concentration after the wide-open ‘09; it’s ringently intense, so powerful it can only express a stammering muscularity, a static scratch of mysterious energy, it’s so massive and so tightly coiled. Chétillons starts to remind me of the Chassagne side of the Burgundy Grand Crus, and even if I’m wrong there’s no denying this is a primordial sort of being, not a “charmer.” And a wine that could only have come from a grower.

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.

Again and again I confront these Champagnes, tasting them there with him, tasting them elsewhere with you, drinking them at home, and every time I've had them in my glass for the past several years I've found myself thinking "Does Champagne really get any better than this?"

Anyone in my line of work rises and falls with the fortunes of his agencies if you're in business long enough. Generations change, sometimes for the better and sometimes not. Now and again it's just a matter of time for the young person to get his legs under him. Then, if you can, you wait. Sometimes, also, estates will coast. But sometimes, like now, an estate that

was always excellent becomes stellar. It happens one time, you think it's a fluke. It happens again and again, you know it's not.

When I first came to Hébrart I was looking for fruit. I had all the rock-head Champagne anyone could want, and I sought something a little more chipper and chummy. I certainly found it—Jean-Paul's wines are replete with fruit. But what I couldn't have predicted was how evermore precise they'd become. At this point I can't recall—can't even fathom—a Champagne that gives the best of both worlds; the utmost purity of fruit with the utmost clarity of expression. You get such brilliance and transparency you'd swear you could taste each grape. This little domain is Champagne aristocracy.

Marc Hébrart “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KMH-1

12/375ml | KMH-1H

80-20 PN/CH; 47% 2013, 29% 2012 and 24% 2011. PN from Mareuil, Avenay Val d'Or, Hautvillers and Bisseuil. Chard entirely from Mareuil. Deg. Nov 2 2015.

At first a little grassier than last year, certainly more high-strung, lithe and brisk, but still entirely to form and with a high register of strawberry; there's a crescendo of chalky solidity—the finish is the strongest element here, indicating it only needs time on the cork to settle into its depth.

Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

(+) +

12/750ml | KMH-6

Deg Oct 7, 2015. 72% 2012, 17% 2010 and 11% 2011. Mostly Mareuil (85%) with 15% Oiry and Chouilly.

A ripe, elegant aroma, more inferential than the Côte des Blanc wines; it's also more masculine on the palate, broader, perhaps less fetching, yet it's an elemental sort of *ur*-Champagne, ineffable and classy; saltier and drier than earlier renditions, it billows into a substantial and serious length—80% chalk and 20% white flowers and lemon zest.

Marc Hébrart “Sélection” Vielle Vignes Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMH-2

6/1500ml | KMH-2M

One of my perennial favorite wines in the entire offering, one my own cellar is full of, and one of the top values.... is wrenched away from its usual character by 2011, which constitutes 55% of the assemblage. (The rest is 24% '10 and 21% '09.) All its usual elements are in place but it can't surmount the pyrazines, though it comes teasingly close. The finish is beautiful. What to make of this? “A rogue snuck into one of the best NVs in all of Champagne, and was detected and quickly subdued.” One hopes! In any case, old-vines PN from Mareuil, and Grand Cru CH from Oiry and Chouilly. 70/30. Deg 10/27/15

Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KMH-5

The assemblage is daunting. 50% CH from Mareuil, vintage 2013. 43.5% PN from Mareuil shared between 2012 and 2011. 6.5% Mareuil PN as still wine vinified in wood, vintage 2012. Deg Oct 2015. This is a tic rounder than last year's; sports the *prettiest* fragrance, rose hips and (sweet!) rhubarb; the palate is quite round, more vinous, but with the tiniest scratch of phenolics. As always it's a wine that seamlessly melds sensuality with cerebrality.

Marc Hébrart “Special Club” Brut, 2011

6/750ml | KMH-311

Deg 7/2015. 2011 expresses as sassafrass and fennel-seed, not as pyrazine. In any case it's not one of Hébrart's great Clubs but it is one of the better '11s. A scrappy and aggressive wine, and atypical if you formed your impression from the '08 or '06.

A *Coeur de cuvée*, it's 35% Mareuil old-vines PN (from *Faubourg D'Enfer* and *Croix Blanche*), 20% PN Aÿ (from *Cheuzelles* and *Pierre Robert*), 25% Mareuil old vines CH (from *Beauregard* and *Ramonette*) and finally 20% CH from Oiry and Chouilly.

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

+

6/750ml | 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, Longchamp, Chauffour) and 50% CH old-vines from Chouilly, Avize and Oiry (Justice, Montaigu, Les Robarts). The Avize parcel is new for Jean-Paul. Deg 10/2014

The recent disgorgement (4/2015) improves on the sample from last year; in fact it's a fine vintage for this wine *because* of its gauzy transparency; the wood isn't subsumed into a big body but shows openly, tasting a little like Vilmart used to be. Quite delicious! Caramel and braised veal-cheeks. JP feels that the wood regime is best for this Grand Cru material, and time may well prove him right. It's less oaky than the last bottle of Bollinger I drank....



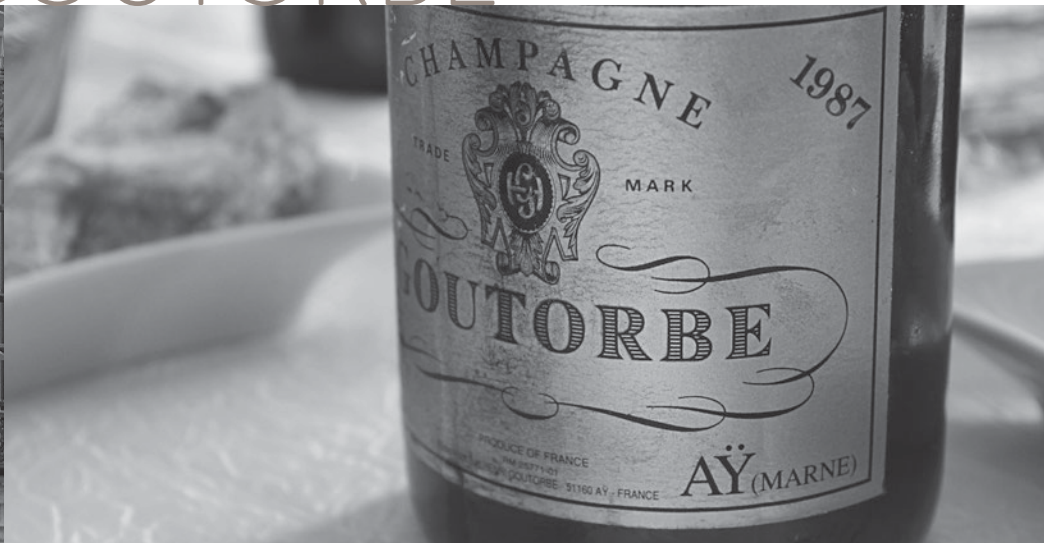
Marc Hébrart “Noces de Craies” Aÿ Grand Cru Blanc de Noirs, Extra Brut 2012

+ +

6/750ml | KMH-8

It means, lyrically, “wedding of chalk,” and is the fruit of his passion for Pinot Noir. 44-year vines of massale selection, it hails from five parcels (*Chezelle, Longchamp, Pruche, Chauffour, Pierre Robert*) and is also a *coeur de cuvée*. It will be available in **October 2016**, and there won’t be much of it. I tasted it blind, and noted—this wine is *strong*, with a back-palate zing of chalk and huge front-palate richness; it’s almost obdurately long (it was then revealed) and AH, that explains it, it’s all Aÿ. It shows a deep sorghum maltiness and profoundly earthy mineral, almost chocolatey. The final dosage is pending but will be Extra Brut; this will not be made every year, and the next one won’t be until vintage-2015. Don’t y’all buy it out; I need me a few bottles.

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,
Cumieres 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,

Part of the “issue” here is, the wines are older than other growers offer—they’re still selling vintage-06 and Club-05—and for quite a while they were selling NV from difficult years, then a fabulous one last year, and now a “curious” one from—you guessed it—2011. It’s already on the market, disgorged 10/2015.

Each year I find myself both distressed and also impassioned by what I taste here. We had, for example, an absolutely superb ‘96, the best I’ve had in years. But I want to get the oogy vintages behind us, move into the consistent years starting with 2012, and see what Goutorbe can really do with the two-generation regime.

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

12/750ml | KGO-1

It is indeed based on 2011, and tastes it, but it's better than most. This wine and a Blanc de Blancs also from '11 had pyrazine characters that were mitigated by lavish fruit (and substantial dosage). Mitigated, but not entirely redeemed.

Henri Goutorbe Millésime Brut, 2007

12/750ml | KGO-407

From an *a la vole* disgorgement (on-the-spot) without dosage, it looks like a typically sinewy smoky '07, and the finished wine ought to be very good. I'm not sure when we'll see it, because they're still offering....

Henri Goutorbe Millésime Brut, 2006

12/750ml | KGO-406

Deg 7/2015, 75-25 PN/CH. The “potato” issue from last year appears to have gone, but this shows a vintage-derived oxidation—many '06s do—which some tasters will interpret as old-school. The wine is round and juicy and Aÿ-malty. Curiously it's freshest on the finish. A lot to like here.

Henri Goutorbe “Special Club” Brut 2005

6/750ml | KGO-205

Perhaps the most mercurial wine I've ever bought and sold, and perhaps ever tasted. Its challenge has always been the 2005 challenge of bad-potato aroma, but this has come and gone so that no two bottles are alike. Deg 10/2015, this was by far the best one yet, a large-framed healthy '05, even minerally, with an elegant dispersal of weight and very nice length, all sweet straw. Deep down in the bottle there were hints of “2005-ness,” but this seems to be diminishing. In any case, I repeat my suggestions from last year: drink this from *Flûtes*, and finish the bottle when you open it. It's best emptied in the first 30-45 minutes.

Henri Goutorbe Rosé, Brut N.V.

12/750ml | KGO-3

Now with a 2012 base, deg 10/2015, this is really pretty, malt and strawberry, but withal it's fresh and sleek; like early-season cherry tomatoes. Tasted great with *Paté en Croute* but I tried manfully not to be swayed.

Henri Goutorbe Aÿ Rouge, 2012

12/750ml | KGO-001

This is wonderful! Done in steel, from a steep parcel, Dijon clone 115; it's a real look at the blueberry profile of Aÿ in the form of gushing primary fruit.

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

12/375ml | KCQ-1H

3/1500ml | KCQ-1M

We continue to ship the 2010-based cuvée, because Nicolas was the only producer in my portfolio to get out in front of the 11-issue and who, from the very beginning, spoke about it openly and honestly. Our goal here is to leap directly to the 2012-base (though halves will be 11-based while they last). Nicolas is also a believer in disgorging *long* before shipping, so this wine has been on the cork since January 2015.

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.

This edition is typically nutty and dark-bready; it has the 2010 brightness and the spicy spine. The fundamental things apply, don’t they! The reserve-wines are 7% 2009 and 14% 2004.

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

12/750ml | KCQ-2

3/1500ml | KCQ-2M

As last year. Deg 2/2015, it’s all 2011, and there’s a kind of strife in it, between the vintage buggyness and a wet cereal walnuty chalkiness that lead to an excellent finish, as though the pyrazine was a shroud that was shrugged away.

Gaston Chiquet Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-8

Same as last year—all 2011, though I agree with Nicolas that this is the best among his ‘11s. 53% PM, 24% PN and 24% CH. Why yes, that is 101 percent. It’s a lot of wine. The still red is 2009; it’s an angular edition of this and not much different than usual as this wine is rather rhubarb-y in general. A little less graceful, and a little more pointed, but a high-spot among ‘11s here.

Gaston Chiquet “Cuvée Réserve” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-5

I thought he was discontinuing this wine, but here it is again, and very happily. In effect it harkens back to earlier generations, when they just did one-third each of the three varieties and put the wine up for sale after six or seven years *en tirage*. This one’s based on 2007, with 24% 2006. Disgorged 7/2015, it’s 40% PM, 35% CH and 25% PN.

In effect what this gives us is a chance to see an NV with some tertiary development, or in other words to drink a Champagne that’s been aged for us. Considering how cool and judicious the “Tradition” often is, this guy is extroverted, smoky and phyllo-doughy; quite savory all in all, redolent of shoot-smoke—they’re often burning the cut shoots when I’m there in March, and that fragrance is evocative and unmistakable. An ‘08 will follow in about a year’s time, and I cannot wait...

Gaston Chiquet “Special Club” Brut, 2008

6/750ml | KCQ-408

Honestly, even I don’t know why I’m hedging the third plus, as this is the best Chiquet wine in at least two decades. Deg 7/2015, it’s 70-30 CH/PN, the Chardonnay from Aÿ and the PN from Mareuil. An absolutely fabulous aroma! Classic Chiquet Club, i.e. a riot of chalk, like Clos de Goisses with less brawn, and in this vintage with exquisite flowery shimmers; firm yet flowing; chalk and shade-grown tea giving spine; quince and orchid dissolve into a rippling breeze-dancing fruit. A candidate for greatness, especially contemplating the searching finish and its exquisite and fathomless intricacy.



Gaston Chiquet “Special Club” Brut 2005

+

3/1500ml | KCQ-405

So happy we can still get this! Deg. 7/2015, it has a doughy apple-cellar profile, silky and still a bit immature; a lot of paella and monkfish, into a charming salty finish.

Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2005

+

12/750ml | KCQ-305

With air we glimpse aromas we almost never see in Champagne (parsnip, eucalyptus), and all I can say is, THIS IS GROWER CHAMPAGNE. One of the best '05s I know, deg 2/2015, it's now starting to resemble the “family” of these PN-dominated vintage wines, with a marked chalk-dusty texture rare in '05.

A LITTLE NOTE OF THANKS

Nicolas opened an old wine for us, though he himself had a cold and was unable to taste. This is a nice man! The wine was a **1983 Blanc de Blancs D'Aÿ**, and in contrast to the many saturnine beings I've tasted here over the years, this was a total darling. Herbs, limpid, balsam, cake batter; really spicy and very much a *morning* wine; it isn't tenebrous or gloaming; it's fresh, dazed with love, and full of promise. A note of ginger snap and candied lemon floats atop its flashing green eye. A truly joyful wine, sweet-natured, with a genially delicate outflow of chalkiness, fresh seafood and a sea-deep finish which is just waking up to its truffle soul.

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 grape must 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.

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12/750ml | KRG-11

Probably the best version of this wine I’ve ever tasted. Deg 2/2016, it will be sold to us in June. Amazingly it’s 57% 2012 and 43% ’11. 36% Meunier, 34% PN and 30% CH, much more than usual. It’s racy and salty and has zero pyrazine; an almost minty back-palate, a surprisingly silvery palate overall; a leap to a new level with this wine, among the few best NVs in the offering. Arrives “red” and departs “white.” 2012 is *da man*.

Three things to bear in mind. One, most of the vineyards are in Cumières, and this is among the steepest and warmest communes in Champagne. Which leads to [two]; because of this, JB doesn’t do malo. The wines are ripe enough. Three, his Meunier is along lines of shiitake and soy yet this is wonderfully subtle in this assemblage, with all its Chardonnay.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, 2009

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12/750ml | KRG-209

Last year’s ’08 was so good we kept buying and buying it until we got scared he’d cut us off. A little vogue built around it, and 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.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut, 2008

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12/750ml | KRG-808

Gorgeous Champagne, FANTASTIC VALUE.

Deg 2/2016, 58% CH, 42% PN; this may be the sexiest wine JB has made; pure straw and hawthorne and a complex and stylish minerality; iris and plantain lead into a finish so intricate it’s nearly heart-rending. Perfect balance into a gentle glowing farewell.

Geoffroy Les Houtrants Brut, N.V.

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12/750ml | KRG-616

This is a field blend (Champagne *Gemischter Satz!*) of every grape permitted in Champagne. I know of no other. It blends 25% 2008, 35% 09 and 40% 10, disgorged 11/2015 without dosage. Exceedingly complex and original, recalling Ziereisen’s old-vines Chasselas; clinging length and detail; densely nutty and saline, and fervently chalky. 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 “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. Deg 2/2016.

Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KRG-912

12/375ml | KRG-9H

6/1500ml | KRG-9M

All 2012, and the BEST VINTAGE EVER FOR THIS WINE. Deg 2/2015, 100% PN, the right dosage, and OK wow, back in town! Someone said hibiscus flower. Both serious and a riot of fun. I suggest you jump on it and start twerking.

Geoffroy Millésime Extra Brut 2005

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6/750ml | KRG-605

Now disgorged 11/2015, this chameleon wine has a somewhat obscure fragrance today but a wickedly attractive palate. The aromas are antique and weighty; the palate is countrified and leathery, extremely long and as impressive as a wine can be that isn’t refined, isn’t “polished.”

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,
Vandière
(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 the newest 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 du 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 Gimonet 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.

Cuisles has 20-40cm of topsoil over what Cédric used to refer to as "schist" but now says is not precisely schist. Either my French or my knowledge of geology is inadequate to explaining exactly what this rogue-soil might be. He shows photos of it on his website.

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 noire.

The project I described in last year's catalogue will come to fruition starting in 2015. 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" Extra Brut, Les Varosses Blanc de Blancs, 2012

12/750ml | KMS-7

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We, ah, looked the other way last year 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.

Moussé Fils "L'Or d'Eugène" 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 Reserve"); based on 2013 with a perpetual reserve going back to 2003, deg 12/2105, it's 80% Meunier and 20% PN. The aroma is refined, friendly but not ingratiating; on the palate it's a superb Blanc de Noirs, diligent, structured, fruity but not gushing, disciplined but not severe. I think and have always thought it's the *ideal* for Meunier NV; thoroughly delicious but not an avalanche of chocolate and pumpernickel.

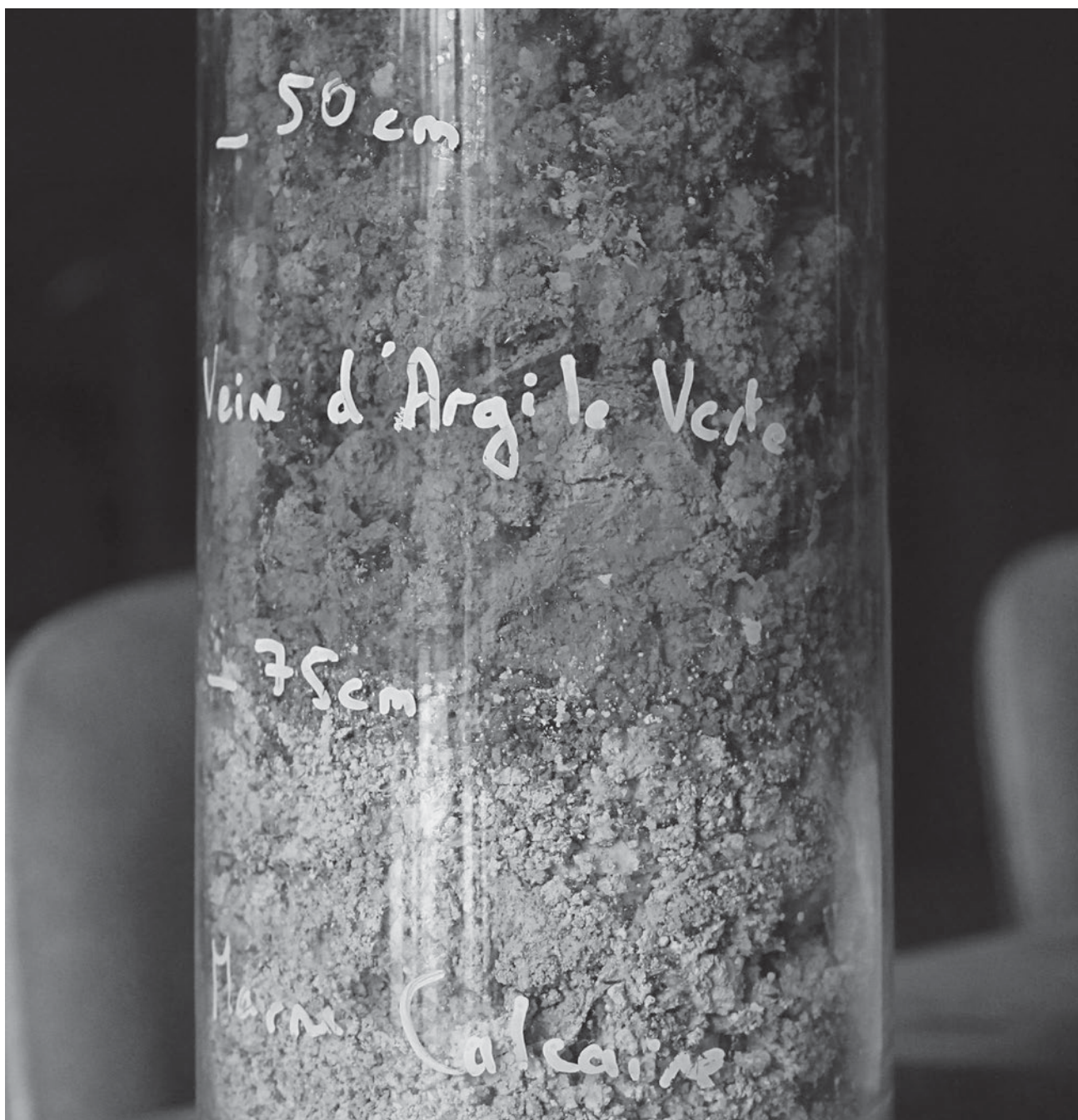
(There is a "superior" version of this, called "L'extra Or d'Eugène" which is two years older, which makes it....you guessed it: 2011. With Cédric's permission, we are going to wait for the '12. This is also true for the Millésime known as "Terres d'Illite" which was so lovely in 2010, and which I'm certain will be even lovelier in 2012.)

Moussé Fils "Effusion" Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMS-9

(+) ++

Available late Summer. 40% 2014, so I tasted a preview. It's assemblage; the still red is 2012. A tidy wine with silky fruit, still stretched and firm, not slack or chubby. Cédric really understands *fruit*, that it shows best in a solid binding. Young as this is, it shows a calm genial elegance, and its rose-hip and *groseille* are delicately poised against the wine's basic energy. 92% PM, 8% PN.



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

+

6/750ml | KMS-612

Welcome back! The world's first 100% Meunier Club wine is a powerhouse in 2012. Deg 2/21/16, it's classy Meunier—and yes, such a creature does exist—really chalky, superb, even splendid, the best since 2008, and similar in its silvery power. Salted caramel on the finish.

Moussé Fils “Special Club” Rosé de Saignée, Les Bout de la Ville, Brut 2012

KMS-612R | 6/750ml

Not content with merely having made the first-ever all-Meunier Club, Cédric now offers the first all-Meunier **Rosé** Club. Deg 2/21/16, it has the *saignée* phenolic brace; assertive fruit, very dry and masculine, dictatorial even. Teensy production. A kind of spiciness that made me think of Sicily. The wine is original, though I personally think it's too dry. You'll probably disagree.

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

AT A GLANCE

100% Grand Cru, particularly satisfying Pinot Noir here. Fresh, bracing red grape Champagnes with long, swollen mid-palate flavors. Just 5 hectares in size, so availabilities are scarce!

HOW THE WINES TASTE

Billiotics are not filtered and they never undergo malolactic fermentation. That makes them very frisky and reductive when they're first disgorged, and occasionally a Billiot bottle will show a slightly metallic aroma for the first few minutes. That's rare and nil if you hold the wines six months after disgorgement. Billiot seems to want liveliness most of all, as she can presume upon lavish and deep fruit flavors. If you know the wines of Egly-Ouriet (Billiot's friend and neighbor) they couldn't be more different. Egly pulls you down into its suavely ripe depths; Billiot lifts you up on a billowing fountain of fruit. Her wines have marvelous stamina and brightness. They're hedonistic but not sloppy. Too firm and impeccable to be sloppy!

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 improving with each passing year. Well, most passing years; there's still the matter of 2011 with which to contend.... but I'm trying to finesse my way around it.

Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V.

12/750ml | KBA-1

6/1500ml | KBA-1M

Now 50% 2013 and 25% each of 2012-2011, deg 12/2015, all cuvée. A lot of color, almost pelure d'oignon. This was the first vintage made after Dad's departure. Broad, chunky, even a little cidery; it seems drier but she says that hasn't changed. Acids were high in both '13 and '12. I'm not sure whether it's coiled or just a little rustic—or too freshly disgorged—but there's some fruit struggling to emerge.

Henri Billiot Millésime Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KBA-212

Deg 2/2016, 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.

Henri Billiot Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KBA-4

The same assemblage as the NV, with still red from 2012; deg 1/2016, has the color of Satsumas, and an absurdly exotic aroma; the palate is so fruity it almost implodes; dissolves into a fresh-disgorged shrillness with a celeriac edge (2011!). Open again in September!

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."

Now the youngest vintage is 2013; the oldest is still 1983. Deg 12/2015. Still majority Chardonnay, unusual for Ambonnay. This is potentially *hugely exciting*, because it seems to be returning to its old form, great and inscrutable, a leviathan of vinosity and chalkiness. It needs cork-time but already shows lots of sweet straw and cookie-dough, but it's in steely mortal combat until the very long finish assumes command.

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

+

12/750ml | KBA-7

It seemed Serge wanted a second Tête-du-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 though it was just disgorged (02/16) 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.

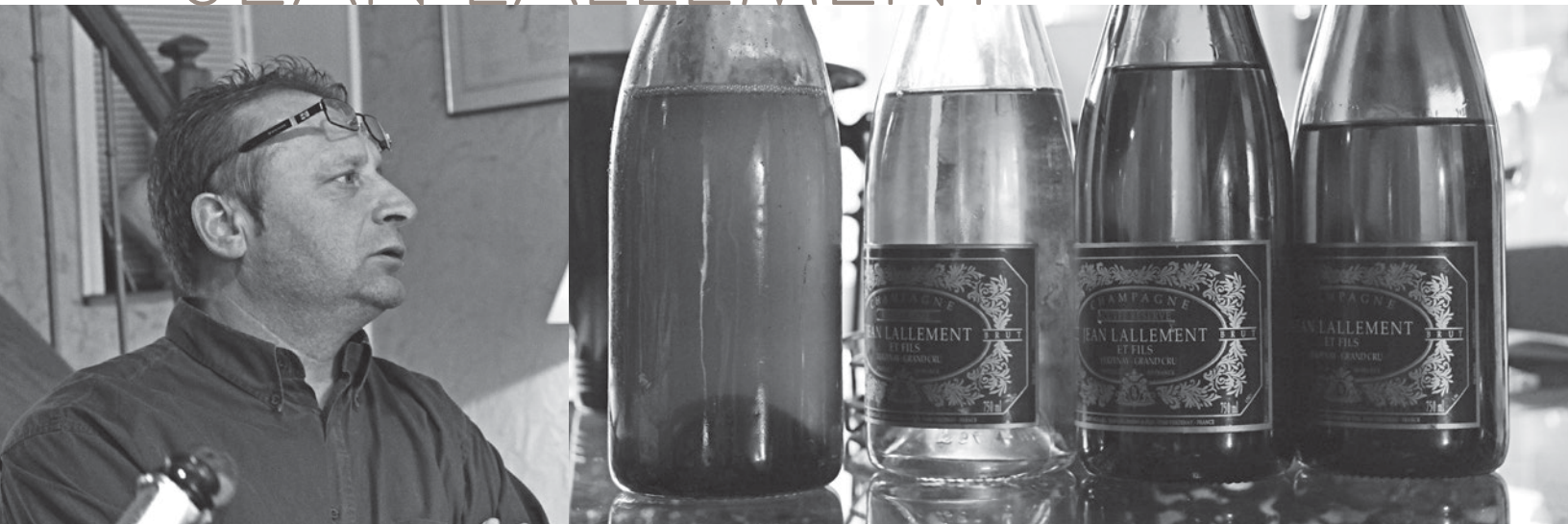
Henri Billiot (Blanc de Noirs – the actual name is still to be determined!), Brut 2012

(+) + +

12/750ml | KBA-???

From the two oldest plots, deg 02/2016; spent three months in new barrique. Obviously it's quite masculine—it smells more like Egly than like the usual Billiot—the palate is dashing and charismatic and not overly oaky; a round, serious Champagne that's hard to resist in its baritone-noir style. We are impressed.

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

AT A GLANCE

Grand Cru village in the Montagne de Reims making powerful, grippingly intense Pinot Noir-type Champagnes. Tiny producer, only four wines, but WHAT WINES!

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*.

Those days are over, finally, and I can welcome my favorites back to the party.

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

Starting with his 2004s the wines aren't 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 huevos, 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 Cham-

pagne 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 Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KLT-1

80% 2012 to 20% 2011 and as always 80-20 PN/CH, “Old Green” was disgorged 9/2015, and isn’t quite as mead-like as it often is, but the finish is, literally, amazing. Right now the wine is on the “cool” side, but will only grow. The signature flavors here run to heirloom apple, violets and irises, herbal honeys and mead, buckwheat and star-fruit.

Jean Lallement Brut Reserve, N.V.

(+) +

12/750ml | KLT-2

“Old Blue” is a year older, or rather it reverses the proportions of vintages such that this one is now 80% 2011 and 20% 2012; it also hails from superior parcels and is a little drier—though all of these qualify as “Extra Brut.” Deg 9/2015, I can’t account for how excellent this is considering the proportion of ‘11 it contains. It’s crusty and lacquered like the skin of a pork roast; cloves and star fruit and a silky-chalky texture into a finish tinged with matja-powder; crystalline and long—classic Lallement. Somehow!

Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.N.

(+)

12/750ml | KLT-3

All 2012, and all PN, assemblage with 8% still red. A *fantastic* aroma, a real WOW fragrance; the palate is a little less euphoric (the sample was ice-cold). Fresh wild Sockeye and Timut peppers lead into a palate that’s curiously diffident. Is it too dry? Usually flavor catches up with aroma, so let’s see.

Jean Lallement Millésime Brut, 2010

+ +

6/750ml | KLT-410

Another of those ‘10s at the sharpest tip of the iceberg, they 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. I’ll wait to see if the body fleshes out before declaring a masterpiece, but this is *really* good.

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
Gewürztraminer

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?

I was stoked to have discovered this man and his wines. The Chartognes led me to him. It was hard to take a second

supplier in Verzenay, first because of the diplomacies involved and second because the portfolio space is taken up with something redundant instead of something new.

But not really, as you will see.

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 Fins Lieux Blanc de Blancs #5 N.V.

12/750ml | KPS-2N

Though an “NV” this always hails from a single year—and this time it’s 2011. And it’s good! Deg 12/2015, no malo (David hates malo), it isn’t a great vintage of this cuvée but neither is it befouled by ladybugs. Good minerality, silvery fruit, a certain length; it has to be a triumph of the year.

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

12/750ml | KPS-1N

70% 2011 and 30% of the perpetual reserve started in 2005. 70-30 PN/CH with all CH from Verzenay; deg 8/2015, it remains one of the best 11-based NVs; it isn’t buggy, just a bit constricted, yet it’s a very good iteration of this, and not just “all things considered.”

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

12/750ml | KPS-5N

Here’s something to conjure with. It’s all 2011, and he did malo on purpose. Deg 12.2015, it has the brassy high-gloss Pehu-thing over fervent notes of Verzenay terroir; pink peppercorns, rare lamb, hyacinth. A mouthfilling X-B with good length; ‘11 expresses as a not-displeasing rusticity, not as vegetality.

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, but this one holds a little slip back. Or it’s cranky from disgorgement (1/2016), but in any case nothing can smell like this does without eventually tasting like it.

Pehu-Simonnet Millésime Extra Brut, 2006

+

12/750ml | KPS-406

50% PN Verzenay, 50% CH from Mesnil and Verzenay, still the 12/2013 disgorgement so a year on the cork. Well guys, as I told David Pehu, I was wrong about this wine. Wrong. I was misled by its dourness when it was freshly disgorged and all its fruit and gras were missing. Now it’s round, stocky and explosively rich and flavorful; dripping rain forest, simmering veal braise, Assam tea, into another searching, clinging finish like bouquet garni and faro and crusts. It’s something of a gem in disguise in this offering, rich, bone-brothy and broad-shouldered. David’s wines have improved since then, but this is nice to still be able to offer.

Pehu-Simonnet Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Brut 2007

+

3/1500ml | KPS-207M

Magnums only on this, and the vintage will appear on the neck-label. Deg 10/2015, it’s a lovely wine, stern yet creamy, typical high-slope Mesnil, with ‘07’s frizzled-leek aroma alongside the Mesnil lemon-blossom; fine clarity; a taut spiciness rides over the charming fruit. Already very fine, it will be twice as good in a few more years.

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

AT A GLANCE

An island of Chardonnay in a sea of Pinot Noir creates near Blanc de Blancs giving the most simply delicious Champagnes in this portfolio.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

They have their own minerality and tropical fruitiness; they're bigger bodied than wines of the Côte des Blancs, and to my mind they're just about as pretty as Chardonnay can be. Damn, they could almost be Riesling! Recent developments seem to suggest a transition to a more "serious" and less flowery style. We shall see! It's a 95% village for Chardonnay. These can be some of the most hauntingly beautiful and original Champagnes you'll ever drink.

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 humil-

ity 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 Chardonnays 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

80% 2013 and 20% 2012, deg. 1/2016; the wine is cool and brisk, acres of chalk-dust and starchy basmati; the palate is rather stern as recent disgorgement tamps down its fruit—the high notes make it through but the fruit is behind a closed door for now. What's good is good, and I will have underrated this, I'm sure.

A. Margaine “Cuvée Le Brut” N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-1

12/375ml | KAM-1H

I wish I were named “Cuvée le Brut instead of my actual name, Gibbery Wobblestein. “Terry Theise” is a pseudonym. To the matter at hand—this superb non-vintage is 55% 2013 and the balance is 25% '12, 10% '11 and 10% '06; deg 1/2016, it's an exceedingly refined, high-toned classic Margaine, White-flowers, with sushi-knife cut and chisel, and overtones of jasmine. This wine rides the thin line between Chardonnay and Riesling, and when it's on form it's a thorough original, and one of my most beloved Champagnes. 92-8 CH/PN.

A. Margaine Blanc de Blancs Brut, 2009

3/1500ml | KAM-609M

From *Champs d'Enfer* (60% of which was planted in 1927; it's the powerhouse among Arnaud's parcels), *Brocot*, *Grandes Arbes* (the source of the talc, jasmine and white-flower notes); deg 11/2015, the wine is generous and *terroiré*; still young and frosty as Magnums can be at first, but scented strongly of white lily and jasmine rice and coconut cookies. Full of character, clarity and outline, firmly chalky and adamantly flowery.

A. Margaine Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-2

90% 2013, deg 11/2015, 75-25 CH/PN which includes still reds of '09 and '07. If you love Margaine Rosé this will bliss you out; it has all the swoony dewy aroma but it's even deeper into *red* than usual. You'll need a very strong will to resist drinking this whole bottle by yourself. Spicy, with a gush of the prettiest fruit and a cold splash of the loveliest chalk; stretching into a torn-silk scarf of chalk. Maybe the best-ever rendition of this classic.

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
(calcerous clay and limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

60% Chardonnay
36% Pinot Noir
4% Meunier

AMPELOS CERTIFICATION

lutte raisonnée

AT A GLANCE

Wood-aged base wines give these Champagnes distinctly mealy and Burgundian flavors. They're often described as the best grower in Champagne or "the poor man's Krug." Vilmar's wines can offer a resonance and majesty unique among small estates.

HOW THE WINES TASTE

At best, Vilmar's wines are grandiose and resplendent. With sufficient bottle age these can take you up and up into rare altitudes of complexity. Even at ground-level they've got lots of flavor, as though the flavors were stated in BOLD CAPS. A further key to quality is the large proportion of pre-clonal Chardonnay vines. "These grapes are yellower than those from clonal vines," says Laurent. "And they have an incredible Muscat aroma." And Laurent, like every great producer, has a wife who says he's "a maniac for his vineyards."

At one point we stood in Laurent's new treasure-room in the cellar, tasting a few wines he'd let us select. I wanted to taste unremarkable wines, to satisfy my curiosity. But there's nothing at Vilmar that isn't remarkable, as I ought to have known.

We were four people, standing shoulder to shoulder across a small table, and as the wines proceeded I felt a kind of intimacy settle over the room, the kind that children feel when they're hiding from someone. Perhaps we were hiding from the quotidian world outside, drinking a friend's old wine, enveloped in gratitude and happiness.

As I arrive at Vilmar, I find I have a feeling of anticipation and pleasure similar to the feeling of arriving at Dönnhoff. Not only will the wines be beautiful, but I'll be breathing my own air. Laurent Champs' wines have reached the level of making-it-look-easy, the lit-from-within-ness and serenity of that lapidary style so few wines have. I feel at home here.

It's not that the wines are always calm and serene. Sometimes they're frisky and even hyper—like the crazy-good 2004 vintage. But they offer the flavor of homecoming, the flavor of belonging, the silent harbor of welcome. And even when they're animated they're never flirtatious, because in order to be coquettish or seductive you also have to be arch. And Laurent's wines already accept you. They are loving.

Peter Liem writes: "Vilmar & Cie. is not only one of the greatest grower-estates in Champagne, but one of the finest champagne producers of any type in the region."

There is a larger existential meaning to Vilmar, having to do with the circumstances of Laurent's father's life and the way these things have ramified for Laurent and for his wines. There is a gleam about them that isn't accidental. And without getting into the silly business of who the "best" grower is, I'll let myself say that no grower in Champagne is more significant than Vilmar, and that the wines, which were already remarkable, have become almost uniformly beautiful.

Beautiful is a word we seldom hear in winespeak. I can't really say why. It might be similar to the absence of the word "de-

licious” in most published tasting notes. We seem to approach wine as if it were a sudoku puzzle we had to solve by grasping at it with our intellects. Alternately, when we respond spontaneously and sensually, the emotions can’t help but engage. There are plenty of impressive wines and even exciting wines that aren’t necessarily beautiful. Some of the wines that certain tasters describe as “hedonistic” are merely gaudy and lurid. Beauty seems like a prerequisite for profundity, and I mean true profundity, not just the affect of significance by virtue of mere power. I promise you, if you vowed to start thinking about wine in terms of its beauty, even for just a day (or to humor me), you’d find yourself starting over. Most of what you know—or “know”—won’t at all

be useful.

When I reached the end of a tasting with Laurent I felt as beauty often makes me feel, the presence of a certain silence. You notice the ever-present thrum is absent, the grinding background buzz of just coping. The wine in your glass is a psalm. Everything everyone says is wonderful. You feel actually pretty dopey, melting away like you are. You hardly feel you have to speak.

It’s clear to me Vilmart is a Champagne estate of unassailable consequence, a must-have for anyone interested in the possibilities of this most suavely powerful and graceful of all wines. Casks are hardly the point anymore. Organic viticulture, (truly!) low yields, remarkable polish of fruit, and the deliberate patient pursuit

of a vision of perfection make Laurent Champs’ estate a gemstone gleaming among the chalk.

I’ve written a lot here, and I respect that you need to know whatever may be decisive for you to buy or not. I get that. But I in turn need to know something. I need to know that you too are able to pause just enough to remember that feelings and history and culture and meanings orbit every single wine, and when we remember that, we bring more of ourselves to the lip of the glass. Other than being a decent habit of living, you’ll find that if you can do this, you’ll have a stay against burnout. It becomes a well you can drink from when you’re feeling parched, and the water will always be clean and cold.

All these wines were tasted from both the Jamasse stems, which sport a globular shape, and from the Richard Juhlin stems which are an elongated tulip. Jamasse is made for hedonism, and Juhlin for study.

Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KVM-1

50% 2013 and 25% each ‘12-‘11, deg 6/2015; dosage made, as for all of Laurent’s wines, from still wines of the two best cuvées, Grand Cellier d’Or and Coeur de Cuvée, done in wood. In the first 1-2 years after disgorgement this wine shows a spiky kind of flavor geometry, shapes and fractals not quite fused together, begging for time in the bottle or, failing that, in the glass. As it moves toward knitting it leaps into complexity and finishes with the stern intricacy of a tête-du-cuvée. A work in progress but a noble one.

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.

Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier d’Or” Brut, 2011

12/750ml | KVM-611

Vilmart did not entirely escape the 2011-issue, so I approached this wine trepidatiously.... but it’s good! It’s better than good, and it’s way better than good from the Juhlin. Jamesse makes it round, sandalwoody and tasty, but Juhlin is articulate and detailed. Either way this is an improbable triumph; the vintage only shows as an herbal edge, nothing more. It’s lighter than usual, even lighter than the generally-light 2010, but..... how did he do it? 80-20 CH/PN.

Vilmart & Cie “Coeur de Cuvée” Brut, 2008

12/750ml | KVM-508

The good news is it’s a great CdC, but the even better news is it isn’t dramatically better than ‘07, ‘04 or ‘01 were. Only the 2002 was grander. I think it’s safe to say Laurent has is making a consistently stellar wine here, which is especially noteworthy because he does it from *all kinds* of vintages, even ones that everyone else wrote off.

Jamasse gilds the lily and makes the wine too sweet. Juhlin is an argument; Jamasse is an aria sung *mezzo-forté*. Laurent says the wine is “delicate” but steadily gaining in power. Where it will go is into a potentially stunning salty-sweet complexity, yet it will stay light-footed. Early days, and I (sincerely) don’t like to hype, but contrasted with the magnificent 2007 there’s just more depth here, especially in the mid-range, the part that goes truffle and woodsy with time. Laurent could have made an explosive wine; 2008 allows it. Instead, bless him, he’s made a gorgeous one.

(+) + +

Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier d’Or” Brut, 2009

+ +

3/1500ml | KVM-609M

Deg 6/2014 and this is an entire dazzling masterpiece; it’s a Magnum you don’t have to wait ten years to drink; it’s simple from Jamasse and fantastically complex and articulate in Juhlin; indeed Champagne doesn’t get a lot better than this—only richer.

Vilmart & Cie “Coeur de Cuvée” Brut, 2006

(+) + +

3/1500ml | KVM-506M

Deg 11/2014, this does have that steel-rod posture of Mags but the succulent juiciness of ‘06 shows in a visible and insanely complex call-and-response among its savors, fruits and terroir elements. It’s open, lets itself be seen; a sweet chicken stock that didn’t simmer too long. Give it a little while, of course, but you needn’t wait a decade.

Vilmart & Cie “Cuvée Rubis” Rosé, Brut N.V.

12/750ml | KVM-3

The current blend is 80% 2012 and 20% ‘11, deg. 10/2014. It’s 90-10 PN/CH. At some point this year it will be superseded by a ‘13-‘12 blend, which will be welcome. In general this wine has become more refined and demure over the years; you couldn’t call it “Burgundian” any more. This was better in the Jamasse, as it emphasized the powerful fruit of 2012 and any nuance of ‘11 was sown under. It remains a gracious and sophisticated Rosé, among the classiest in all of Champagne.

Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier Rubis” Rosé Brut 2010

+ +

6/750ml | 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.

Philippe was in a jocular mood this year. I wondered aloud in last year’s catalog whether his stopping smoking—thanks to bypass surgery two years ago—would change his palate in any way. If it has, it’s improved the wines, as they are less mil-

itantly dry, and more willing to accommodate a certain fruit. Mind you, they're still *dry*; they're just not *goddamn dry* any more; what once had 1g/l of rs now has (all of) 3g/l. This is a radical departure for this estate, but the wines taste (even) better.

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L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAB-1

12/375ml | KAB-1H

6/1500ml | KAB-1M

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.

This year it's 50% 2013 and 50% a perpetual reserve started in 1998. Deg 1/2016, it's 55% Meunier (higher than usual), 25% CH, 20% PN and 5% "other" (which means basically everything that wouldn't fit in the vats); it's in form, brassy and oyster; after a dip a couple years ago (for which we have our old friend 2011 to thank) this is better than ever.

L. Aubry Fils Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAB-2

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. It's 50% CH, 30% PN, 5% PM and 15% still red PM. Deg 1/2016. Iris and berry as always, but this is an especially fetching and balanced edition of this. The finish is like stirring chalk dust through blackberry juice.

L. Aubry Fils "Le Nombre d'Or, Campanae Veteres Vites" Brut, N.V. (2012)

12/750ml | KAB-4

The blend is fiendish: 25% Pinots Gris and Blanc—20% Petit Meslier—20% Arbanne—10% CH—5% Meunier—and 20% PN. Dosage is 5g/l, still Extra Brut but less dry than it's been. And boy does this smell good! The best edition of this wine in a long-g-g time, with the cuvée's elegant mélange of the "regular" Champagne profile with the exotics from the heirlooms. It's seamless, breathy, faintly malty, no evident meatiness from the Gris and just a little haricot-vert from the Arbanne.

A year in, it's still a strong version of this wine, still highlighting the Arbanne and Pinot Gris; really solid and savory (just a breath of *pâtisserie*) with a finish like roasted green beans with potpourri and soursop. Has a sneaky final saltiness with lemon blossom. It smells, curiously, like a super-classy Auxerrois.

L. Aubry Fils “Aubry de Humbert” Brut, 2007

+

12/750ml | KAB-307

“Très atypique.” 30% CH, 30% PN, 30% Meunier, 5% Petit Meslier and 5% Arbanne—the first time these have been used in what’s usually the “classic vintage” wine. The dosage is also higher than before—still just 6g/l—and this is the best version in at least a decade. It has the leaf-smoke and wet forest aroma of ‘07, plus the toasted straw and leather notes of the cuvée, plus nuances of lemon soufflé and white chocolate; fantastically stylish. Deg **10/2015**.

L. Aubry Fils Sablé Blanc des Blancs Brut, 2010

+

12/750ml | KAB-810

It uses all the white grapes (hence Blanc des Blancs), deg 10/2015, 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 has mouthsfull of salty raw dough and wonderful savory exotic length. Wet straw and haricot vert.

L. Aubry Sablé Rosé “Nicolas Françoise Aubry” Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KAB-612

Also *sans* dosage. Deg 2/2016, it’s 25% “black grapes” plus 10% CH, 25% Arbanne, 25% Petit Meslier, 10% Pinot Blanc plus “a little red stuff.” A glorious aroma of 2012; without dosage it gets crackery and dried-beefy, but with a rich florality and *fraises-de-bois* coming in. Far from a rad hipster novelty—this also *tastes* good.

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 spritzy 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 winegrower 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.

Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste-Anne” Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | KCT-1

This came *roaring* back from the 2011 doldrums, and the last couple editions have been the best ever, perhaps a little less assertive than before but also a lot more elegant and complex. For me it stands in the absolute top class among entry-level grower-Champagnes; I mean, who has *better* NV Brut than this???

Now 60% 2013 and 20% each of '12 and '11, it's 65-35 PN/CH, deg 1/2016, very dry (could be “Extra Brut”); it's an elegant straight-lined and silky edition of this, as graceful and balanced and tasty as they come. Incisive and classy, chiseled and vaporous, with an aerial solidity.

Chartogne-Taillet Les Barres, Brut (2011)

++

6/750ml | KCT-711

“I know, I can't explain it either,” he said. “All the bad grapes must have gone into the NV.” Yes, this is '11 and yes, it is superb. If you have forgotten, it's entirely 63-year old ungrafted Meunier, and this is a wonderful version; deep and earthy, bright and shimmering; a long tertiary finish of cardamom and oat-bread toast. If you put a little cognac in your shiitake risotto it might taste like this. A stupidly long finish that doesn't want to vacate your senses; it takes up residence in your entire upper respiratory system.

(Visitors to France should look out for another Meunier cuvée from the next-door neighbor vineyard, Beaux Sens. 61-year vines, and different from Les Barres, chalkier, less earthy, less deep but more silvery. Neither wine is produced in large quantity, so it makes more sense to give all of this to one customer and all of that to the other, instead of mingy amounts of each to both.)

Chartogne-Taillet Les Orizeaux Brut (2011)

++

6/750ml | KCT-811

100% Pinot Noir, and 100% inexplicable how it can be this good in '11. It's round and elegant and glossy; the most sophisticated single-parcel wine Alexandre has yet made, PN both solid and ethereal; crystalline and large-scaled, savory yet floating, incisive yet clinging. Absolutely superb!

Chartogne-Taillet Blanc de Blanc Heurtebise Brut (2009)

+

6/750ml | KCT-909

Less incisive than the 2008 but even more generous and white-flowery. A little broader, more inferential but also extravagantly chalky. Want to see full-impact terroir in Champagne? Taste this, then the BdB from Moussé, and finally Varnier-Fanniére St. Denis.

Chartogne-Taillet Rosé Brut

+

12/750ml | KCT-6

All 2012. 60-40 CH/PN. Delicate, refined “sweet” aroma (though the wine is extra-brut dry—that's '12 for you), fruit-forward but also anchored, solid, by no means a *parfait* of fruit-froth; it splits the difference between grip and attractiveness, and an esoteric floweriness arrives at the end. Deg 12/2015.

RECENT VINTAGES



One must remember, when a vintage starts to appear in NV blends, it is the weakest material from that vintage. An impression can be formed, but only partially. Similarly, tasting the still wines before *tirage* is a useful view through the periscope, but not necessarily predictive.

It's safe to say that **2015** will be strong. The wines have ripeness and torque. Growers are also well pleased with **2014** (which was truly mind-bending at Hébrart, the best group of *vins claires* I've ever tasted), and at least some growers are stoked with **2013**. You always have to pay close attention, because any given vintage isn't equally good for all three (major) varieties, and variations can exist within varieties and often in close proximity. Gimmonet doesn't think 2013 is remarkable, whereas Peters, just eight miles away, thinks (correctly) that '13 is da bomb.

I attend to the young still wines, of course, but a lot can happen in *tirage* and so I let the picture blur a little.

It's safe to say that **2013**, as it first appears now, is at least very good and that the vintage wines will be excellent in a detailed flowery way. It also seems safe to await *very* fine things from **2012**, especially Pinot Noir based '12s; these seem to be the strongest wines since 2003, though they're quite a bit more fruity in aroma, and seem to have greater finesse. It's also apparent that '13 and '12 will blend well together. One cannot assume this, by the

way, as even "good" years don't always partner well.

2011 has been sufficiently flogged and pilloried in these pages and elsewhere. Not many vintage wines will be made, and those that are will probably prove to have been mistakes. And yet! When the bullets were dodged—thinking now of the top wines at Chartogne and Vilmart—the vintage can be really good.

2010 is sleek and incisive. Most of it was barely ripe, yet there's a small sharp summit where outstanding wines could be made, provided one doesn't insist on opulence.

2009 keeps getting better. It started its life as a somewhat coarse obvious vintage, heavy-footed and often awkwardly balanced in terms of dosage, as many growers were too sparing in light of the wines' lower acids. (A common mistake....) Yet 2009 is doing what 1999 also did, slimming down and growing more graceful and refined. I'm starting to think these will age very well, as "uncomplicated" vintages often seem to do. They're still forthright Champagnes—don't approach them hoping for intricate, searching wines—but there are visible complexities in a generous framework here.

2008 is potentially superb. Most wines from this vintage taste absolutely beautiful and sometimes spectacular. Why,

then, do I say "potentially?" Because I've learned to be wary of high-acid vintages, which we *suppose* will age sensationally but which often zig and zag and don't invariably end up harmonious. **This is especially true in Champagne's modern dosage-averse environment.** It's hard to keep one's hands off these '08s, they taste so marvelous right now, and I'm not entirely convinced we *need* to wait for them.

2007 is a decent "modest" year from which a few exceptional wines were made by the growers who always seem to do exactly that—make super wines in middling vintages. '07 is usually smoky and a little acrid-scented—not in a negative way. No need to worship it, no need to hang on to it, but always a good idea to appreciate the finest citizens of even this ordinary nation.

2006 was an analogue vintage except for the top levels, which showed a focused minerally spine that was always surprising in light of all that juicy texture. However, except in Magnums, I would start drinking them up, as they're showing some oxidation. This could be a "phase" and if it were I'd be surprised but not shocked, but neither do I intuit anything on the far side of the "phase" that would have been worth waiting for. Most of the Mags will be wonderful, but do visit the bottles, and be happy you found them before they began to fade.



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