









# INTRODUCTION

Having established and sold this portfolio for 22 years now, the only thing I quest for in Champagne is—beauty. Just like I seek in all wines. I appreciate experimentation—this entire portfolio is built on the idea of breaking free of old assumptions—but I prefer the experimenters to be searching for new ways for Champagne to be delicious and beautiful, whereas, distressingly, too often they seem only to be groping for novelty. At times they pursue bad ideas and false gods.

Why am I telling you this?

An entire crop of passionate young growers, encouraged by the pioneers who paved the way for them, are entering what is now a *comfortable* world. I don't mean they'll get rich, or want to get rich, but I mean they don't need to doubt that a demand exists for grower Champagne. And they can look at the landscape and see how they might contribute.

This is a mixed blessing.

I am thrilled at how vibrant the grower-Champagne culture is, thrilled at the excitement in the air around it, thrilled at the breaking down of the walls that prevented growers from sharing information with one another, thrilled that the grower-culture is seen as a culture, and well-pleased to be active, doing my part in such happy times.

And yet. These young growers are often.... very *young* people. I used to be one myself. Wanna know how I was in my twenties? I was often an asshole in my twenties, and I was way too sure that every idea I had came right from the lips of the angels, and I was serenely certain that I was entirely right in all my views and opinions. That is to say, I was a person in his twenties: Often wrong and never uncertain. In some ways it's one's *job* to be smug and cocksure and vainglorious as a 20-something. Because if you weren't, life wouldn't be able to kick your conceited ass in your thirties.

This new generation of Champagne growers are full of ideas and plans and concepts, and many of the ideas are good. I tasted the collection of one conspicuously interesting grower—a friend of a friend—and was really thirsty to crack into those samples because the guy looked wonderful on *paper*. The wines, though, were pretty *meh*. It was clear to me that here was talent, here was energy, here was derring-do, here was everything but - palate. Somewhere in all this

conceptualizing the guy had forgotten to consider what tasted good.

Part of this can be explained by the current fad for low-or-no-dosage Champagnes. I respect (and love) the minority of these wines that work, but I lament the majority of them that don't, and the muddled and incoherent thinking that underlies them. Today's young grower emerges into a Moment where the catechism is to reduce dosage at all costs, to zero if possible. He's also laboring under the delusion that Champagne should be as *intense* as other wines. Small wonder that he makes awkward, painful, difficult, unpleasant wines. And sadly, small wonder that they are greeted with approval by people of corrupted (or simply unformed) palates.

There is wheat among all this chaff—I think of Chartogne and Moussé and feel a massive *<whew>* of relief that here are two sensible men making superbly delicious Champagne in line with the Zeitgeist but not enslaved by it. Another excellent young grower will join their ranks in my offering. You can tell me any story you wish, if your wine tastes good. I love a good story—we call them “selling points” in our filthy mercantile personae—but no story, no matter how good, means anything if the wine's lousy. And so I ask of you, dear reader, to hold the “story” in abeyance even if it's compelling, and taste the Champagne dispassionately. Taste it with your wits and your actual honest palate. Like it if you truly like it, and not because the story encouraged you or made you hope you'd like it.

Many years ago, when a few of my Austrian producers were pushing the ripeness envelope—inspired perhaps by Franz Hirtzberger and his fondness for extremely ripe dry wines with botrytis—I objected, at times vociferously, and was termed a “classicist” by one grower, who has since disavowed the grotesque wines of that luckless era in favor of more... *<grin>*... classical wines. Too many of us hear “classical” and think of a bank in the shape of the Parthenon, but to me “classical” represents nothing other than *the pinnacle of a type that is itself classical*. I would not argue that classic equals eternal. Paradigms shift. 19th Century Champagne was mostly sweet. Bordeaux of the earlier climate era were lower in alcohol and more moderate in profile, a style some people still regard as

classical, and yet if you were born recently enough you cannot remember when Bordeaux wasn't dark and ripe and powerful. *They* are your paradigm, and the old style of wines might well strike you as oddly diluted and anemic.

Then the question is: given that paradigms shift, can we discuss whether they've shifted for the worse? I believe we can, and I think there are sometimes two perfectly reasonable sides to that debate. *Sometimes*. I wonder whether now is one of those times, talking about Champagne. I fear it is not. I wouldn't go so far as to assert that Champagne is in danger, but I will argue that a prevailing current in Champagne is not “creative” and not even properly “experimental;” it is simply incoherent and senseless and pernicious. I visited a grower this year who showed me a truly dispiriting group of *Vins Claires*, which foul pinnacle was reached near the end, when one of the wines was clearly and definitely fecal, and the gentleman said “This wine has a reduction but I *like* this reduction.” And I was aghast and appalled. By what mental conniptions does one approve of a wine that smells like the contents of a chamber pot? If this story (and this producer) were isolated I wouldn't bother telling you—but alas, this is all *too* typical, and it's not excusable at all, no way no how. Should notions such as these prevail, then Champagne will become uglier and more brutal, and one more beautiful thing will be snuffed out of the world.

Alexandre Chartogne “experimented” with deconstructing his Champagnes into single-parcel bottlings, and the results were a range of wines that showed us beauties we hadn't thought were there. More important, he did this in order to come to know his terroirs, so as to add to his own depth of understanding and also to the greater store of knowledge of his place, Merfy. Cédric Moussé “experimented” in any number of ways, all in the service of unlocking the secrets of Meunier, to show it in guises it had seldom displayed. This man is always urging and pushing and questing, but his wines *make sense*. For these growers, the bathwater may have been discarded *but the babies weren't in it*. The Champagnes are differently beautiful, and our sum of beauty is increased bit by delicious bit.

One grower whose wines I tasted is an avowed explorer of his terroir, which

he understands in geological terms but doesn't seem to know how to register sensually. The Champagnes were so Stalinist, so dour and ominous, that terroir was obliterated, swept under a prevailing ferocity and bitterness. Does he really suppose that terroir is subsumed by *dosage*? It would seem so, and it contradicts a lifetime of evidence I myself have accumulated, that the *right* dosage makes terroir sing out. Obviously too much sugar is as bad as too little (but even then I'd argue that the over-dosaged Champagne is at least palatable, albeit mundane, whereas the under-dosed wine is shrill and unpleasant), but if you begin by assuming that dosage is public-enemy-number-one to terroir, you're starting with a frame of reference that's 180° false.

My new motto is: Learn to discern!

Grower Champagne is embedded into the market quite deeply now. It's here to stay. The market share is now 4.8% and the number of growers is now 356. I doubt this growth is sustainable without a corresponding drop in quality, but this could straighten itself out over time, if the new crop of young growers grow more serious about how their wines taste (or experienced enough to judge).

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

It was a dull morose world, and it seems like a nightmare now, though it was less than twenty years ago. Many things have changed for the better. The market is full (too full, but we'll go into that later) of growers, everyone is talking about terroir, it turned out those distinctions were valid after all, and not just valid: *fascinating*. The mega-companies no longer had control of the narrative, and this shocked them, dismayed them, and in the fullness of time, prompted some of them to enter the world of the fine wine business and the mentalities it fosters. Many of the big houses have improved, qualitatively. Many of them are less parsimonious with information. (They had to be, or no one would bother talking with them any more.) Many of them are working to improve the conditions of the vineyards.

Yet most of them still think with "industrial" minds. You see it in how they treat their customers. There's very little to distinguish their actions in the marketplace from Big Whiskey or Big Wine (such as Gallo); they just have a higher level of fairy dust to sprinkle over it all. And they have a lamentable tendency to overbid the price of any vineyard land that becomes available—in an effort to shut the growers out—and they continue to bid up the price they'll pay for grapes, so that the irresolute grower will say "We work less hard and make more money selling grapes to LVMH, so why not just quit making Champagne ourselves?"

If asked to sum up this portfolio, it consists of a number of absolute *benchmark* growers, alongside of another number of pretty compelling geeks. I know there's a trope out in the ether that this portfolio is somehow "conservative," but that's far from the truth. If this group of growers were only just now being introduced to the market by someone eager to establish his hipster bona-fides, (s)he could say:

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

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

Now that grower Champagne is itself trendy, it brought out all the little

dogma cockroaches from their hiding places within the walls. As a result, we waste a huge amount of time arguing over how much RS is the right amount, forgetting that this question has already been answered again and again. The right amount is what tastes the best, whether it is zero grams, or 3 or 7 or 10. The dry-at-all-costs mentality is sucking a lot of tastiness, charm and grace from myriad Champagnes. And as much as we talk it to death, did you know the market share for extra-brut and zero-dosage Champagne is actually only 1.9%?

## 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 bigglom 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."

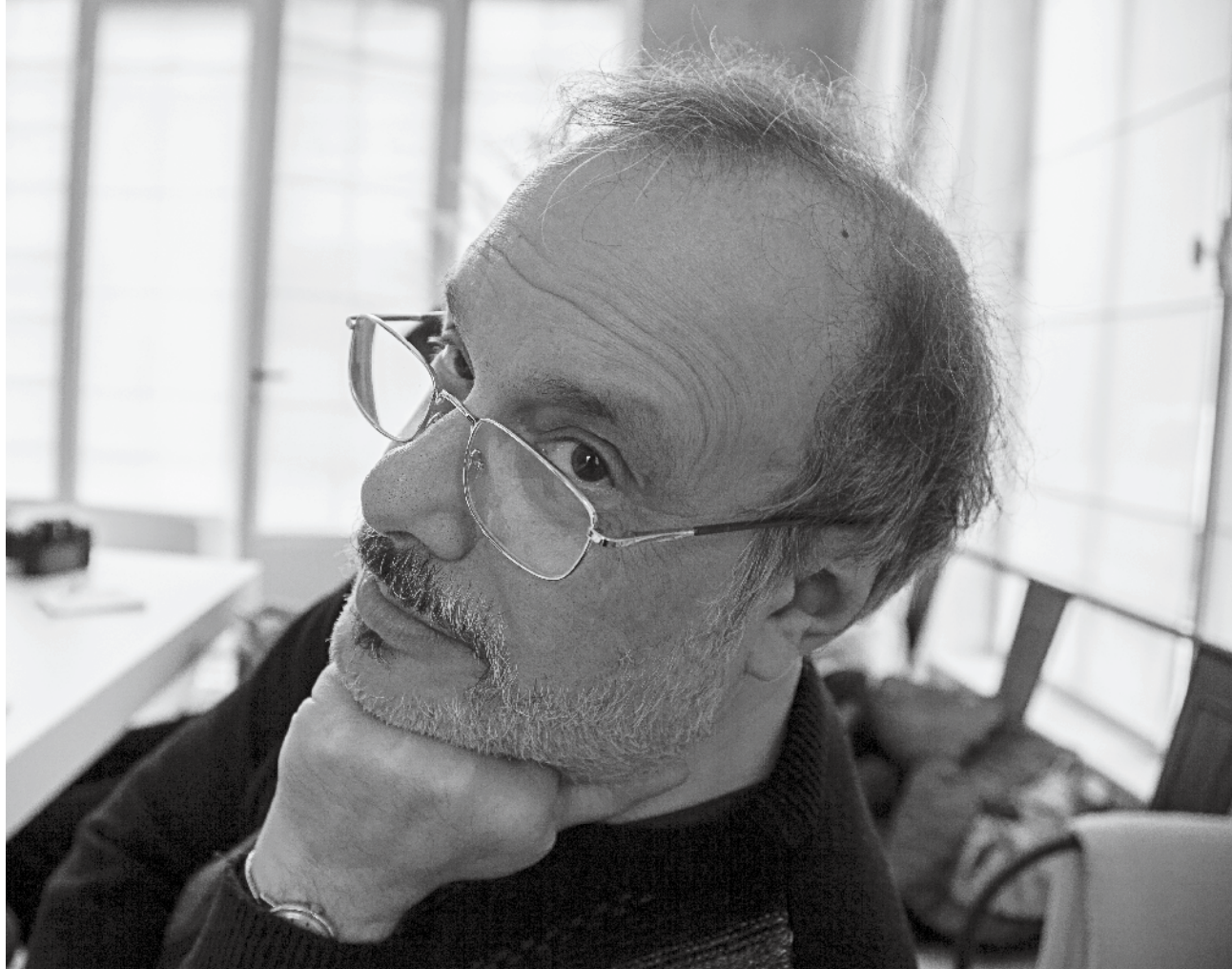
Something we hear less often is that not all secondary fermentations complete to absolute dryness. I don't suppose it happens a lot, but I'm also certain there are Champagnes with residual sugar in the base wine before dosage is added. It's worth remembering when you listen to the dry or anti-dosage 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.

## "A GROWER WILL ALWAYS TELL YOU THE TRUTH ABOUT A VINTAGE...."

The original quote, from a German vintner, concluded, "One year later," but in Champagne it needs to be adapted to "Five years later," because that's how long it seemed to take for anyone to come clean about the geosmin issues with 2005 or the pyrazine issues with 2011. And only the most honest and candid among them will talk about the grassy taste of many 2015s.

Kudos to Mr. Galloni, who was the only writer I'm aware of to go public with this matter. And kudos to Peter Liem, who (not atypically!) has presented the most plausible theory to explain it. Liem says that the Champenoise have always picked grapes based on potential alcohol, i.e., sugar-ripeness, and that for most of





them it was all they needed to know. But in the modern climate we reach that ripeness earlier, in many cases *before* we have physiological ripeness, so that the sugars may be OK but the grapes still *taste green*.

This prompts a whole slew of questions. One, none of us remember tasting green flavors in the *Vins Claires* we saw from 2015. Why not? And then, if Liem's theory is correct (as I think it could very well be) then what's to be done about it? Growers can pick later but how will they then keep their Champagnes at or below 12.5% alc if they pick with higher sugars? The only way would be to adjust tirage so there's less pressure in the bottle, but even then there's only so far down one can go. This perplexing issue also exposes a flaw in many *Champenois'* logic, the notion that riper grapes (with one assumes lower acidity) will lower the need for dosage. This isn't true, and it arises from the aforementioned misunderstanding of the actual role dosage plays. Lower-acid Champagnes with inadequate dosage will still taste boorish and nasty.

Meanwhile, there's still a few NVs based on 2015, and while these are nowhere *near* as objectionable as the cauliflower-water vegetality afflicting so many

2011s, you still need to know that the wines are not typical. In essence I don't mind a little grassiness in wines if I buy them *because* of that flavor, but it doesn't belong in Champagne and I was mightily relieved to see it give way to the far better NVs from a 2016-base.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

I have no idea why I've never done this for Champagne! Permit me to draw your attention to this short-list of indispensable masterpieces, some of which might have been below your radar.

### THE GREATEST WINES IN THIS OFFERING ARE:

**PÉTERS** 2012 Chetillon  
**LALLEMENT** vintage 2012  
**HÉBRART** "Mes Favorites"  
**HÉBRART** 2014 Spécial Club  
**HÉBRART** 2015 Les Noces de Craie

### THE GREATEST VALUES IN THIS OFFERING ARE:

**CHARTOGNE-TAILLET** Cuvée Ste Anne

(2016-base)

**VARNIER-FANNIERE** Cuvée St. Denis

**CHIQUET** vintage 2008

**HÉBRART** Selection NV

**GIMONNET** Cuvée Gastronom 2014

### THE BEST NV BRUT IN THIS OFFERING IS:

**HÉBRART** "Reserve"

(Honorable mention goes to: **LALLEMENT** and as already cited, **CHARTOGNE-TAILLET**.)

### THE BEST BRUT NATURE IN THIS OFFERING IS:

**DEHOURS** – which was as good as this genre ever can be!

### THE BEST ROSÉ IN THIS OFFERING IS:

**GEOFFROY** Saignée 2015

(Honorable mention to **LALLEMENT** and to **VILMART** "Emotion" 2012)

### THE MOST INTERESTING NEW WINES ARE:

**PEHU-SIMONNET** 2012 Finlieux

(100% Verzenay Chardonnay)

**GEOFFROY** Terres 2008



# PIERRE GIMONNET



## SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs

## VINEYARD AREA

28 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,800 cases

## VILLAGES

Cramant Grand Cru  
Chouilly Grand Cru  
Oger Grand Cru  
Aÿ Grand Cru  
Vertus 1er Cru  
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru  
Cuis 1er Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

98% Chardonnay  
2% Pinot Noir

Didier Gimonnet has reached an interesting place in his life as a vigneron. He is ever-more sure of the wisdom of his basic principles, and ever-more relaxed about playing around their edges. His wines aren't changing in any essential way (except to the degree they're getting drier) but he's making wines he wouldn't have made ten (or even five) years ago. But let me back up.

You have two families of type here. The majority of the wines are chalky, aerial, transparent, mineral-driven, and aristocratic. They are exceptionally clear and precise. They register "cool" and are quite *vinous*. Apart from these, there's a small family of much richer wines that have some va-va-voom. Vintage plays a role here, and sometimes the styles overlap. And all of this is based upon my repeated experience of tasting the wines very fresh and young, and often quite recently disgorged. One of the most striking elements of Gimonnet is the way the wines transform with a few years on the cork. They become haunting and silky and tertiary—and classic. You can read words like "classic" and "aristocratic" and think *Oy, Grand-Pa wines*, and what a silly person you'd be.

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?

We drink some old Champagne when the work is done. Curiously, I am told there aren't that many of us who cherish old Champagne, which baffles me. I've never had *more* beautiful wine than the finest among these old Champagnes, and they seem to be one of the wine world's best kept secrets. We drank a 1979 *Fleur-de-ron*, which was an utter beauty in the middle of its life, tasting like ethereal Tonka beans. A 1976 *Club* and a 1995 I didn't identify came next, and we were delighted and absorbed. Then came the masterpiece.

I know I risk being too heart-on-sleeve goopy when I write about old wine. The risk is worth taking, but that doesn't mean I want to cloy. So I'll try to say what this moment was like, in the simplest language I can find.

It was a 1966, which is becoming my favorite vintage (Champagne, Burgundy, Germany...all great) and really, this wine led us down into the truffle dark. It was like some mushroom that hasn't been discovered yet. Hauntingly sweet, sweetly haunting. It was the exact wine that speaks to who I am now, in this time of my life. It has a visceral, teeming mystery,

it is full of warm drippy earth, and then | alight on fresh leaves and pungent herbs. | ger of gravitas yet it is also friendly, in its  
it walks backwards through the years to | This sinewy vigorous beauty is a harbin- | mysterious warm shimmer.

### Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V. +

12/750ml | FR-KPG-01-NV  
12/375ml | FR-KPG-01-NVH  
3/1500ml | FR-KPG-01-NVM  
1/3000ml | FR-KPG-01-NVJ

We tasted this from different formats. The HALF-BOTTLE was in effect the current (or about-to-be) assemblage—cuvée 189, 70% 2016 and the rest a mélange of 2015-14-13-12, deg. 11/2018, and it's a delightful and perfect Gimonnet NV, hitting all the notes.

The wine from full bottles and Mags is cuvée 181, 67% 2015, deg. 9/2018 (bottles) and 1/2019 (Mags); it's a little grassy but acceptably so, and the mag is more mineral and craggy, not surprisingly. It's actually the better rendition, though don't take that to mean it's *ready* to drink immediately. I'm actually kind of sad about restaurants who pour young Champagne from Mag; it looks good but often the wine's stiff and unyielding.

One final note: when Gimonnet says a reserve wine is (let's say) 9.3% 2014, what that means is it is the *entire NV blend* of 2014, so that all the reserve wines THEMSELVES contain reserve wines. Moreover, these wines are stored in MAGNUM, not in tank, which gives them greater freshness and refinement.

My hero.

### Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 'Cuvée Gastronome' Brut, 2014 +

12/750ml | FR-KPG-32-14

The cuvée is intended for the table, hence its name, and hence its lower atmospheres of pressure. Almost always vintage-dated, it is not the "vintage wine," but it is crafted so as to be the most explicitly mineral wine in the range. This '14 has realized its early promise. Wine like this shows why Champagne does not need to be "reinvented." This classic, aerial wine is white sails full of sun and air, on a cool bright day.

Deg. late in 2018, it's 28% Chouilly *Montaigu*, 34.5% Cuis, 18% Cramant *Buissons*, 10% Oger and 9.5% Vertus.

### Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 'Cuvée Fleuron' Brut 2010 +

12/750ml | FR-KPG-31-10

Updated deg. 7/2018

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

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

With the new deg. 12/2017 the wine has an element of macadamias and an almost bacony finish. 2010 has some tricks up its sleeve, it would appear...

The new deg. is salty, precise, *brioché*. It's nearly ready, if you're impatient.

### Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 'Cuvée Fleuron' Brut 2010 +

3/1500ml | FR-KPG-31-10M

It's not the same wine; in fact, it's the *SPÉCIAL CLUB blend*, ("In order to manage the stock") deg. 4/2018, and while this is tempting now, this smokier and more ascetic wine will reward 2-3 years longer in bottle.



## Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 'Cuvée Oenophile' Non Dosé Extra Brut 2012

12/750ml | FR-KPG-30-12

This is usually the "Fleurion" blend without dosage, or close to it. There was no 2012 Fleurion, so it's all here: 40% Cramant, 38.5% Chouilly, 7.5% Oger and 14% Cuis, deg 11/2017. The 2008 is a hard act to follow, but he has the touch with this wine; it's strong and assertive (that's '12) but while it's stark it's not austere, and it will grow on the cork.

Indeed, it has done so; this new deg 1/2019 really shows what zero-dosage Champagne can be in the hands of a master. Balanced, salty and chalky, transparent but not stark; it's like Sencha strained through chalk. By the way, it has 1.5 g/l of its own RS left over after *tirage*, as nearly all "no-dosage" Champagnes do. So there, tough guy.

## Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Oger Grand Cru Brut

12/750ml | FR-KPG-36-NV

After finding Oger to be a difficult blending partner ("Even a small amount dominates a cuvée and changes its character.") I suggested, facetiously, that he bottle it alone. This of course he would never do. Ever. Until he did it.

Now the furies are unleashed and there are all manner of previously *verboden* Champagnes, and it's all good; it doesn't supplant the blended wines, it joins them. The wine is authoritative, the chalkiest Oger I've ever tasted, and if it's "Other" then it's a most compelling Other!

The latest iteration is 90-10 2016/15, deg. 7/2018. It's a lovely young Champagne with the white-flower winsome fruit of '16; something between Rheingau-Riesling and chalk and plum blossom, with a mineral finish. It's 51% *Terres de Noël* and *Brulis* along with 33% *Champs Nérons* (on chalk) and 16% *Fondy* (on clay).

## A TRIO OF 2012s

*Tasted again a year later, their distinctions become even more vivid. Chouilly is going all "dark" and suggestive, with the most extreme chalkiness. Cramant is just a big beauty: pure Cramant! The Club is less sunny but more multi-faceted.*

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

6/750ml | FR-KPG-42-12

This is starting to show its stuff. It's 100% *Montaigu* from 61-year-old vines. It's a kind of Champagne intrigue, to hack a fascinating slice out of a blend. There's a nicely intricate call and response of juniper, quince and chalk, and I'm curious to see where this goes.

## Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Spécial Club Cramant Grand Cru Brut, 2012

6/750ml | FR-KPG-43-12

A blend of many parcels, four in *Buissons*, (32%), one in *Bauves* (22%), one in *Champ de Prévot* (14%) and two in *Fond du Bateau* (16%), not chaptalized and "very healthy" grapes. This has developed wonderfully and shows the basic nobility of the commune, the lime, chalk, green tea, balsam and sorrel. It's a wine to love, to study, and to wonder over.

## Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Spécial Club Brut, 2012

6/750ml | FR-KPG-40-12

60% Cramant, 30% Chouilly and 10% Cuis. Gimonnet Club is one of the absolute icons of the Côte des Blancs, and this one joins an illustrious family. Joins, and stands out: it's a young, strong, somewhat brashly beautiful Club. There's a calm in the euphoric aroma but it's assertively chalky, with iron and brassica on the palate. This muscular youngster is finding his way, and won't be ungainly forever....



**Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils 'Millésime de Collection,  
Vielle Vignes de Chardonnay' Brut 2008**

+ + (+)

3/1500ml | FR-KPG-45-08M

**Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils 'Millésime de Collection,  
Vielle Vignes de Chardonnay' Brut 2006**

+ +

3/1500ml | FR-KPG-45-06M

The 2008 is entering the beginning of its prime, and this kind of wine may be the best case for 2008. The '06 is just wolfishly delicious to drink now. I wonder where 2006 BdB will go at this point; it's so juicy and generous. Maybe it won't go, which is fine, nothing wrong with a quick-maturing vintage.

**Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils 'Paradoxe' Brut, 2013**

12/750ml | FR-KPG-35-13

New deg 7/2018. If this were a Pinot Noir based wine from, let's say Mailly, we'd say it is markedly lissome and graceful. It's only "at odds" with Gimmonnet's prevailing style. It's 90% PN from Mareuil, the highest proportion of red in the history of the cuvée—hell, in the history of the estate.

**Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils 'Rosé de Blancs'**

+

12/750ml | FR-KPG-20-NV

2016 base, deg 1/2019. It's no less than 92% Chard, with 8% Bouzy PN. The CH is 27% Chouilly *Montaigu*, 22% Cramant, 11% Oger and 32% Cuis. It's available in MAGNUM but honestly that makes no sense to me. The 750 is just delicious, like an even dewier Margaine; flowery and solid below its winsome sigh of friendliness.



# VARNIER-FANNIERE



## SUB REGION

**Côte des Blancs**

## VINEYARD AREA

**4 hectares**

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

**3,000 cases**

## VILLAGES

**Avize Grand Cru  
Cramant Grand Cru  
Oger Grand Cru  
Oiry Grand Cru**

## GRAPE VARIETIES

**100% Chardonnay**

It is Valérie Varnier's domain now—ably assisted by her friend Isabelle. It's been a little over two years since her husband Denis' untimely death, and while I continue to find it greatly moving that Valérie wishes to carry on his work, it is clear she has crossed-over, and is looking more forward than back. It is not only Denis' legacy that lives on, it is the strength of their connection to each other, because doing the work is a way of uniting their two hearts beyond death. The best way I can honor her commitment is to simply receive the wines as they are and keep the story in the background. In another year Valérie will have made the wines from the ground up; for now, she is completing work which Denis began. Apropos of which, we tasted very fresh disgorgements of 1/2019, because they need to disgorge often due to lack of storage space.

The wines have a singular nature. 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 one 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 Varnier has as much land in Cramant as they do in Avize, and I also learned one possible reason their Champagnes are so silky and refreshing: they microoxygenates the still wines in order to use less sulfur and to encourage the tertiaries to express. Denis did full malo and was another one who undertook 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 their Rosé. You know those magnifying goggles the jewelers wear when they're inspecting a stone? Drinking Varnier's Champagnes is like looking at flavor through those spectacles.



### Varnier-Fannière 'Cuvée de Jean Fannière Origine,' Extra Brut N.V.

+

12/750ml | FR-KVF-03-NV

An homage to the man who decided, in the 50's, to quit selling grapes and to make his own Champagne—Denis' grandfather. It's mostly from an old (50+) site in Cramant called *Chemins de Chalons* in the plain (where the soil is often chalkiest). The current deg. is half-half 14/13 and it's both beautifully serious and dramatically chalky, for lovers of "dark" flavored Blanc de Blancs.

### Varnier-Fannière Grand Brut, N.V.

+ (+)

12/750ml | FR-KVF-01-NV

Half-half 16/15 and as racy and loaded with graphite as ever, and while disgorgement shows, it's also incisive, perfectly balanced and has an endless finish of chalk and mint.

### Varnier-Fannière 'Cuvée Saint-Denis' Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KVF-09-NV

Often, I find this to be the BEST VALUE in this whole portfolio. It used to be a single-parcel wine from *Clos du Grand Père*, but the vineyard is affected by fan-leaf and it's now an assemblage from the oldest vines in a couple of Avize parcels. The (brutally) fresh disgorgement lets some reduction show, but wow, this wine is superb. A sizzle-cymbal crispness and spindrift brightness. Its usual depths are waiting to emerge but even the wash of flavors on the surface are intricate and lingering.

### Varnier-Fannière Grand Vintage 2012

+ (+)

12/750ml | FR-KVF-40-12

To be released in small *tranches* with some held back for each new year; a pointedly brilliant, even blatant graphite. The dosage was misjudged and so the mid-palate needs to rise to meet the surface flavors, but the finish is eighteen layers of chalk. Just one more gram of dosage will do the trick. I hope she does it.

### Varnier-Fannière Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KVF-20-NV

This seems to have changed permanently, from the delicate and fruit-driven wine it used to be, to a darker and more vinous wine that's less pretty and more "adult." Soberer, more rhubarb and rose-hips and less strawberry. Flavors are both enticing and interesting in its rather serious vibe.



# PHILIPPE GLAVIER



## SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs

## VINEYARD AREA

4 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,000 cases

## VILLAGES

Cramant Grand Cru

Avize Grand Cru

Les Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Chardonnay

Bought a couple bottles at a shop in Epernay. Grower I hadn't heard of. Got the bottles home and drank them. Impressive! Went and bought some more, newer disgorgements, different cuvées. Liked 'em again. Every bottle I opened was tasty and interesting, and they didn't taste like anything else I knew in the Côte des Blancs. I'll circle back to this subject, as it is salient.

The domain is small—4.5 hectares—all in the Côte, all Grand Cru. They're on a side street in Cramant, strangely hard to find (it's not like Cramant is a bustling metropolis), away from the village center, inconspicuous sign.

I met a husband and wife. Philippe is a 3rd generation wine grower, parents delivered grapes to a co-op if I understand correctly. Véronique is the 12th generation of winegrowers in Monthelon, and as she was growing up she was categorically certain of one thing: She would never marry a wine grower. As fate (and life) would have it, she met Philippe, and changed her mind. (Funny how that works.)

The cellar is in Cramant because Véronique's family owns the cuverie and the buildings in Cramant. But most of the vineyards are in Mesnil-sur-Oger—in the following parcels: Les Louivières, Montpetin de Haut, Les Maltrances, Au Dessus d'Aillerand, Rose et Jutées, Les Zalioux, La Côte, Vaucherot, Les Bas Montpetins, Les Varnaults, Les Volibars, Les Moissonnières.

Oger is also important: les Vozemieux, les Chenets, Noyerots, Frémont du Midi, les Gaillards

Champagne Glavier began in 1995.

Phillipe used the cellars of Véronique's family at first, until they were able to buy their own *cuverie* and build the press house and cellar. A lot of work, and a lot of investment. And I haven't even brought up the nine parcels in Avize and Cramant. So, check all the boxes for an idealistic and energetic team creating a domain from scratch. They have existed since 1995—newbies!

Each terroir is vinified separately and the various final cuvées are assembled by taste and not by recipe.

What most impressed me about these wines was a singularity of style. Many of the Champagnes I work with are marked by a certain texture; lacy, detailed, crystalline, transparent, refined. I adore such wines, but even more than that, I adore variety. Glavier's wines are *strong*, analog, they compare to Gimonnet as vinyl does to CD. In my portfolio they join a group that includes Pehu-Simonnet, Billiot, even Geoffroy in many ways. And that is why I want you to see them, because they are entirely classy and they show all the breed of GC Blanc de Blancs, but they're sturdy and solid rather than chiseled and filigree. Normally if you see such wines they're rustic and muddy, but you can find wines with torque and also with refinement, and you will find them here.

Véronique may disagree with me, at least a little. She avers that the wines enact a harmony among laciness, power and elegance, and of course she has a point. If I describe them as "strong" it doesn't mean that's all they are. It means they lead with muscle.

### Philippe Glavier 'La Grace d'Alphael' Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KGL-01-NV

Now 64% 2016—happily—deg. 10/2018, it's a frisky NV that leads with fruit and citrus, with mineral following discreetly; compact but not constricted, showing polish, balance and a bracing crispness. This is exactly what they want for this cuvée, and some of what's now "bracing" will fill out on the cork.

The wine is 18% Cramant, 36% Mesnil, 23% Oger and 23% Avize.

### Philippe Glavier 'La Grace d'Alphael' Brut, N.V.

( + )

3/1500ml | FR-KGL-01-NVM

From 82% 2014, the wine is still unfurling but promises to be a brisk and mineral driven NV with considerable length. Needs maybe two years, then watch out. Deg 10/2017.

### Philippe Glavier 'La Grace d'Hakamiah' Extra Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | FR-KGL-03-NV

Named for Veronique's guardian angel, this 2014-based wine is a marvelous complex Blanc de Blancs; intricate mélange of citrus, herbs and mineral with herbs leading into the finish.

It's 10/2018 deg and contains 10% Cramant, 40% Mesnil, 40% Oger and 10% Avize.

### Philippe Glavier 'Genesis' Extra Brut, N.V.

( + )

12/750ml | FR-KGL-02-NV

Deg 7/2018, and based on 82% 2014, this is a driven, determined Champagne, less muscular than the '12 or '13 but more sinewy and assertive. If you nurse the glass it emerges with a shy, strong core. I requested a teeny bit more dosage—still Extra Brut—which the wine has received with a 3/2019 disgorgement. 14% Cramant, 37% Mesnil, 21.5% Oger and 27.5% Avize.

### Philippe Glavier 'Emotion' Brut, 2012

+

6/750ml | FR-KGL-10-12

Deg 1/2018, 40% Mesnil, 40% Oger, and 10% each Avize and Cramant, the wine is "greedy and full" in Véronique's words, and even freshly disgorged it's generous and enveloping, a puff-pastry kind of Champagne, seductive and focused and on its way up. A year later it's emerged as a fine, strong Champagne, showing the craggy face of '12. The class of Mesnil shows here along with its unyielding chalk and length. Deg 9/2018.

### Philippe Glavier 'Mesnil Emotion' Brut, 2012

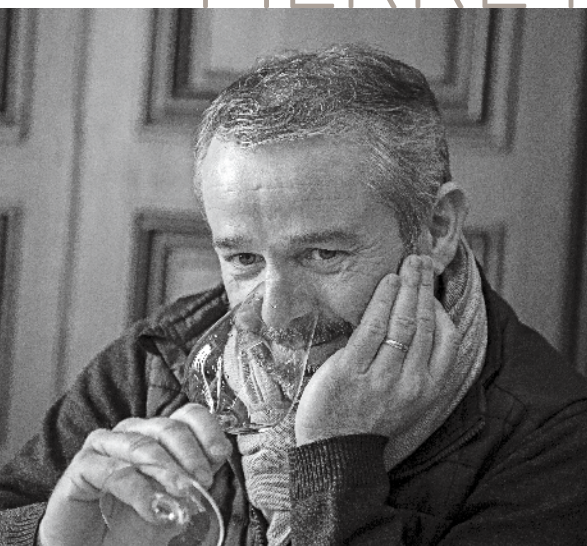
+ +

6/750ml | FR-KGL-11-12

100% Mesnil, of course. Deg 10/17, and not surprisingly it is beautiful. If you're looking for a cognate it's more like Robt. Moncuit than Peters; euphoric fruit and physio-sweetness; mineral swathed in cool waves of jasmine blossom. A year later it remains superb, capacious, authoritative and deeply mineral. New deg 10/2018.



# PIERRE PÉTERS



## SUB REGION

Côte des Blancs

## VINEYARD AREA

20 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

14,000 cases

## VILLAGES

Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru  
Oger Grand Cru  
Cramant Grand Cru  
Avize Grand Cru  
Vertus 1er Cru  
Villeneuve 1er Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Chardonnay

They're building a new, um, situation, which was basically a muddy construction site when we were there, but which will confer all kinds of benefits on the wines (and the admin) when it's done. Luckily the toilet was complete, but not for the reason you might suppose. I had to go behind a closed door at one point so that no one would see me weeping. It was that kind of collection this year, ending on a high note—or rather, a deep note—that set the ol' ducts a streamin.'

This was one of those years when it comes together perfectly for a grower. No more...let's call them "controversial" vintages to be wrangled over. All systems go for this outstanding producer to show just how noble his Champagnes can be. And noble in a most singular manner. These have to be the winiest Champagnes in the whole Côte des Blancs, with only Selosse

at all similar. That's not an evaluation, just an impression, but there are many times when I'm drinking Péters when I think "This is—X—with bubbles." Péters has become Champagne royalty, and happily for us, Rodolphe Péters is a benevolent ruler.

It's a style with an improbably high common denominator of power, terroir, precision and a certain starched magnificence that stops just short of being brittle. The opposite of soft or fluffy or even seductive—these are *impressive*.

Vineyards predominantly in Mesnil, with land also in Oger, Avize and Cramant. Rodolphe knows the parcels intimately and has a *priori* ideas of which wines they will be used for. The wines have been allocated for many years; indeed this estate has the *mien* of a coveted Burgundy domaine. So welcome to aristocracy, artisanality and personality.





### Pierre Péters 'Cuvée de Réserve' Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | FR-KPP-01-NV

I rather wish this wine had a more original name, since among the NVs of the Côte des Blancs it is quite a particular wine.

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

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

The newest edition is based on 2016, deg. 12/2018, it starts out quite shaky from disgorgement but after a few minutes it almost tangibly relaxes and stretches out its limbs. A silken white-flower element emerges exquisitely; a jasmine and jasmine rice nuance in a delicate but generous minerality, like a cooler, sleeker version of the 2013-base. It's both classic Péters yet also a flutey version of classic Péters.

The 2015-base is still on the market and might be for a few months longer. Deg 8/2018, it would be superbly rich and beautiful without that little sideswipe of '15 grassiness. Persons who don't taste pyrazine (and there are some) are the lucky ones, because you're getting a gobfull of vinosity and muscle here.

### Pierre Péters 'L'Esprit' Millésime Brut, 2014

+ ( + )

12/750ml | FR-KPP-30-14

The 2014, disgorged 12/2018, is more overt and bold, and here we are part-way to a Chetillon-like solidity; it's spicy and adamant with an orange-peel nuance and really blatant chalk. I admire it greatly, but it tends (at least now) to shout its flavors, but in fairness *any* wine would shrink from proximity to that sublime '13.

### Pierre Péters Rosé 'For Albane' Brut, NV

12/750ml | FR-KPP-20-NV

This will be wonderful. Rhubarby Meunier fruit with a Côte des Blancs backdrop of chalk; it's sleek and vibrating and rides the razor's edge between crispness and overt fruit.





### **Pierre Péters *Les Chetillons Brut*, 2012**

+ + (+)

6/750ml | FR-KPP-40-12

3/1500ml | FR-KPP-40-12M

### **Pierre Péters *Le Mont Joly Brut*, 2012**

+ + (+)

6/750ml | FR-KPP-98-12

What we have here is an *enthralling* contrast between two lieux-dits, both on the plain, separated by barely a kilometer. And just when Péters was facing “competition” for his Chetillons, along he comes with a new wine that carries him far, far away from the pack.

Both were disgorged 11/2018. This is the best *Chetillons* in quite some time; really profound, drenched with Grand-Cru-ness; it's rich but not muscular, massive but not heavy. Dazzling! In contrast the *Mont Joly* is more skittish, cooler, with the most exquisite slim minerality; perfume and melody here, like the more “feminine” among the Chablis Grand Crus (Vaudesir versus Clos, perhaps); it's an exaltation of complete Champagne, with plum blossom and penetrating chalkiness. A wistful, sideways glance of desire, or the perfection of a cool Spring morning. *Chetillon* is warmer yet improbably buoyant.

What a duo!

### **Pierre Péters ‘Réserve Oubliée’ Brut, N.V.**

+ +

6/750ml | FR-KPP-09-NV

The wine answers a challenge presented to Péters by a British wine writer, to loosen the wines up by permitting casks to be used. What he did instead was to age the wine an extra year in tank before tirage, to create a “mature but not oxidative” Champagne. It's aged agrafé on the lees, also for longer than the regular NV.

The wine can be wonderful. They make their own dosage from must-concentrate they do themselves (does anyone else in Champagne do this???) and age it in a 60-liter barrel of old wood from Cognac, so the Champagne has a sly bit of bois after all. After a short hiatus to let the 2011-base to slip into the mists, we're back and with a vengeance.

We're now in a 2013-base, and the wine is—unsurprisingly—superb especially with 3-4 minutes in the glass; an old-school leesy and penetrating Champagne, basmati and salts, yielding but not surrendering. This is a thoroughly perfect realization of Rodolphe's vision for this wine.

# MARC HÉBRART



## REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Mareuil-sur-Aÿ

## VINEYARD AREA

15.5 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,750 cases

## VILLAGES

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

## GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Pinot Noir  
30% Chardonnay

I tasted the most gorgeous and sensational group of young Champagnes I have ever tasted, this year at Marc Hébrart. Each year has built upon the one before, and on this mercurial March day—another of those rainbow-days we had this year—where there was often bright sun out of one window and black clouds out the other, I came to consider many things. Formed as questions, they asked: Does grower Champagne get any better than these? Does Champagne *period* get any better than these? Is it true (as someone said) that Hébrart is the “most underrated” producer in my portfolio? If it's true, then why? Are the wines not weird enough??

Jean-Paul Hébrart is ill-at-ease at this sort of full-frontal praise. “I just keep pushing, trying to get better,” he says, and I've learned to be “cool” face to face. Nor do I need to contrive enthusiasm for the wines, as we're already maxed out—he's just 15 hectares, a little over 10,000 cases in a generous year. No, this time it's about principle. And it's simple: this is what first-class Champagne should taste like. And in this case, does!

I don't like to use exclusive superlatives (even when I feel they're warranted), so I'll use an old coinage I didn't invent but which is helpful now: Marc Hébrart may not be the “best” grower in Champagne, but no one is better. And, incidentally but significantly, if you seek the antidote to the world of weird-ass Champagnes is-

suining from (too) many of the millennial growers, come here, the door's unlocked and the table's set, and see how supernally great and absurdly beautiful Champagne can be.

This was brought home in dramatic fashion a few weeks ago while tasting his *Vins clairs*, which were the our 5th or 6th group of young pre-tirage Champagnes I saw, as we made this, our 10th visit overall. Sitting in Jean-Paul's mint-condition tasting room with its expanse of natural light and its lyrical view to the Marne canal—all part of a new facility one member of my “entourage” already dubbed “Chateau Hébrart” for its neoclassical exterior—I got the second of the wines in my glass and was so amazed, literally amazed, I said out loud “I mean, shit; even his *Vins clairs* are in a class by themselves.” Nods of assent and smiles around the room.

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



### Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KMH-03-NV

The very best “NV Blanc de Blancs” in this portfolio, challenged only by the best editions of Péters.

It's 60% 2015 (and is entirely *without* grassiness), 25% '14 and 15% '13—it's 12% from Oiry/Chouilly (Grand Cru) with the balance from Mareuil (*ought* to be Grand Cru!), deg. 9/2018.

### Marc Hébrart 'Cuvée de Réserve' Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KMH-01-NV

I cannot fathom how there could be a “better” NV Brut than this, anywhere in Champagne.

The assemblage is complex. 80% Pinot Noir (from Mareuil, Avenay Val D'Or, Mutigny and Hautvillers), and 20% Chard (Bisseuil and Mutigny). It's 50% 2016, 20% '15, 20% '14 and 10% '13. Deg. 9/2018.

Other than its miraculous quality, clarity and breed, it's also 80% *Pinot Noir*, and as such it's a flavor-gesture of PN such as I have never tasted elsewhere. Is anything clearer, or more deft? Is there an NV Champagne that more brilliantly squares the circle between fruit, precision and character? Are these things more important than—god help me—“buzz” factor? Is the whole idea of “buzz factor” repulsive to any mature mind? If ya'll ain't buzzin' over this sterling beauty, then your buzz is on the fritz.

### Marc Hébrart 'Sélection' Vieille Vignes Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KMH-02-NV

The vines range from 40 to 55. Very often this Champagne is something of a guilty secret, because it's a ludicrous **VALUE** and if everyone knew about it you'd be dissuaded from trading up to *Club*. Maybe.

I don't really see this as a “superior NV Brut” so much as the entrée into the Têtes-de-Cuvées, analogous to Vilmart's *Grand Cellier*. Why buy this, though, when the NV is so good? First, it is two years older. The vines are older. There's more Chardonnay in it. It's all Mareuil, so mono-communal, more *terroiré*. The aromas are also white; white flowers, white tea, chalk, jasmine rice, lemon blossom, and the wine is creamier, more rapturous and euphoric. Many growers' top wines don't come near to this. Pleasure-for-Dollar, this is as good as it gets. And this year it flirts with sublimity.

This year's masterpiece is 50/50 2015/2014. It's 70% PN (markedly higher than usual) from Mareuil and Avenay, and 30% Chard from Bisseuil. Deg 10/2018. Even with more PN it still has the lemony lift and length we know; it's less different from the NV than it is a refinement of that wine, a different emphasis; springier, more lithe, more *pâtisserie*, with an almost buttery finish.

### Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V.

+ (+)

12/750ml | FR-KMH-20-NV

This edition is more fruit-forward than usual, after a relatively restrained aroma, and yet the nature of that fruit is for the up-front PN to almost tangibly dissolve and leave the most delicate wash of Chard, white, tea, and balsam and blossom—like the parting of a curtain.

It's 58% Chard in fact, from Mareuil, all 2016. Then 35% PN, also Mareuil, all 2015. Finally 7% still red, from Mareuil, 2015, vinified in barrel. Deg 7/2018.

### Marc Hébrart 'Mes Favorites' 1er Cru, Brut, N.V.

+ + +

12/750ml | FR-KMH-31-NV

The facts first—It is 75% PN from Mareuil, 25% Chard also from Mareuil. Old vines, massale selection. Deg 4/2018. 60% 2014, 20% 2013, 20% 2012.

It's from his favorite parcels in Mareuil—and is intended as a tribute to its *terroir*.

It has a truly noble PN fragrance, leading to an utter masterpiece of weightless concentration, as huge and yet as penetrable as a cumulous cloud. Mareuil is clearly great but it's also somewhat inscrutable; it has some of the malt of Aÿ, some mirabelle confiture, an almost gingery spice and top notes of chalk. This wine has great, gossamer opulence.



### Marc Hébrart Spécial Club, Brut 2014

+ + +

6/750ml | FR-KMH-40-14

It's as though you married the gauzy mysteries of '13 with the solid fruit of '12. Herbal, jade-oolong, shade on a warm day; pixilated, dissolving down to a pure mineral fundament of almost incomprehensible intricacy—every blade of grass, every pebble of chalk is blazing. ALL the beauty of young Champagne is on rich display here.

Data: 40% old-vines PN from Mareuil (from the climats *Faubourg d'Enfer*, *Croix Blanche*, *Pruche*, *Haut de varille*). Then 20% PN from Aÿ (climats *Cheuzelles*, *Pierre Robert*, *Le Leon*, *Pruche*). Then 30% Chard old vines from Mareuil (climats *Beauregard*, *Ramonette*, *Buisson*, *Saint Loup*, *Clef*) and finally 10% Chard from Oiry and Chouilly. It's also a COEUR DE CUVÉE, massal selection, and deg. 9/2018.

You can read about these sites and locate them on a map; all you have to do is **buy Peter Liem's wonderful Champagne book**.

### Marc Hébrart 'Noces de Craie' Grand Cru, 2015

+ + +

6/750ml | FR-KMH-80-15

To be sold later in 2019, this preview bottle was extraordinary, following on the heels of the masterly 2012.

It's 100% Aÿ PN, from *Cheuzelles*, *Longchamp*, *Pierre Robert*, *Pruche* and *Chauffour*. Another *Coeur de Cuvée*, massale selection, deg 9/2018.

Our "marriage of chalk" is surprisingly lapidary and ready. More seductive than the "Favorites" and also fruitier. It has a huge adamant length you did not expect—all the power is in the back, it only *seems* to yield. Like a sweet-natured person who always seems to prevail, or a sideways strength you don't feel being used. A wonderful, surprising work of genius.

### Marc Hébrart 'Rive-Gauche / Rive-Droit' Grand Cru Brut 2012

+

6/750ml | FR-KMH-30-12

We have 50% Aÿ PN (from *Pruche*, *Cheuzelles*, *Longchamp* and *Chauffour*) and 50% Oiry-Chouilly-Avize CH (*Justice*, *Montaigu*, *Les Robarts*) It's a strong and woody being and as always it's hugely impressive of its genre. But how do you follow the *Club*? This wine has JP's Blu-ray focus and brilliance, but I don't worship this wood-deity. Interestingly with lower dosage (4 vs. 6) it became less woody, more complex and more articulate. Curious; it seemed as if dosage had bound itself to wood somehow. The drier wine allowed a warm earthiness to emerge more purely.



# GASTON CHIQUET



## SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne

## VINEYARD AREA

23 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

18,300 cases

## VILLAGES

Aÿ Grand Cru  
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru  
Hautvillers 1er Cru  
Dizy 1er Cru  
Crugny, Nanteuil-la-Forêt

## GRAPE VARIETIES

45% Chardonnay  
35% Pinot Meunier  
20% Pinot Noir

Put it this way—there's nothing I like *better* than old Champagne, and this visit was became a study in old Champagne. Except that “study” makes it seem academic, whereas it was actually a mutual celebration of a species of wonder that, to our mutual delight, we all shared. I'll tell you the highlights in a little bit.

Chiquet's Champagne tastes 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 without fussing about it. They split the difference between the adamantly mineral Champagnes and the overtly fruity ones. They are classical, not romantic—or not often. They are thoughtful but not aloof, like Nicolas Chiquet himself.

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 excellent 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*.

I do want to share some thoughts on the old wines we drank, to the extent they are useful or revealing, or just help us to be reminded of wonder and beauty, not to mention friendship and communality. There’s a risk of wine-upmanship—“Look what I drank that you never can!” But the greater good is to keep reminding us that old Champagne is one of wine’s greatest gifts. On this late afternoon Nicolas began with a young-old wine, the **1999 Club**,

which was in the prime of its life. We then drank the **89 Club**, which was a beautiful old cackling witch of a wine, followed by a great **79 Club**, as lithe a wine as I’ve ever had from this marvelous vintage. Then came the masterpiece.

It was a **1969 Blanc d’Aÿ**, from an unsung hero vintage and a great favorite of mine. The color was strikingly pale, I cannot account for it. Pure sweet mystery here, tenderer than the ’79, and on the palate it is all the kindness of the forest floor and the things below the ground. I mean, how many times have I seen this happen? The little cool beaker of hazelnut oil at the end of the world, the quiet beasts in the golden evening field, the day-breezes now still, the old couple strolling, too happy to even talk...yet among the threads and seams of this blessing a pulse emerges, strong, almost virile, a fresh green chuckle that builds

and builds and then won’t end; it doesn’t vanish and haunt you, it stays and guides your face to the blessing. All you can do is hold your breath and be still and look. Even to thank would be an intrusion.

To put a little coda on the evening we drank another half-bottle of **1949**, “another” because we drank one last year and nobody could believe it. But a second bottle confirmed, this amazing wine has no reason to still be delicious, and yet it is. It isn’t merely alive or “viable;” it’s still *crooning*, heroically, and improbably.

I wonder whether any wines from the current crop of young hipster growers will age even ten years, let alone seventy. Of course it’s our job in our youth to refresh and reinvent, and then, one hopes, we grow up enough to realize the thing didn’t *need* reinvention because it was already perfect. What it needs, at last, is quite simple: respect.

## Gaston Chiquet ‘Tradition’ Brut, N.V.



12/750ml | FR-KCQ-01-NV

In essence this wine combines the pumpernickel-sweetness of Meunier with a walnutty 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 is based on 2013 now, deg. 7/2018. Nicolas’ NV is generally older than most, and longer on the cork before it’s shipped, and that’s because he understands and *cares* that the wine isn’t too raw. There’s 7% reserve wine from 2009, and the assemblage is typical—40% Meunier, 35% CH and 25% PN. It’s a delicious, classy and flawless edition of this wine; the fine vintage ’13 shows. The lacy needlepoint detail of ’13 really sings with the charming dark-bread of the Meunier.

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



12/750ml | FR-KCQ-02-NV

It’s like the poster-child for farmer fizz, the first-ever white Aÿ. Nearly always from a single vintage—2013 in this instance—it is not a “vintage” wine. Deg 5/17, it’s one of the best editions of this wine, complex, animated almost to the point of brashness; mealy, jasmine and ginger, still a little angular but has a great future in store—in the 1-3 year range (not to mention the 35-40 year range), which you will infer from the compellingly long and savory finish.

The latest disgorgement is 1/2019, but I preferred the one before, 6/2018. That’s because the dosage was lowered for the new one. It’s all 2014, and it shows dramatically how more RS can taste less sweet, while also adding length to the palate and complexity to the finish. That said, I’m not certain the January version will stay awkward—disgorgement can warp a Champagne.

## Gaston Chiquet Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KCQ-20-NV

A curiously adamant version of what’s usually a sheer and gauzy sort of wine. It’s based on 2015, maybe that’s why. There’s 4% 2013 and 8% still red wine from 2011. Deg 11/2018. The aroma is super pretty but the palate struck me as clunky—at least today. Others may disagree, and they’ll use words like “assertive” or “with an herbal edge.” It does knit with air, but the wine is more voluminous than it’s been in the past.





### Gaston Chiquet Cuvée Réserve Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | FR-KCQ-03-NV

This started as a desire to emulate the kind of NV that was made in Grandfather's time, with more oxidation, longer tirage, and a third of each variety. The wine has often been excellent, but it has struggled a little to find its natural "home" in the lineup.

What it seems to have become is an *elevated* version of the "Tradition," basically older and more "yellow" flavors, such as brioche and saffron.

This one's a 2012 base, deg. 6/2018, and it does indeed show more tertiary elements (and I forget to mention Parmesan as one of them) along with butter and mirabelles. The slightly higher dosage gives it more *gourmandise*, prompting words like *gras* and "joy." There's a shimmering complexity here and an articulate generosity.

### Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2008

++

12/750ml | FR-KCQ-31-08

60-40 PN/CH, deg 7/2017, and *what* a Pinot fragrance! (And what a blessing to have 2008 available when it's long since gone at so many other growers.) It's like a whole basket of fresh-gathered wild Maine blueberries; silky texture, dried herbs and fruits and salt; white flowers, powdered ginger; endlessly cool yet entirely forthcoming. **ABSURD VALUE!** Somehow this is both classic and yet irreducibly a grower's wine.

### Gaston Chiquet Spécial Club Brut, 2011

6/750ml | FR-KCQ-40-11

It's a bit like when we "finessed" the 2005. You have to fess up that it's not a typical Club but you also have to allow that it's a good '11, and seems to be getting better. You can recognize the wine through the shroud, and it shows class and quality. But 2011 is ineradicable by its very nature, so be aware.

Basically, Nicolas' Club is his most minerally/chalky wine. Anti-varietal in the best sense. It reminds me of a mini *Clos de Goisses*, actually; this is stark in the yowling extravagant 2009, a wine that's like an entire hooting audience at a rock concert. If you have any of the gorgeous **2008** left, it's time to start considering who'll be "worthy" to drink it, because believe me, you want this beauty for yourself.



# GEOFFROY



## SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne

## VINEYARD AREA

14 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

10,400 cases

## VILLAGES

Cumières 1er Cru  
Hautvillers 1er Cru  
Damery 1er Cru  
Fleury-la-Rivière 1er Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

41% Pinot Noir  
37.5% Pinot Meunier  
21.5% Chardonnay

## AMPELOS CERTIFICATION

lutte raisonnée

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.

I had a moment of time-passing, considering that JB and Karine's daughter Sasha is now *staging* at Schloss Gobelsburg, and I first met Sasha as a (very) small child. I am subscribing to the notion, from now on, that everyone is aging except me. Well OK, my knees are aging, but not the rest of me. Except my hairline. I give up.



### Geoffroy 'Expression' Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KRG-01-NV

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

We're still shipping the cuvée I previewed last year, deg. 9/2018, and 53% '14 to 47% '13. It's 35% Meunier, 36% PN and 29% CH. It bears mentioning that these proportions change all the time, as JB does nothing by rote or formula. This is a fine edition of the wine, rather more measured and perhaps less extroverted than usual, though if you taste it (as I did, reluctantly) from a Zalto "Universal" it becomes curiously lush.

### Geoffroy Les Tiersaudes Brut Nature, 2013

( + )

6/750ml | FR-KRG-41-13

Another single-vineyard wine, this is entirely Meunier, grown on clay (not chalk), a 1-time-only bottling of just 1300 bottles. It's a lovely, almost delicate Meunier; caraway and rye-toast, not austere but pure and ascetic; detailed finish and high-register aromas of seemingly every sweet grain. As refined as Meunier can be. With a new deg. 4/2018 it remains a curiously expressive Meunier, though for whatever reason I found it more austere this time.

### Geoffroy Les Houtrants Brut, N.V.

+

6/750ml | FR-KRG-42-NV

This is a field-blend—Champagne *Gemischter Satz!*—of every grape permitted in Champagne. I know of no other. Deg end of 2017. Exceedingly complex and original, recalling Ziereisen's old-vines Chasselas; though it's stiff from disgorgement it's really nutty and bready; 2011 is a weirdly pleasing nuance here (and Arbanne is green-beany in any case), it's also markedly long, with a finish of dark bread and green herbs. All steel. The mind wants to identify the flavors of each variety but the wine refuses to allow you. It is holistic, a mélange. Very small production of an entirely original wine.

The new bottling is *tirage 2013*, which means it combines every vintage from 2008-2012. I tasted a volée disgorgement. The wine's a *sponti!* It's also tasty in the best sense, and markedly mineral. This is the best version to date, long, both explicit and inferential. Saltier from a tulip-shape but—credit where it's due—more articulate and balanced in the "universal." This wine has found its voice. It will ship later in 2019 and is worth the wait.

### Geoffroy 'Cuvée Empreinte' Brut, 2012

+

12/750ml | FR-KRG-30-12

### Geoffroy 'Cuvée Empreinte' Brut, 2013

12/750ml | FR-KRG-30-13

The final deg of the '12 was on 3/18/2018, and it's a big riot of Champagne generosity and smoky sweetness, with the maple flavor of candy-cap mushrooms. It screams out its identity: *Cumières!*

The '13 was also disgorged in front of us; it will be sold in July. It's 70-30 PN/CH and will be the *last* vintage to have any Chard. Through the periscope, this promises to be good, diligent and studious, not as lavish as 2012 or 2008, but '13 is an introverted vintage in general—not aloof, just not noisy.

### Geoffroy 'Cuvée Volupté' Brut, 2011

12/750ml | FR-KRG-31-11

It's rather good, as '11s go. Only its raspy texture shows the challenges of this benighted year. It isn't vegetal, it has fruit and terroir and concentration, and things to like, not just to tolerate. (There is a 2010 which JB is wisely holding back.)



### Geoffroy Terres Millésime Extra Brut, 2006

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KRG-40-06

### Geoffroy Terres Millésime Extra Brut, 2008

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KRG-40-08

2006 is the current vintage, and it is classic '06, robust, a little countrified, a refined bumpkin; yet one loves the blazing honesty and verve and the hearty generosity of this chocolate-y wine.

The 2008 may not be released until next year—it is “under review”—but a bottle disgorged for us is a riot of aroma, Meunier at its butter-cookie-est, and even without dosage it's hedonic and extravagant; apricot slices sautéed in brown butter; it tastes like Puligny in fact, all the way to the acacia-blossom fragrance and the finely managed wood. Like parsnips at their sweetest.

### Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | FR-KRG-20-NV

The 2015 edition of this wine is spectacular! Effusive but not overbearing. The '14 we're shipping now is slimmer and more citric, somewhat atypical for this wine, but who can par-TAY every night?

### Geoffroy 'Blanc de Rose' Brut, N.V.

+

6/750ml | FR-KRG-21-NV

This Coho-colored, singular Champagne broadens the possibility for Rosé. Rose hips and sautéed rhubarb, Tonka bean and *Biscuit de Reims*. The price may or may not be “justified” but it is clear: there are many Champagnes worse than this and costing more, explicitly including some of the hipster effluvia masquerading as “Champagne.”



# MOUSSÉ FILS



## SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne

## VINEYARD AREA

5.5 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,100 cases

## VILLAGES

Cuisles, Jonquery  
Olizy-Violaine  
Châtillon-sur-Marne  
Vandières

## GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Pinot Meunier  
16% Pinot Noir

We did a dosage trial and of course it wasn't unanimous, though my own preference was the majority's. Alas it wasn't Cédric's preference—he wanted it drier. Man of his *era*, clearly, and it goes without saying he has *his* wine *his* way, but it was worth having one of those *What do we want Champagne to be?* conversations. We can do it because we like and trust each other, and the vibe is warmer each year.

The Germans have one of their extremely useful words for which no perfect cognate exists in English. The word is *Aufsteiger*, literally “one who climbs,” and in this context it would refer to a vintner who's showing a most dramatic increase in quality. I liked Moussé's wines from the beginning, and Cédric was precisely the kind of young man who was going places, and even as the wines have steadily improved from year to year, this was the year they jumped up to an entirely new level.

The estate produces a piece of promo literature called “Gazette Champenoise by Cédric” which is actually interesting and useful and not the usual fluff. It is symptomatic of a man who doesn't seem to be able to do an *uninteresting* thing. After establishing that he preferred to use non-branded corks—the smell of the branding was disturbing to him when he visited the facility—he's now experimenting with two different types of crown-caps (for *tirage*) and also with degrees of pressure, i.e., mousse, varying between 4.8 to 6.0. The gazette is probably available online as well, and I recommend it especially if you already like the wines.

Two quotes, though, stand out. The first is from Cédric's father Jean-Marc,

who died abruptly in 2013. This man was a great lover of the Meunier. The prevailing view had always been that Meunier was the “lesser” grape in Champagne, but Jean-Marc had a different point of view. “I understand that it suits the big houses to say that because it allows them to buy lots of grapes at low prices, but it's not true. You can make superb wines from Meunier. It has aromas that you just don't find in other varieties. Yes, Pinot Noir is more complete and powerful, but it doesn't have the fruitiness of Meunier. We absolutely love Meunier here.”

In this context *here* is Cuisles, and also a vein of soil that runs between Jonquery and Châtillon-sur-Marne, the so-called Illite, a green clay that's quite rare in the Marne. Local brokers have been known to refer to Cuisles as the “Grand Cru of Meunier,” about which Cédric is gently teased, but which contains a germ of truth.

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 Lorient 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.

In his own words Cédric looks for “minerality, tension and elegance” in his Champagnes.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

I list the wines as we tasted them, from driest to least dry.

### **Moussé Fils ‘Les Vignes de mon Village’ Brut, N.V.**

12/750ml | FR-KMS-13-NV

This is a tribute to Cédric's father, 100% Meunier and all from Cuisles. It was also a rare wine that wasn't flattered by the “Jancis glass”—as I call it, and with which I plan to set about ridding the world of the repulsive Zalto universal—in any case my favored glass was unkind to this stern, salty Meunier. It's zero-dosage, 20% 2014, 60% 2015 and 20% 2016. I can suggest it to specialists in absolute dryness, for whom it offers a sinewy sort of fascination.

### **Moussé Fils ‘Special Club’ Les Fortes Terres Brut, 2014**

6/750ml | FR-KMS-40-14

This '14 is a fine citizen of what's becoming a noble range of vintages in this, the first-ever 100% Meunier Club. It expresses a gleam that reminded me of Vilmar, that weightless concentration, like an ambience or atmosphere of fruit yet precise and detailed. I can't fathom how Meunier gets better than this.

### **Moussé Fils ‘Terres d'Ilite’ Brut, 2013**

12/750ml | FR-KMS-30-13

95% Meunier and 5% PN, deg 7/2018. A little reduced at first but the palate is finely detailed, salty and even mineral and with a superbly charming finish. It has more weight than the Club, more chewiness and tangible solidity; it's a sort of dissertation of the interaction of soil and variety, along with 13's silken elegance and dispersal of nuance.

### **Moussé Fils ‘L'Or d-Eugene’ Brut, N.V.**

12/750ml | FR-KMS-01-NV

80-20 Meunier/PN, 55% 2016 and the rest a perpetual reserve of every year from 2003-2015, deg 7/2018; it's a yummy bright Blanc de Noirs with his typically firm structure and anchored fruit. A new disgorgement (1/19) has a little less dosage; it will arrive late summer and is better delineated, less effusive but more detailed.





**Moussé Fils Rosé 'Effusion' Brut, N.V.**

12/750ml | FR-KMS-20-NV

92% Meunier and 8% PN, deg 12/2018, based on 2016 with perpetual reserves (both the Champagne and the still wine); it's quite assertive and masculine, impressive but it costs a little sacrifice of deliciousness. The finishing length is impressive. It may just need more time on the cork.

**Moussé Fils Spécial Club Rosé de Saignée Les Bouts de la Ville Extra Brut, 2015**

12/750ml | FR-KMS-41-15

Very freshly disgorged and concussed, so I'll spare you my notes.



# HENRI BILLIOT



## SUB REGION

**Montagne de Reims**

## VINEYARD AREA

**5 hectares**

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

**3,750 cases**

## VILLAGES

**Ambonnay Grand Cru**

## GRAPE VARIETIES

**75% Pinot Noir**

**25% Chardonnay**

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

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

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

But I admire this smart, resolute woman, and her Champagnes keep getting better, returning to the style we loved in the first place. These things take time in Champagne, not to mention when you do everything essentially alone. You'll find them robust and energetic, rather like the lady herself.



### Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KBI-01-NV

This calling-card wine is 50% 2015 (and without grassiness) and 25% each '14-'13, deg 10/2018, mostly PN, and it's 98% of the Billiot some of us remember; lively, animated, fruit-driven and spicy. Essentially this is Laetitia's first wine—that is, the first wine she controlled entirely from harvest to vinification to tirage to disgorgement. It is highly encouraging!

### Henri Billiot Millésime Brut, 2013

12/750ml | FR-KBI-30-13

I made a rookie mistake and ate midday. Even bland food changes my palate and I've learned to have nothing but bread. It may have clouded my look at this wine, as it didn't show the typical virtues of '13. 70-30 PN-CH, deg end of 12/2018, the onion-skin color was curious and the texture was on the rustic side. Maybe too little dosage for a non-malo wine? Or maybe too freshly disgorged?

### Henri Billiot 'Cuvée Laetitia' Brut, NV.

12/750ml | FR-KBI-41-NV

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."

It includes 2014 now. This wine is slowly making its way back; it's a slimmer and lighter rendition these days, and there's a grainy straw-like element. Deg 10/2018, it has some of the plum-blossom element of German Rieslings in 2018.

### Henri Billiot 'Essence Billiot' Extra Brut 2014

6/750ml | FR-KBI-31-14

Hailing from the climat *le Clos*, it's 100% PN, no fining nor filtration, aged three months in new barriques, and I'm surprised how much I like it. The wood is integrated, the wine is strong, the dosage is low but accurate and to me this is the first time this wine has really rocked.

### Henri Billiot Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KBI-20-NV

Last year's wine will soon be supplanted by a 16-15-14 assemblage that was disgorged 2/2019; while it's concussed from disgorgement it seems more graceful and balanced than last year's. 2016 seems inherently classy.

### Henri Billiot 'Cuvée Julie' (2010)

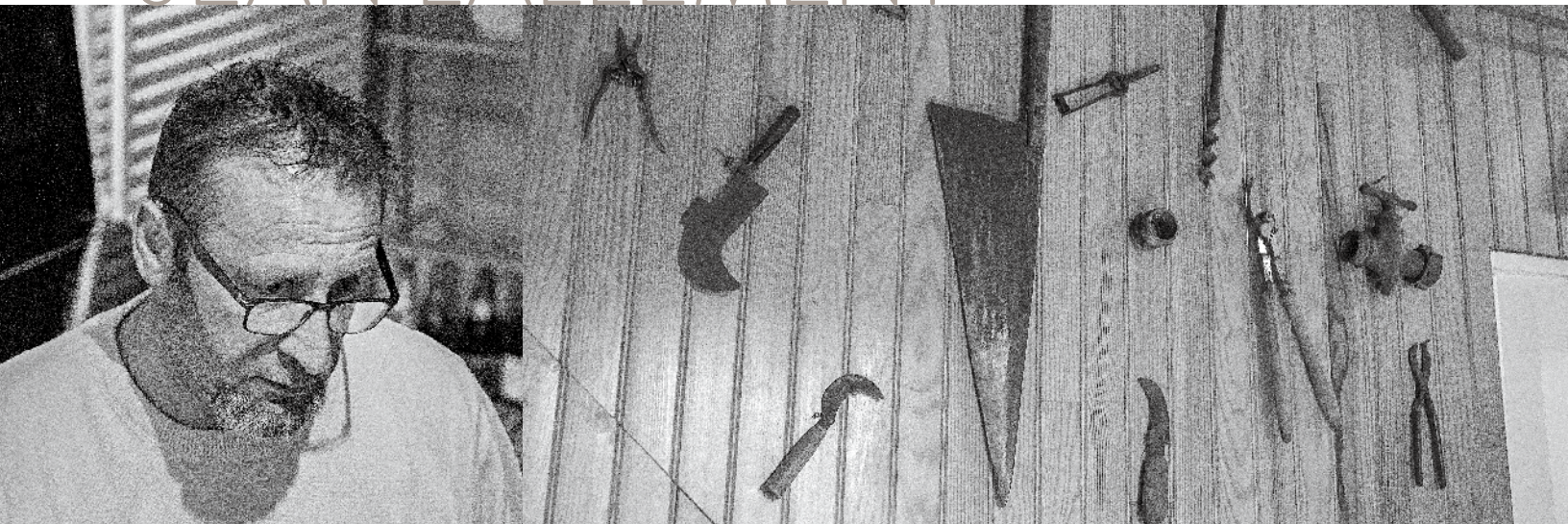
+ + (+)

12/750ml | FR-KBI-40-NV

Serge opted to create a second tête-de-cuvée, this one with a prominent taste of cask. Too prominent, I often felt, and Laetitia agrees with me. This edition of Julie is fresh, and the oak is showing, but in contrast to *Laetitia* this really has the scope and intensity of a true "luxury" cuvée. If you accept the sort of antique, countrified touch of cask you'll get a huge mouthful of wine here.

The new disgorgement is 7/2018 and I tasted from a bottle opened 24 hours, to see how the oak would behave. It's kind of like the second-wine of the "Essence Billiot," lighter, sweeter (but not sweet) and if you like wood, it isn't blatant here and the wine offers a kind of luxuriousness.

# JEAN LALLEMENT



## SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims

## VINEYARD AREA

4.5 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

1,700 cases

## VILLAGES

Verzenay Grand Cru  
Verzy Grand Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Pinot Noir  
20% Chardonnay

These are my favorite of all the Champagne in this portfolio. That is of course ludicrous and seriously unfair to the likes of Vilmart and Hébrart, but this isn't a "sober professional appraisal," it's subjective and it's based on the wolf-joy I feel when I'm slugging down a fabulous bottle. Which, again, we may now do with abandon, and I can't wait.

I'm not going to fuss any more about the two difficult years, 2010-2011, because they're behind us now. And yet some of you formed your impression of this estate from those wines, and while the error was understandable, it was an error. The current assortment is not only back in form, it's *as good or better than Lallement has ever been*.

It is a simple selection because the domain is small. The vineyards are in Verzenay (primarily) and Verzy—so all Grand Cru. It's mostly PN, as these terroirs would suggest. The wines are quite dry but never taste austere. They are saturated with the very particular flavors of Verzenay. In the last month I happened to taste a Champagne whose label I hadn't yet looked at, and I said to my companion, "This is Verzenay but I don't know whose." (It was the 2004 vintage from Bereche, 100% Verzenay. The terroir is really particular.)

Can anyone describe it? Not anyone

I've ever read. But let me hack away at it, fool that I am.

It's a strong flavor but not a "powerful" one. It is intense. The PN is sometimes a little rude, a little animal. Richard Juhlin uses words like "virile, pepper, iron." If it were Burgundy it might be Nuits-St-Georges. Anyway, let's start with virile pepper iron. Then we have the Verzenay Chardonnay, which brings a seriously effed up bunch of flavors. I often write *mead, violets, sorrel, resin, funky-apple*. So if even a few of these cognates are valid, we have one gorgeously weird critter to contend with.

And when its wine is as amazingly crystalline and transparent as Jean-Luc's, it is like nothing you have ever tasted or could even imagine tasting. You have in effect all of the polish and silkiness of an *haut-negoc* but all of the quirks of a deranged terroir wolverine. There are other ornery terroir beasts in Champagne, and there are other chiseled and etched Champagnes—but show me *anyone* who offers both. Go on, try!

These are new disgorgements of the wines I offered a year ago, which is all to the good. We're fortunate to have them; Jean-Luc made *no wine* from the 2017 vintage, whose botrytis he found objectionable. The vintage-wine is astonishing.





### Jean Lallement 'Tradition' Brut, N.V.

++

12/750ml | FR-KLT-01-NV

Deg early August 2018, and showing *even* better with time on the cork. Still 80-20 2014-2013 and as always 80-20 PN/CH. This is superb, almost delicate for Lallement, but classically silky, very long, chervil and tatsoi; silvery and cool and with a haunting delicate finale of smoke, quince and herbs, at once both earthy and ethereal. Stand this alongside Hébrart and answer me two questions: One, can NV Champagne be better than these, and two: can you ever return to the anonymous pabulum still issuing from the Big Brands after you know that *this* is possible? The vital differences between these two growers' wines stretch from Alpha to Omega.

### Jean Lallement 'Réserve' Brut, N.V.

++

12/750ml | FR-KLT-02-NV

Deg 8/18, it reverses the vintages now, so it's 80% '13 and 20% '14; it hails from better parcels and older vines, and while it hasn't always been dramatically different from its sibling, it is this time. Mostly in style and personality, but to some extent also in intensity. This isn't ethereal. It's crystalline but has a force, a dancer's muscularity. Less "spicy" than *spices*. It's overtly PN but not fruity; it reminds me of 2010 Burgundies.

### Jean Lallement Millésime Brut, 2012

++

6/750ml | FR-KLT-40-12

This could be the apogee of Lallement to date; it combines the best virtues of the previous two wines and adds a *demi-glace* length and concentration entirely without heaviness; an amber maple sap and the loveliest honey-mushroom vapor swirls around the solid finish.

### Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.V.

++

6/750ml | FR-KLT-20-NV

Yet another new deg of the all-2013 Rosé that only keeps improving. I also learned that he gets his still PN from our friend David Pehu. The wine itself is 100% PN; taste it sometime aside the Gimmonnet and wonder that the two utterly disparate wines are both Champagne.

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

# PEHU-SIMONNET



## SUB REGION

**Montagne de Reims**

## VINEYARD AREA

**9 hectares**

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

**4,000 cases**

## VILLAGES

**Verzenay Grand Cru  
Verzy Grand Cru  
Sillery Grand Cru  
Mailly-Champagne Grand Cru  
Villers-Marmery 1er Cru  
Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru**

## GRAPE VARIETIES

**78% Pinot Noir  
22% Chardonnay**

This was the year I felt David Pehu was tangibly emerging, making the wines he set about to have made, untroubled by difficult vintages, showing the singularity and identity he's been promising for several years.

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

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

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



### **Pehu-Simonnet 'Face Nord' Brut, N.V.**

12/750ml | FR-KPS-01-NV

70% 2015 and 30% the perpetual reserve he started in 2005; 70-30 PN/CH, the wine is informed by the grassy/herbal notes of '15, which seem at odds with the polished lush palate. The overall profile of the wine is golden-ripe, almost honeyed (without sweetness of course), like a soap made from honey, and then the herbs appear. The effect is curiously fascinating, but not entirely coherent.

### **Pehu-Simonnet 'Face Nord' Extra Brut, N.V.**

12/750ml | FR-KPS-02-NV

80-20 PN/CH, malo (noteworthy as David didn't used to like malo but has come to feel it works at least for this cuvée), deg 11/2018; the wine's way cool, a lot of Verzenay *gibier*, a lot of the '14 root-veggie sweetness; a light-footed vinosity with all of Pehu's typical juiciness and gloss. Iris and violets and quince round out the flavors of this loveable rascal.

### **Pehu-Simonnet 'Face Nord' Rosé Brut, N.V.**

+

12/750ml | FR-KPS-20-NV

2016 base now, deg 1/2019, the wine is 6% still red added to the NV blend; the wine gracefully balances weight, juiciness and liteness into a hypnotically pretty mélange. Indeed, this liquid *fraises de bois* rosé is both deft and rich, transparent and full.

### **Pehu-Simonnet 'Face Nord' Millésime Extra Brut, 2008**

++

12/750ml | FR-KPS-40-08

This new deg. of 10/2018 remains a rapture of chalk and cookies. It has found itself and had quite a self to find! Deg 12/2017, this may be David's best wine yet, with a lovely holistic melding of really disparate terroirs, even as both can be discerned individually. It's 50% Verzenay PN in wood and 50% Verzenay and *Mesnil* CH done in steel. Mesnil sings the soprano notes and Verzenay the baritone—but the chord is pure.

### **Pehu-Simonnet 'Fins Lieux #6' Blanc de Blancs Verzenay Les Basses Correttes Extra Brut, 2012**

+

12/750ml | FR-KPS-05-12

This is all Verzenay and all Chardonnay—thus a *rarity* and a new flavor to encounter. It comes from a single-vineyard called *Basses Gorrettes* and is a Champagne unique in my experience. Not really "Chardonnay" in any normative sense but rather an esoteric gesture of Blanc de Blancs in general, tasting like sweated fennel and leeks; it's more an unusual narrator of Verzenay than it's anything we'd recognize as Chard on this planet.

### **Pehu-Simonnet 'Fins Lieux #1' Blanc de Noir Verzenay Les Perthois Extra Brut, 2012**

(+)

12/750ml | FR-KPS-06-12

A single parcel from Verzenay, esteemed by the locals as a superb bit of vineyard. All PN of course, 70% in cask and 30% in steel, deg 2/2018. An earnest, deep PN here; woodsy but it works, and the very low RS also works. I wouldn't have minded less oak but the wine has such a heavy-suede richness it may swallow that flavor in time. The overall gestalt is mouth-filling and celebratory.

*Finally, we saw a preview of the next "parcel" bottling, a Schouettes from Villers-Marmery, all 2012, to be released next year, and it's quite promising, tasting like a light rendering of Margaine Club. I am still resisting the remaining '11s and will be glad when those two wines—a Mesnil Blanc de Blancs and a Mailly parcel wine Les Poules are updated to 2012. David accepts, somewhat ruefully, this verdict.*

# MOUZON-LEROUX



## SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims

## VINEYARD AREA

7.5 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

6,000 cases

## VILLAGES

Verzy Grand Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

65% Pinot Noir  
30% Chardonnay  
4% Pinot Meunier  
1% Arbanne, Petit Meslier,  
Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc

Apart from being a super-sweet man, Sebastian Mouzon's Verzy estate is white-hot on the trendiness metric. The Champagnes are expressive, at times to a point of severity, and they strike me as existing as much to *instruct or demonstrate* as to please. The four wines I'll offer are those that meet the drinker at least some part of the way. I like them.

The story of the estate was finely told by Gabe Clary last year, and it is a fine story to be told. I would be pleased if this potentially superb grower would unlock the sensual potential in his wines, and I am certain he could do so while still honoring his values and vision. But this remains to be seen. Meanwhile here are a few fine Champagnes.

*I first tasted the outstanding wines from Sébastien 3 years ago, on a recommendation from Pierre-Yves Cainjo at Le 520, an excellent caviste in Epernay. Browsing the shelves while Terry made his selections, I asked Pierre-Yves if he could recommend 3 wines that I probably hadn't tasted before. He recommended a number of wines, including Mouzon-Leroux Atavique 2010 base, saying that this young grower was "a rising star and one of the very best in the village of Verzy", a Grand Cru in the Montagne.*

*Tasting this wine was a very different experience than the Champagnes we were tasting just days before, from Lallement and Pehu-Simonnet, though they are in the same part of the Montagne and have some terroir overlap. Unlike Ambonnay or Bouzy, the two powerful, south-facing Montagne Grand Crus, Verzy faces northeast, producing wines with more finesse, tension and a higher register. The wine was not loud, but adamant—it was confounding in the best possible way; nothing else was quite like it.*

*Fermentations are done Pied de Cuve—collecting a small preharvest and fermenting that small amount of wine naturally as a "starter" for inoculating the different tanks with the indigenous yeast. There is no filtration on any of the wines and no collage; the addition of riddling aids to keep the lees from sticking in the bottle. The wines aren't filtered, and the amount of sulfur used at the estate is very low. None of the wines are released before they have rested on the cork after disgorgement for at least 6 months.*

*The wines here are unlike anything else in Terry's portfolio; Verzy produces very individual wines, and Sébastien's interpretation of this terroir is refined but also unadorned and without pretense. They are delicious wines, though thoughtful and restrained.*



### **Mouzon-Leroux L'Atavique 'Tradition' Extra Brut, N.V.**

12/750ml | FR-KMO-01-NV

From a 2014 base, it's 70-30 PN/CH and it's a tasty Champagne of the "penetrating" type. Deg 7/2018 it shows straw and hyssop and is good solid stuff for people who ask "What point is he making?" instead of "How does it taste?" For me there's a lot to respect here...

### **Mouzon-Leroux L'Incandescent 'Rosé de Saignée' N.V.**

6/750ml | FR-KMO-02-NV

All 2015, and this really is his best wine. It has fruit! It gives pleasure! It's a flourishing explosively expressive wine, generous and extroverted yet serious. It's also original, and it *earns* its originality by also tasting good.

### **Mouzon-Leroux L'Ascendent 'Solera' Extra Brut, N.V.**

6/750ml | FR-KMO-03-NV

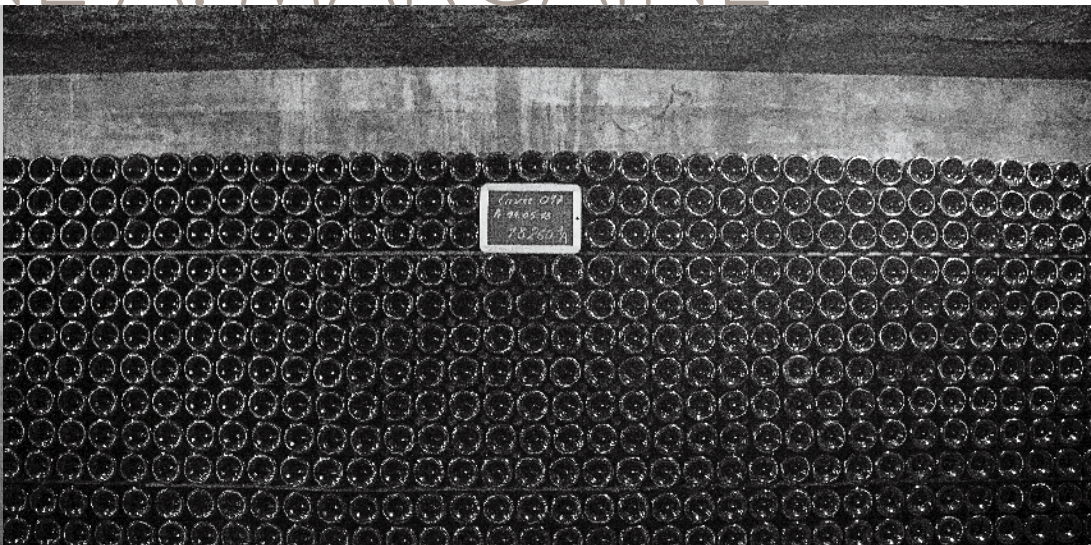
Based on 2014 with reserve wines from 13-12-11-10 in roughly equal proportions, starting with the Atavique as its foundation. As usual, everything about the "idea" is fascinating. The wine itself has....things one can appreciate (such as detail, intricacy, chalkiness) but not to inspire joy. It is not strictly "unbalanced" but the very existence of the sensual is "seen through a different prism" (If one approves) or "rather haughtily ignored" (if one yearns for the wine that might-have-been with a less extreme view of dosage).

### **Mouzon-Leroux L'Angelique Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature 2012**

6/750ml | FR-KMO-04-12

For me what's most interesting about this Chard is that it smells like PN—is this some essential Verzy signature, or is it the robustness of 2012? It offers a sort of grudging pleasure in its particular frequency of insistent admonition.

# DOMAINE A. MARGAINE



## SUB REGION

**Montagne de Reims**

## VINEYARD AREA

**6.2 hectares**

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

**4,600 cases**

## VILLAGES

**Villers-Marmery 1er Cru**

## GRAPE VARIETIES

**90% Chardonnay  
10% Pinot Noir**

It's very much father and daughter now, as Mathilde makes her presence felt.

Margaine's wines are, or have been, careful and focused, not especially gushing. A curious facet of a visit to this domain is how good the Vins Clairs are. Some of the Chardonnays remind me of young German Riesling, 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.

Arnaud's wines exhibit a marked refinement and about the loveliest perfume of which Champagne is capable. Lovely, and because of the special terroir of Villers-Marmery, unusual. Whether this is due to the thickness of the local soil, or to (it is alleged) a different clone of Chardonnay planted there, the relation to Riesling is more tangible and less oblique than elsewhere.

What I have never understood is the phenolic astringency common to these wines, something that shows already in the *Vins Clairs*. It would seem at odds with their otherwise filigreed and detailed flavors. It isn't inherently objectionable. It isn't a flavor or flavors, but rather a mouth-feel, exacerbated by tasting wine after wine after wine. It has never bothered me when simply drinking my share of a bottle. Put it this way; certain palates will register it as "bracing" and find it enjoyable, and others will see it as "sharp" and find it obtrusive. And many won't notice it at all, especially when you're not thrust into the tasting situation.



### Margaine 'Le Brut,' N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KAM-01-NV

88% CH 12% PN, it's 50% 2016 and the rest an assemblage of 15-13-12-11-06, deg. 11/2018. This is very good but rather unusual for Margaine, somewhat more chalky and "exposed" and Serious, less floral and more adamant. There's just a single gram less dosage than usual, which of course could make a huge difference. It tasted to me like one of the dosage-trial wines where you just *know* the next one up will be perfect, because this one's *almost* there.... I hope it isn't a harbinger of things to come, because Margaine's wines were NEVER too sweet, so don't fix what ain't broken! And just to demonstrate the point—

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

12/750ml | FR-KAM-02-NV

Here's a drier wine that works almost perfectly and is indeed a highlight among the range. It's 2015-14, deg 11/2018, and while there's an echo of '15's grassiness this is in another echelon of refinement and sophistication. Again I found the finish a bit sardonic, and only its sternness stands apart from an otherwise seamless harmony.

### Margaine Spécial Club, 2012

6/750ml | FR-KAM-40-12

Most recently deg. 11/2018 and it's still the solid lavish powerhouse it always was; it's shedding baby-fruit and taking on muscle—in its current phase. You get the feeling this wine has many zigs and zags ahead of it.

*(We saw a preview of the 2013 Club, which will probably be offered next year, and it's enormously promising, delicate calligraphy after the mezzo-forté '12.)*

### Margaine 'Cuvée M' Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KAM-03-NV

It's a solera, deg 9/2018, consisting of every vintage between 2002-2012. There's another one in the wings that contains 2013 and was just disgorged 2/2019, that suppresses the impact of 2011 and feels even more complex and detailed. For now the wine's something of a push-pull, with some sips tasting perfect and others revealing '11. Worth the risk on behalf of the great loveliness it offers—but eyes open.

### Margaine Rosé de Saignée Brut, 2012

12/750ml | FR-KAM-21-12

Arnaud wanted to do a saignée along with his already existing *assemblage*. How would it be?

It's 70-30 PN/CH, so it's already different from the CH-based *assemblage*. 12 hours maceration. It's an almost lurid expression of the blueberry flavor of Villers-Marmery PN; starts out rich and only gets richer, yet it's gliding and smooth, more earnest perhaps but no less beautiful.

And this year our rowdy raucous friend is really *da bomb*.

### Margaine 'Le Demi Sec,' N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KAM-50-NV

It's the regular NV with more RS, and while it's usually PFG it does show the "fragrant grasses" of the 15-base. It's the only "sweet" Champagne I'm offering at the moment, and I'd use it as I'd use a German Feinherb. And c'mon somms: put it on your pairings menu between the sorghum ale and the amphora sake!

# VILMART & CIE



## SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims

## VINEYARD AREA

11 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

9,000 cases

## VILLAGES

Rilly-la-Montagne 1er Cru  
Villers-Allerand 1er Cru

## GRAPE VARIETIES

60% Chardonnay  
36% Pinot Noir  
4% Meunier

## AMPELOS CERTIFICATION

lutte raisonnée

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

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

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

In my Germany catalogue I wrote a text about Theresa Breuer's wines in which I tried—again—to describe a fac-

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

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

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



Laurent has learned how to make the flavor work *for* him, to put it in its place and then rejoice that it is precisely *there*. The oak is subtle because it isn't plastered on. It rather permeates the wine so as to elude identification. Indeed, all of Vilmart's

wines consist of flavors that permeate one another in a gently whooshing circle. But I babble.

*(A final note: we tasted in a smaller range of stems this year, most prominently the*

*Juhlin per my request. The Jamasse is almost too seductive. It occurs to me to do what Peter Liem says he'll start doing and bring my own glass(es) with me, so that I'm tasting from the same glass everywhere, and that variable is removed.)*

## Vilmart & Cie 'Grand Cellier' Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KVM-01-NV

As always 70-30 CH/PN; the base vintage is 2015 with reserve wines from '14 and '13; deg. 6/2017—bless him for all that time on the cork! The "curious flavors" of 2015 do not show, thankfully. As last year, this wine shows greater integration than earlier editions. Fewer elbows and knees; lovely spice and delineation, and once again the top note of cherry blossom.

We drank our last Magnum of the '99 "Cuvée Creation" not long ago, a poignant moment, and the wine was lovely. But Laurent's sensible choice to discontinue it has improved his other wines, this one markedly so. These days there's a settled-ness around Vilmart.

## Vilmart & Cie 'Grand Cellier D'Or' Brut, 2014

+

12/750ml | FR-KVM-30-14

Deg. 6/2018, it's 80-20 CH/PN and is the "vintage" wine. The '14 begins a little woody, but the palate is buoyant, bright and hale, seeming almost cheerful; its opulence is restrained and its high registers really sing. A vertical, aerial and fresh reading of this always toothsome Champagne.

As an aside, 2014 is a vintage I haven't really been able to "get." Clearly it's excellent, but most vintages start to form their shapes and profiles within a short time of encountering them – '12's robustness, '13's ethereality, '09's yellow-fruits and directness. But '14 remains elusive somehow; it hasn't established a flavor-print that would help me identify it blind.

## Vilmart & Cie 'Coeur de Cuvée' Brut, 2011

12/750ml | FR-KVM-40-11

OK, what have we here? Deg 3/2018, it's about the best job anyone could do in this vintage. You could call it CdC "with an herbal angle" or some such thing. I admire Laurent's achievement wholeheartedly, as the '11 "thing" rests rather discreetly atop the weighty yet graceful yet opulent yet elegant wine this has come to be.

## Vilmart & Cie 'Coeur de Cuvée' Brut, 2010

+ ( + )

3/1500ml | FR-KVM-40-10

Deg 10/2018 this is remarkably present for both a '10 and a magnum, but several years worth of patience will be greatly rewarded. The bottle, offered last year, was a Great Wine of the vintage—possibly the great wine of 2010—and we'll see whether the larger format (which tends to emphasize the "cool" elements of a wine, in this case in an already cool-feeling vintage) plays to its strengths or veers off in some as-yet unimaginable vector.

## Vilmart & Cie 'Coeur de Cuvée' Brut, 2009

+ + ( + )

3/1500ml | FR-KVM-40-09M

**VERY LIMITED!** Deg 1/2018, this is already outrageously good, and seems to prove the rule that Laurent's most forward wines benefit most from the Magnum format.



### **Vilmar & Cie Blanc de Blancs *Les Blanches Voies* Brut, 2009**

+ + ( + )

12/750ml | FR-KVM-42-09

Still the 3/2017 deg, this has only grown more tautly brilliant with time on the cork. Way back in the day, Vilmar made a BdB and it was excellent. I missed it when it was discontinued, but this new and spectacular wine more than makes up for it. Deg 3/2017, and drier than the rest of the range, it has great richness (pheasant stock, applewood smoke) and a tangelo-citrus lift, a pixilated chalky-dusty minerality, all conspire in a rumble of interplay that stops you cold and leaves you warm. Entirely original, and a new vibrancy of mineral for Vilmar

The production is tiny. He's launching its release at the *Crillon* in Paris, which is a pretty big gesture for a small grower's tiny-production wine.

### **Vilmar & Cie 'Cuvée Rubis' Rosé Brut, N.V.**

+

12/750ml | FR-KVM-20-NV

Now 60% 2016 to 40% '15, deg. 9/2018, it is and remains one of Champagne's classiest Rosés, offering both vinosity and concentration yet expressed in a lacy, quivering stillness. Or, usually! Because this one just smells *wonderful*, it makes you smile, it's really *Glad to see ya!* Beneath its ample fruit there's a tight vein of chalk and sweet rhubarb and herbs and even caraway seeds. How does he produce something so rich and yet so racy?

As always, it's 90% PN and 10% CH.

### **Vilmar & Cie 'Emotion' Rosé Brut, 2012**

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KVM-21-12

Formerly known as "Grand Cellier Rubis," I approve of the name change, but then I like emotion and try to have a bunch of it every day. Deg 10/2018, it's a really superb edition of this, with the weighty weightlessness of the wine at its best; the fruit of '12, the ether-of-Chambolle thing, the deep embedded sweetness as if of a song from a faraway voice.



# L. AUBRY FILS



## SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims

## VINEYARD AREA

17 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

11,700 cases

## VILLAGES

Jouy-lès-Reims 1er Cru  
Pargny-lès-Reims  
Villedommange  
Coulommès-la-Montagne

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

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

## L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

+

12/750ml | FR-KAB-01-NV

Meunier expresses here as barley, rusks, crackers, and so the wine tastes 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*.

We're up to a 2016-base now, though it's just 45% of that base, with 55% the perpetual reserve. Deg 1/2019, 30% Meunier, 30% PN, 35% CH and 5% "other" by which I infer whatever didn't fit in the tanks of other cuvées. I'm starting to *really* like '16 in the NV blends; this is an excellent edition, classically coppery and salty but with unusual elegance. Last year and this one seem to herald a new era at Aubry—at least for this calling-card wine.

## L'Aubry Fils 'Ivoire et Ebène' Brut, N.V. (2014)

12/750ml | FR-KAB-30-14

60% CH, 30% PN and 20% Meunier; this is a salty (and slightly woody) Aubry *exemplar*, angular and fluffy at once, with a long herbal finish. Deb 12/2018.

## L. Aubry Fils 'Aubry de Humbert' Brut 2012

( + )

12/750ml | FR-KAB-40-12

Named for the Archbishop who laid the cornerstone for the Reims cathedral, this is Aubry at their most classical. Deg. 2/2019, it's 60% PN and 20% each CH/M; potentially a fine vintage, with a lot of salt and mineral; it's more elegant and less woody (because there's less Chard, which they raise in wood), it has both the rustic profile of PN but also its unlikely focus and length. Can a wine be both rustic and polished? This one seems to be.

## L. Aubry Fils Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | FR-KAB-20-NV

There used to be very few Rosés like this in Champagne, very dry, deliberately not "for the ladies," tasting like ripe blackberries from which the sugar had somehow been extracted. Remember next time someone tries selling you on the spurious notion that the young hipster growers are "revolutionizing rosé" (or whatever they'll insist upon) that a couple old geezers in Jouy were doing it thirty years ago.

This year's edition is *really* pale, just a surmise of blush. It's in fact the NV blend with barely 5-6% still red—he wants to return to an older style. It was just disgorged so notes are useless unless you want to read *EEK! SHRILL!* Aromas and finish are encouraging.

## L. Aubry Fils Sablé Rosé 'Nicolas Francois Aubry' Brut Nature

12/750ml | FR-KAB-21-NV

Another wine behind a curtain of disgorgement. It's (get ready...) 15% Petit Meslier, 15% Arbanne, 65% CH and 5% still red. "Sablé" is their word for lower pressure, so 4 atmospheres. Based on 2015, there's grassiness to contend with, and the proportion of heirloom-grapes is somewhat lower. This ultimate-Aubry wine is waiting for clarity and then we'll see if the grassiness is acceptable.

## L. Aubry Fils 'Le Nombre d'Or, Campanae Veteres Vites' Brut, N.V. (2014)

12/750ml | FR-KAB-32-14

40% CH—25% Petit Meslier—25% Arbanne—10% still red (a mish-mosh), and lower pressure than the norm—"Sablé" is their synonym for what used to be called "Crémant."

This is usually the non-plus-ultra for Aubry (if you don't like it, it's the *reductio ad absurdum* I guess) and it's among the wildest animals you'll encounter in Champagne, a civet with a just-caught mouse in its teeth. Whether I "like" it isn't quite the point. I've liked earlier versions more. But as a pure gesture of one guy's ultra-skewed perspective it's compelling, if a little insolent.

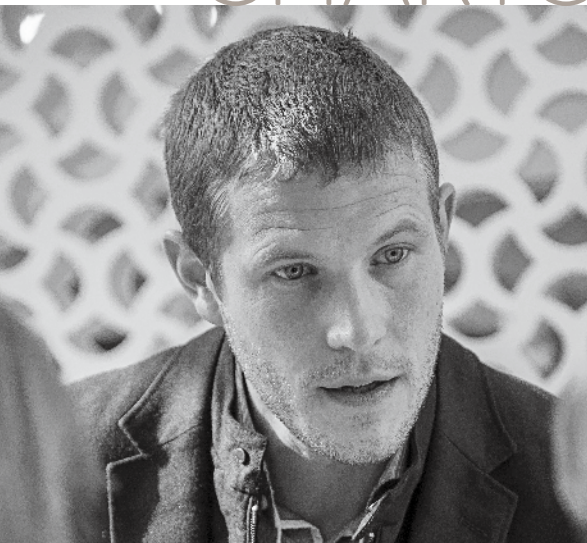
## L. Aubry Fils 'Le Nombre d'Or' Sablé Blanc des Blancs (2014)

12/750ml | FR-KAB-31-14

40% CH, 25% Arbanne, 25% Petit Meslier and 10% Pinot Blanc. I was starting to yearn for a less militant approach to dosage here, but this wine was really impressive. It's *really* dry yet somehow it doesn't sting or feel cruel; there's a banana nuance, a fresh-fish nuance; he talks about "fruits and flowers" but for me it's dough and fluff.



# CHARTOGNE-TAILLET



## SUB REGION

Montagne de Reims

## VINEYARD AREA

11.5 hectares

## ANNUAL PRODUCTION

7,500 cases

## VILLAGES

Merfy  
Saint Thierry

## GRAPE VARIETIES

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

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 staging at Selse. "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.

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

*What is the terroir? Some say it's more than just the soil, but the terroir is first*

*the soil. The roots take 46 elements from the soil that give the grapes complexity, finesse, sometimes minerality. The plant only takes 4 elements from the air that give anything to the wine, 4 elements that permit the plant to grow, but that's all; no flavors from the air into the wine. I never try to instruct my soil or my vines, how they have to live or what flavors they have to give. I only want to let the vines live in the best conditions; when the roots stay on top of the soil because the winegrower is too lazy to work or plow his vines, it's a real shame. I make walls in the soil, to see how the population in the soil is living and how the roots are reacting, and if something needs to change, I change it.*

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

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

that's free of “politics” and therefore relaxing. I can't tell you what a comfort that is.

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

Will we ever learn?

**NOTES ON SINGLE-PARCEL WINES:** Alexandre is concerned he's been releasing these too young, based mostly on demand, and he wants to let them expand into their full identities before letting them loose. I respect this, though it entails an interruption in supply until a new pattern is established.

These were 2014s unless otherwise indicated.

Alex likes his parcel wines. Often they require very little diddling. “My best wines are always the ones where I was laziest,” he says. Stands to reason.

These pro-forma previews began with **Les Barres**, old-vines Meunier as you know, and typically earthen, leathery and lobster-stock, seeming very *very* good. Both **Orizeaux** and **Couarres Chateau** (Pinot Noirs) are absolutely delicious! But he insists they should be “more than just friendly,” and feels that longer tirage and on-cork aging will deepen them. An enticing and scary thought—can they be better than this?? They can be more complex and profound, he feels—and who am I to disbelieve?

Finally two wines were disgorged before us, a pair of 2015s, both of which had echoes of Savignin (even a little sous-voile) though that's said to be a yeast-signature at least for these wines. The **FIRST** wine is 100% Avize and the **SECOND** was 80-20 Avize/Merfy, both Chardonnay, and with air they shed the Jura accents and became Champagne again. Alex is quite careful about not treading on the primacy of growers actually *in* Avize, so he's underplaying the wine, not to mention I actually thought the Avize-Merfy blend was a little better. But with one nonchalant gesture, our hero makes better wine than any but the very best Avize growers.)

## Chartogne-Taillet ‘Cuvée-Ste-Anne’ Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | FR-KCT-01-NV

Based on 2016 with about 40% reserve wine, deg 12/2018. The exact proportions of CH/PN/M cannot be known! “It was the blending from the press.” We came here straight from Aubry, and my first words were “Back in the *delicious* world again.” This wine is superb, literally ridiculous quality from an NV Brut; it's an angular, countrified, high-impact brilliant Champagne, full of maizy crackery salty character; dry but worlds away from scrawny, and with a superbly deft integration of wood.

## Chartogne-Taillet Chemin de Reims Brut, 2013

+

6/750ml | FR-KCT-32-13

A Chard from an iron-rich parcel, it doesn't exactly replace the *Heurtebise*, but that wine is only available in generous enough years when it can be separated; the 2016 is all in the Ste-Anne. Deg 12/2018, this is a fascinating original Champagne, like no other BdB I've ever tasted. Oak in obedient proportion, mineral is earthy, sophisticated in an unpretentious way.

## Chartogne-Taillet Rosé Brut, N.V.

+ + (+)

12/750ml | FR-KCT-20-NV

All 2016, deg. 2/2019, 60-40 CH/PN, and if a rosé could be like herbs and mints, this one is. There's the usual rhubarb but also spinach and Tasmanian pepper and cherry blossom and cardamom.



# OVERVIEW OF RECENT CHAMPAGNE VINTAGES

This won't be a definitive vintage report because this does not purport to be a Standard Reference for Champagne, but rather a sales catalogue. Detailed vintage information is easily available elsewhere. What I'll do here is to sketch the characteristics of various vintages in terms of how the wines taste—and maybe share a few thoughts along the way since, basically, I'm an opinionated guy.

**2004** was a large crop, and being a large crop, most of the wines were innocuous and diluted, good material to add freshness and lift to NV blends. Yet there was a small tip-of-the-pyramid community of really marvelous Champagnes, mostly but not exclusively in the Côte des Blancs. (It's no accident that Charles Heidsieck's current vintage of *Blanc de Millénaires* is 2004.) The wines have what I call "ripe green" flavors, things like verbena, vetiver, aloe vera, green orange, much beloved among Champagne insiders. I've seen no evidence one *needs* to drink them now, though they offer wonderful pleasure if you do. It's a vintage I really like.

**2005** has a common flaw, under the heading of rot. There's no consensus as regards which rot it may be, or if there's more than one. The most plausible theories I heard were, one, a rot attacking the actual flowers that could not be seen at the time and of course could not be seen later on the grapes, and two, geosmin, which seems to give the "nasty potato" aroma with which many of the wines were afflicted. There is a minority of wines that either escaped this altogether, or seemed to wiggle free of it after time in bottle. But even then, 2005 is a heavy-footed vintage, muscular and a little ungainly—the opposite of elegance. The entire vintage (at least the clean examples) tastes like slightly overripe Pinot Blanc. I have found the occasional bottle to be rather enjoyable, but I don't seek them out.

**2006** seemed to be a bland and somewhat stewy vintage, like Champagne in the form of commercial Pinot Grigio. And yet! When the *millésime* wines were released they showed surprising focus and chalkiness, tending to favor Chardonnay,

and tasty right out of the gate. This agreeably fleshy vintage doesn't seem destined for aging and most of the wines seem to be at their best now. Generous and open-armed, they make beautiful drinking while we wait for the '08 and '10 (among others) to be "ready." The question of what is *ready* will be addressed shortly!

**2007** is one of those in-between years forgotten before it was ever met. Like every recent "off" vintage in Champagne, there are isolated wines that are both exceptional (Vilmart's *Coeur de Cuvée* is a great Champagne in any context) and that succeed *because* of the vintage, not in spite of it. 2007 has the energy of not-quite-ripeness; it expresses as stinginess in weak wines and as electricity in strong ones. There aren't many strong ones, but if you see a vintage-07 it's likely to be very good, as only the most resolute growers bottled serious wine from this crop.

**2008** is the vintage everyone loves. I love it also, but I seem to understand it differently. Basically '08 checks all the boxes; it's brilliant, its mineral, it has fruit and florality, and it's wonderfully nakedly chalky. It's slimmer in body than 2002, to which it is sometimes likened, and it doesn't show botrytis as a few of the '02s did. It's also animated and articulate and full of joyful energy. It is simply an excellent vintage.

The question is, what sort of an excellent vintage? And my intuitive answer is, one that will be complicated. Lately I'm exploring a hypothesis whereby vintages in which acidity is salient often zig-zag their ways to maturity, and when they're "zigging" they show a strange bifurcation of acid and fruit, which can seem to be moving on parallel tracks and not always communicating with each other. This isn't intrinsically worrisome, but if acid decouples from fruit and does not return, then fruit loses much of its protection, and the wines lose coherence. The blatant example is 1996, in which fruit grew decadent and mushy while the acids remained spiky. My sense is, this was an especially dramatic enactment of what may be a general phenomenon in acid-driven vintages. This is *only a theo-*

*ry*, mind you, but I do wonder, sincerely, whether the best time to drink the 2008s is right now. Obviously I'd prefer to be wrong, yet we really can't turn away from the revisionism mandated by our many wrong guesses of late. 1990, thought to be great, now decaying and premoxed. 1996—as discussed. Even 2002 seems to be in a snit from which one *hopes* it will emerge—but who knows? All of which leads us to...

**2009**, the corollary to 2008, and as likely to have been misunderstood. Like 1999, this yellow-fruit in-your-face vintage seemed to be rather obvious and clumsy on first release, especially in contrast to the scintillation offered by '08. And yet, I look at how 1999 developed, slimmed down, accessed some incipient elegance and grace, and became a classic, and I think that 2009 will do the same. We wine-people are wont to be seduced by acidity, and we also tend to greet a hearty chummy young wine with a collective *meh*. I think the wines will laugh last, and so I propose—simply propose, for us all to think about – that we're overrating 2008 and underrating 2009, especially as regards aging, both how long and how well-behaved they'll be along the way.

**2010** was another lean vintage, with many wines showing the "green" flavors of underripeness. And again, there are a few masterpieces from this rather ascetic year—Vilmart, Lallement, Gimmonnet among others, that don't cruise along on waves of ripeness but that seem to cram every bit of available energy into those few bracing, stunning wines. Don't shun the 2010s—chances are if they were made at all, the grower knew what he was doing.

**2011** has been talked to death, at least in these pages. I truly can't summon any positive feeling for this ladybug-infested vintage, because even when the wines aren't fouled by the worst kind of pyrazine, they have a raspy texture I find coarse and unpleasant. Yes, of course, a few—*very* few—wines escaped the issues, and another few subsumed the vintage's nature into wines we politely call "unusual, atypical" or words to that effect. Let me simply



say that, as a lover of Champagne, 2011 is a vintage I prefer to avoid.

**2012** is a strong, ripe year. The wines were needed after 2010 and 2011, but I don't think we're overrating them in our relief to have something clean and ripe at last. Don't go to '12 in search of subtlety, but do go in search of rock-your-world fun, especially with Pinot Noir-oriented wines. Finally, though 2012 is adamant it is also coherent, organized and doesn't sprawl.

Among the **MORE RECENT VINTAGES**,

where it's too early to have true perspective, I can only offer these early notions. I'm utterly in love with **2013**, and I wonder only whether my limerence will survive as the wines enter their second lives. '13, when it is good, gives every feeling of being Champagne perfection (Peters, Hébrart embody this) though it seemed like a spotty sort of year. Gimmonnet found nothing he wanted to bottle as "vintage" yet a few miles away, Peters correctly saw it as great. But it is great in a particular way—ethereal, inferential, silky, shimmering and translucent. It's a little like 2008 but most tasters, comparing

the two directly, will find '13 is less definitive. I think it's every bit as good as 2008 and even more *fine*, but I don't yet surmise how it may age. **2014** is a year that eludes me, as I wrote elsewhere herein. It's clearly very good, somewhat a hybrid between the forthrightness of 2012 and the aerial nature of 2013—but, early days. **2015** has the perplexing grassy notes, and we wait to see if these will persist into the *millésime* wines. **2016** is warmly welcomed into the NV blends, where it has seemed to be as it was in Germany, good-humored, lithe and lucid.



# FINAL THOUGHTS



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

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

Just my luck; I get to have the sugar ar-

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

away from wisdom. It twists your palate and damages your mind. So just stop it.

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

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