



INTRODUCTION



Two things to announce before we commence to caterwauling. One, the **MOST IMPROVED COLLECTION** in this year's offering belongs to **LALLEMENT**, who have come all the way back (and then some!) from the 2011 doldrums. And two, the **GROWER WHO HAS CLIMBED TO THE HIGHEST LEVEL** is my young friend **MOUSSÉ**, who is most of the way to the elite, and whose trajectory is up-up-up. Indeed I think Cédric is about to experience "the Hébrart effect," whereby he is suddenly *discovered* and the wines become scarce.

Thanks for listening. Now we may begin:

It's been twenty years since I started doing farmer-fizz, and twenty years is, among other things, a generation. And what this means in turn is, a new generation.

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 Mousse and feel a massive *<wheu>* 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 any-

thing 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.

Grower Champagne is embedded into the market quite deeply now. It's here to stay. The market share grew to 5.08% (from 4.87% last year) and the number of growers grew sharply, to 321 (from 284). 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 con-

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

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

TWO THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW

Most of you do know that Champagne villages are classified on a so-called “scale of growths,” and that 17 of these villages are Grand Cru, after which there's a slew of Premier Crus and then a very big glom of just plain Crus. Many of you know, or have wondered, how they could classify entire communes, when any given commune's vineyards are bound to vary in quality. To use a blatant example, the least of (GC) Cramant isn't as good as the best of (PC) Cuis, its neighbor.

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

The usual answer is, everybody knows which are the best parcels and sites, but it would be politically impossible to enact such a granular classification, because

all it could do is harm. That is, think of a grower who trades on his “Grand Cru” Cramant, whereas in fact he has the lowest quality land in the commune. If his parcels are suddenly downgraded to Premier Cru, it's tantamount to lifting Euros from his pocket. Growers would take to the streets with pitchforks. So, it is argued; such a classification is impossible.

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

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

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

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

When Didier Gimonnet told me “We waited to pick and then had to pick all at once because the grapes were ripening immediately; we actually picked some lots with 10.5 and even 11% potential alcohol,” my first question was how you keep the eventual Champagne within the typical 12.5% alc after the second fermentation. It turns out there are two ways. One is, you manipulate the second fermentation by the amount of sugar in the liqueur de tirage, and the other is you manipulate residual sugar. In short, you will create less supplemental alcohol by using less sugar in your sugar-yeast mixture. Which in turn means you won't necessarily have the six atmospheres of pressure one presumes are present in normal Champagne. In fact this is far from uniform, and one grower told me, “You can find everything from four and a half to six and all points between.”

Something we hear less often is that not all secondary fermentations complete to absolute dryness. I don't suppose it happens a lot, but I'm also certain there are Champagnes with residual sugar in

the base wine before dosage is added. It's worth remembering when you listen to the dry or anti-dosage purists. Most of them of course mean exactly what they say, but we should at least bear in mind, when someone says how dry his wine is because he uses little or no dosage, that his base wine may have had a dollop of its own sweetness.

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

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

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

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

Less dosage is not always better. It doesn't make your wine more honest, more pure, more transparent, more sophisticated or more honorable; it just makes it more dry. Among the many dubious things we owe the big Champagne houses is that they've poisoned the well by making their commercial bottlings treacly-sweet in order to mask the deficiencies of the base product, or because they presume their "market" wants the wines sweet. And so we all believe that less sweetness is more desirable. First we let them dupe us, and then we duped ourselves.

Less sweetness is more desirable under two and only two circumstances in Champagne: one, the wine tastes better that way; two, the drinker happens to honestly dislike sweetness in his Champagne. (We'll leave aside for the moment the sweetness he accepts in myriads of other things...). You cannot determine these things until you taste. Can you

imagine someone saying "I ate a lot of Fritos when I was a kid, and now I just can't stand the taste of salt in anything." Somehow it's only sugar that inspires these theological disputes. Tom Stevenson recently published an article in *World of Fine Wine* in which he said—someone finally said—that Champagnes with less than 6 grams per liter (g/L) wouldn't age well. I'll revisit this subject when I write about the many shades of "Brut" a little later on.

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

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

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

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

But the overriding theme is, at LAST

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

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

The original quote, from a vintner in Germany, concluded "...one year later." In Champagne it needs to be adapted to "Five years later," because this year was the first time anyone spoke candidly about the 2011 ladybugs. And now most of them do. There are still some '11s on the market, others yet to be released, and some perpetual-reserve wines where '11 plays a (diminishing) role.

There's a new curiosity we need to talk about, and this one is extremely obscure. For some odd reason, the NV wines that include vintage-2015 for the first time, are showing a curious herbal flavor. Grassy. It is not underripeness (not green like 2010 could be) and it is not vegetal (like the genuinely obnoxious '11s) and it was not present in the *Vins Clairs*. No one could explain this, and I wonder whether it's explicable at all, at least at this point. Later maybe, if it becomes a "thing," a topic-of-discussion, people will start asking *where on earth does that flavor come from in such a ripe year?* For now—denial.

But I must emphasize this is *not* an annoying element and for some palates may even be pleasing. I happen to be rather put off by it, because it's not a "Champagne" flavor. (You could see it in bubbly Grüner Veltliner.) It's a little wild and very much fresh-cut-herbs or things you'd make a tisane from.

What is it about Champagne, I wonder? I had an excellent 2004 from a good grower, bought in a *really* good wine shop in Epernay, and when I asked for more it was sold out. But the 2005 was available. At my *very* skeptical response, the guy insisted the '05 was outstanding. "No rotten potato smell?" I asked. I was assured the wine would be free of this taint.

Well I opened it two weeks ago, and it sucked, and I had to pour it down the drain. It's as though there's some unwritten law that says "No vintage in Champagne shall ever be criticized, until and unless it is no longer on the market."

Apropos vintages, we appear to have a brilliant one in our midst, as many of the 2013s I tasted were about as ravishing as Champagne can be. We won't mind if you're grabby.

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

Here we drank the most remarkable wine I've ever had in Champagne. One of us put it on Facebook, and for the rest of the trip the other growers were exclaiming "Wow, what was *that* like?" (One guy pouted facetiously that he couldn't possibly open any old wines for us now; we'd been spoiled forever by the crazy thing we drank at Gimmonnet.)

It turns out there used to be a little Pinot Meunier in Gimmonnet's Cuis vineyards. It also turns out there was a previously hidden hole in the cellar, and in this obscure compartment there was, among other things, some bottles of a STILL PINOT MEUNIER from vintage 1934. Remarkably, it was still alive, and not some hoarse flickering life; it was fantastically exotic and animal and bloody and feral, still a little tannic, and tasting like dry-aged beef and summer truffle. That it was pleasant in *any* way was a pure bonus; it was amazing to find it still breathing!

I'm telling you this because there's a larger meaning here, and it may not be the one you expect. Drinking old Champagne is often a hugely emotional and numinously spiritual experience for me, as I have sometimes written about. And up to the opening of that '34, we'd drunk two gorgeous old Champagnes (a '70 and a '61), and my heart was wide open. But the meaning of the '34 moment was one of *society* and of the burnishing of a relationship that was now mature, twenty-plus years' worth, and for these wines to be shared with us was a welcoming, into a privileged nexus of sentiment and respect. I was touched to encounter those wines, but even more touched to

be thus welcomed.

Didier Gimmonnet 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 Gimmonnet 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?

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

+

12/750ml | KPG-1

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

(+)

3/1500ml | KPG-1M

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

What’s on the market now was disgorged 5/5/17. It’s 70% 2013, 6% 2012, 9% of 2011, 10% of 2010 and 5% of 2009. It’s quite a bit drier than it used to be (and I’m not convinced this is a good thing), but 4 years of *tirage* confers an agreeable creaminess. The wine is sharply focused and vinous (not fruity), with smoky complexity and striking length.

Next will be an 11/14/17 disgorgement of a 2014-base, “Brut” (on paper; it’s extra-Brut by actual RS), 65% 2014, 12% 2013, 10% 2012, 8% 2011 and 5% 2010. This was the most *Gimonnet* among the NVs, herbs, chalk, jasmine, Basmati and fruit; it’s started to be wine.

Next-next (if we get that far this year) will be a 2/2018 disgorgement based on 2015, with 9.3% 2014, 8.4% of 2013, 6.3% 2012, 7% of 2011 and 2% of 2010. It will again say “**Brut**” though it could have said Extra Brut. (I don’t care and neither should you.) The wine is very good, a little ’15 grassiness (plus rosemary and marjoram). This was disgorged ten days earlier so I’ll spare you my wrenchings-of-palate trying to get at it.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronome” Brut, 2013

+

12/750ml | KPG-213

This was also a candidate for a special “NV” cuvée we sometimes offer, and it was superb. And atypical, because there was no *Spécial Club* nor *Fleuron* from 2013, so in effect all the best material went into *Gastronome*: 65% Cramant, 18% Chouilly, 10.5% Oger and just 6.5% Cuis (for “vivacity”), and a lot of old-vines in the mix. Deg 10/2017, unusually late-picked (“It was a cold vintage”), and it smells wonderful, with great purity and clarity; a saline note like impeccably fresh skate-wing, a little herbal, decisively chalky.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronome” Brut, 2014

(+)

12/750ml | KPG-214

Deg 11/2017 and back to the prevailing assemblage: 28% Chouilly (all *Montaigu*), 34.5% Cuis, 18% Cramant, 10.5% Oger and 9.5% Vertus, and as always it has lower pressure (4.5) in order to be more food-friendly. The aroma is enticing; the palate is stylish and oriented toward Chouilly, the finish is charmingly toasty, lithe and curvaceous; white tea notes, it’s like mixing Chablis and Riesling in the same glass; a potentially classic edition of this.

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

+

12/750ml | KPG-10

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. This one’s based on 2014, deg 11/2017, and the wine is authoritative, the chalkiest Oger I’ve ever tasted, and if it’s “Other” then it’s a most compelling Other!

Four plots, 55% Terres de Noël and Brulis (the “heart” of Oger, he says), 18% Fondy (on clay, not chalk) and 27% Champs Nérons (planted 1951). In contrast to the usual *Gimonnet* dialect, this is smoky, almost rugged.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Fleuron” Brut, 2010

+

12/750ml | KPG-710

If Gimonnet's wines are ever “rich and generous” it's with this vintage-cuvée, which is lambswool as opposed to the cashmere of the Club and the Gastronomer. 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...

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Fleuron” Brut, 2010

+ (+)

3/1500ml | KPG-710M

THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM THE 750; it is actually the *Club* blend (“in order to manage the stock.”). It's young and freshly deg. Jan 2 2018 but it's exceptionally good, incisive but intense. Just be patient.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Oenophile” Non Dosé Extra Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KPG-344

This is usually the “Fleuron” blend without dosage, or close to it. There was no 2012 Fleuron, 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.

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

+

6/750ml | KPG-312

Deg 10/23/2017, this is starting to show its stuff. It's 100% *Montaigu* from 61-year 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 | KPG-350

Deg 10/23/17, 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 | KPG-412SP

Deg 7/2017, 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 Gimonnet et Fils “Paradoxe” Brut, 2013

12/750ml | KPG-913

This is essentially a mono-communal Blanc de Noirs—90% PN (“mostly” from Mareuil) and 10% CH. It's the highest proportion of red fruit in the history of this wine, called “Paradoxe” because Gimonnet is so strongly associated with Chardonnay (and because Didier once said he'd “never” make a wine with PN). I find this to be a graceful, lissome '13, delicate, charming, and recognizably Gimonnet.



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

3/1500ml | KPG-606M

Again a noble impulse, to offer back vintages in Mag that one can actually drink for pleasure right effing now. Deg 7/14/2017, it's a textured, generous but not effusive glass of wine. As a rule '06 is a quick-developing, round and juicy vintage, but the best wines—most often in the Côte des Blancs—have a chalky spine which the Magnum format emphasizes.

NOTE: there will be a 2008 to follow this, probably not available until the very end of this year, and it is likely to be magnificent.

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

As you may remember, Denis Varnier died abruptly, just about a year ago, and of course the future of the domain was uncertain. Or so it seemed. Denis' wife Valérie, whom I had never met and whose interest in making Champagne I couldn't have ascertained, felt immediately that she would continue. There was no question about it.

Thus would she honor his legacy, but more important, thus would she show her love. To hear her tell it, she got a lot of help from Denis' old team, who stayed on, and a lot of help from a friend named Isabelle, and perhaps most stirring, the entire Village of Avize formed a safety net around her, as neighbors can do, and everyone stood by to help if their help was needed.

As grieving goes, this is as productive a method as can be imagined. That statement could sound flippant but I think you will trust that it's not. Valérie's choice did not (and does not) ameliorate her mourning; it channels the enormous sadness into purposive action. And it is a way for Denis and Valérie to remain together, united in a continuum of passion for the domain.

This is a large-hearted and resolute woman. She has a harvest behind her now, and she has disgorged wines her husband placed into *tirage*. The collection she showed me this year was as lovely as any wines I ever tasted here. Naturally she is aware these are Denis' wines, and she wonders whether her wines—those she made from the ground up, literally—will equal them. Denis didn't keep a logbook with details of each thing he did, and so Valérie has to piece it together from the

anecdotes and memories of people who knew and worked with him. Thankfully in this case, Champagne's inherent lag-time will work in her favor. By the time Valérie's wines will be finished, several years will have passed.

I told her to look in the vineyards. To be sure, there are certain aspects of cellar work that influence quality, but these are codified practices and she will perform them competently. The "secret," if there is one, will lie in grape-growing, how you pick and how you press. Because a style as focused and digital as Denis' doesn't come about randomly.

My work is like anybody else's. It entails a tolerance for disappointment, when we fall short of the goals we set, when we let down our suppliers or co-workers. These things are (one hopes) minimal but they are inevitable; they are a pebble in our shoe. And we live with imperfection as we must learn to do. But once in a while we have a chance to be part of something rousing, and I am gratefully aware that I am privileged to borrow a little of Valérie Varnier's powerful and loving commitment to her Champagnes. I join her as a partner in the work. What she is doing is fine, loving, human in the very best way.

You can help too. And I know, it can sound like I'm cueing the sad music and putting the baby harp-seal on the screen with its doleful eyes. Nuh-uh. I want, rather, to remind you, as I remind myself, that when I drink a bottle of Varnier-Fannière I can never again do so without knowing the human story behind it. And this is true of all small-domain wines; we don't need to know the story to know there is

one, and that the liquid in our glasses is redolent of the entireties of human lives.

Rock on, Valérie. Thank you for letting me use my voice to tell this story. Your heart is as big as the world.

(My notes are sketchy this year, because the tasting room had just been painted and was too stinky to taste in, and we sat in Valérie's office to taste and I balanced my notebook on my lap. So I wrote minimally.)

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

12/750ml | KVF-9

“Spirit of the chalk” hails from (35%) Grauves and Mancy (1er Cru) and 65% Avize and Cramant. They had a request for an NV between his zero-dosage and his “regular” NV. It's half-half 2015/14, deg 11/2017. It was the first wine from '15 that didn't show any grassiness (and it ended up being among the very few) and I found it marvelous, incisive, almost peppery, with a suave herbal finish. Grain and straw and white teas and jasmine.

Varnier-Fannièrè Grand Cru Brut, N.V. + +

12/750ml | KVF-1

Also half-half 2015/14 and also deg—as all the wines are this time—in 11/2017. The best iterations of this wine are entirely enthralling to me, both fascinating and stupidly delicious. And perfectly balanced. Flavors of Timut peppers, far-northerly apples, tarragon.

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

12/750ml | KVF-5

An homage to the man who decided, in the 50s, to quit selling grapes and to make his own Champagne—Denis' grandfather. It comes from an old (50+) Cramant site called *Chemins de Chalons*, in the plain (where the soil is often chalkiest) and right on the Avize-Cramant border. It's half-half 2013/12 and quite stern and peppery, vinous and smoky. Proud, avuncular, and below its earnest exterior, it shows a lovely kindness.

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

12/750ml | KVF-2

Very often I find this to be **THE SINGLE BEST VALUE IN THIS PORTFOLIO**. Especially when it's this good. Formerly a monocuvée from a parcel called *Clos du Grand Père*, that vineyard is affected by fan-leaf and now this wine combines 30% of another site called *Pierre Vaudon*, which sits on the plain on the south side of Avize.

This year it's half-half 2013/12 and I think it's the best since the 09/08 edition. It's near to an icon-wine in the Côte des Blancs, absolutely saturated with Avize at its graphite-y best, yet also crammed with minerality and old-vines density—and in the best years, with amazing fruit.

Varnier-Fannièrè Rosé Brut, N.V. (+)

12/750ml | KVF-4

This is usually the NV blend with still PN from Déthune in Ambonnay, though Valérie's brochure says the red is from Aÿ. It's quite *rouge* this time, like Chiquet if it were braised longer. It's affected by disgorgement, but when has it *not* been marvelous? My wife and I opened a bottle a couple weeks ago, intending to keep half for the next night. Accent on “intending,” because the wine was just too damn good and we slugged the whole thing down. Just like the delicate sybarites you imagine us to be...

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 Maltronces, Au Dessus d'Aillerand, Rose et Jutées, Les Zalieux, 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 Gimmonnet 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 “Génésis” Extra Brut, N.V. +

12/750ml | KGL-2

This is why I'm here, I wrote in my notes. It's based on 2013, deg 11/2016, and it's really impressive; ripe, round, fruit-forward, starting to show tertiary elements, into a chalky finale.

It's 40% Mesnil, 24% Oger, 20% Avize and 16% Cramant. 27% (perpetual) reserve wine. An excellent 2014-base is in the wings.

Philippe Glavier “La Grâce d'Hakamiah” Extra Brut, N.V. (+)

12/750ml | KGL-3

Named for Véronique's guardian angel. It's 2013-based, deg 1/2018; it's focused and forthright, less *brioché* than *Génésis*, more leafy and silvery, with fine potential and length after it's over disgorgement. 40% Mesnil, 40% Oger and 10% each Avize and Cramant.

Philippe Glavier “Émotion” Brut, 2012 + (+)

6/750ml | KGL-112

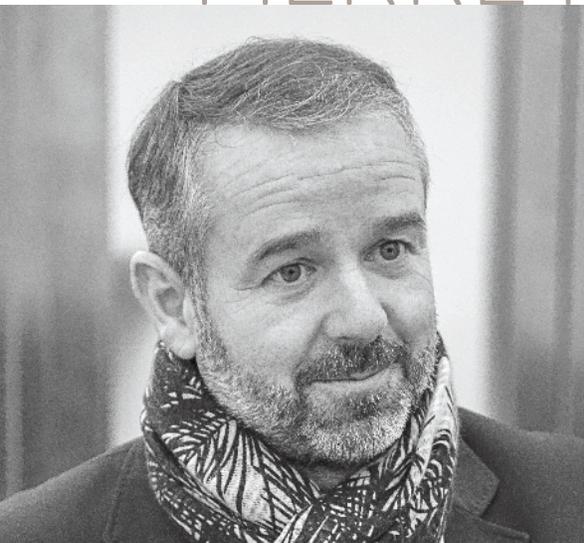
Deg 1/2018, 40% Mesnil, 40% Oger, and 10% each Avize and Cramant, the wine is “greedy and full” in Véronique's words, and even freshly disgorged it's generous and enveloping, a puff-pastry kind of Champagne, seductive and focused and on its way up.

Philippe Glavier “Mesnil Émotion” Brut, 2012 + (+)

6/750ml | KGL-212

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.

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

These have to be the winiest Champagnes in the whole Côte des Blancs, with only Selse 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 domain. So welcome to aristocracy, artisanality and personality.

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

+

12/750ml | KPP-1A

The wonderful 2014-base draws to a close, and too bad! It's the acme of Péters. Deg 7/2017.

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 next cuvée is '15-based, and it was the first '15 I'd tasted, and the grassiness was entirely perplexing and disconcerting. The wine was deg 12/2017, and we also tasted a bottle open 24 hours, which had more *pâtisserie* and typicity. If you didn't read my intro, this grassiness is NOT the vegetality of the 2011s, which was inherently repulsive, but instead it is literally like fresh-cut herbs and mown grass. I have to alert you to it because it is so atypical for Champagne, and to date no one can fathom where it came from in such a ripe clean vintage.

Pierre Péters “L'Esprit” Millésime Brut, 2013

+ +

12/750ml | KPP-213

Deg 12/2017, this is an absolute beauty; in fact it's the class of the offering this year. As always two-thirds not-Mesnil and one third Mesnil (reversing the proportions of the NV); this is a riot of mandarins and satsumas, chalk and meyer lemon and lemon blossom; it's racy, limpid and brisk but completely effing delicious, salty and resplendent.

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

+

6/750ml | KPP-7

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.

This is 2012-based, deg 11/2017, and it's a wild beast, extreme biscuits and rye crackers; balances the power of '12 with the herbal notes from '11 and '10; raw pizza dough, sorrel, this wine is crazy in the best way.

A PAIR OF 2011 WITH ALL THAT ENTAILS

Pierre Péters “L'Étonnant Monsieur Victor” Brut, 2011

+ +

6/750ml | KPP-511

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

I think that if—if—2011 has an acceptable face, it's this. Seeing the wine as a rogue-variable is not unreasonable.



Pierre Péters Les Chétilons Brut, 2011

+ (+)

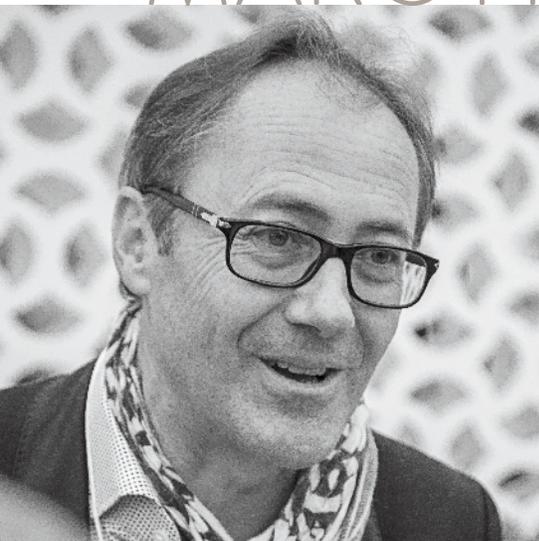
6/750ml | KPP-311

Another icon of the Côte des Blancs, to the point there are now two other Chétilons bottlings as other growers perceive the potential of the site and/or the “brand value” of the name.

Chétilons is a particular wine. It owes as much to Chassagne or to Grand Cru Chablis (especially *Les Clos*) than to any conception we may have of “Champagne.” It is always solid, proud, kingly, and by “always” I mean in each of the 20-some vintages I have bought and sold plus the many others I’ve been privileged to taste. It is not an ethereal wine—it is monumental. That may be why it has acquired “collector value.”

I wonder what collectors will make of this 2011. I personally find it tolerable in the context of that peculiar vintage. No question the wine is *unusual*, but it can be recognized as Chétilons. Most intriguingly, a day-open bottle was moving toward a more classic Chétilons profile, whose marked intensity seemed to blanket the vintage pyrazine with a strong note of sorrel. Though I detest the trendy practice of decanting Champagne, I’d make an exception for this one.

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

It is truly hard to fathom how great these wines are. Each year seems to build upon the one before, and I came away from tasting—on a strangely bitter day with the ravens screeching and snow in the air and the Marne canal flowing so slowly you could barely see it move—absolutely convinced that *Champagne does not improve on these wines*. Jean-Paul is in the zone. With one exception, he doesn't take a single false step, and I'm glad for that exception because otherwise I'd fear a spell had been cast over me.

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 issuing 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 4th group of

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

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

Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | KMH-6

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

It's 70% 2014, 20% 2013 and 10% 2012, deg 6/2017, and 85% Mareuil with the balance a blend of Oiry and Chouilly. It's a rather more adamant iteration of this, though as deft and complex as always, all culminating with a finish that absolutely *defines* Champagne.

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

+ +

12/750ml | KMH-1

Deg 10/2017, this isn't really a discrete gesture of Pinot Noir as it often is; just outstanding Champagne, two levels above what anyone thinks of as “non-vintage,” and while the fruit does say PN, the mineral, the sapid silvery savor, and the sideways glance at chalk, all paint a seamless portrait of terroir.

45% 2015 (with zero grassiness), 25% 2014, 20% 2013 and 10% 2012. It is in fact **85% PN**, from Mareuil, Avenay Val D'or, Mutigny and Hautvillers, and for the first time, 15% CH from Bisseuil.

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

+ + (+)

12/750ml | KMH-2

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.

Deg 9/2017. 60% 2013, 40% 2012. 70% PN, 30% CH and again, 100% Mareuil.

Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | KMH-5

At first quite *Pinot* before it breaks out into whorls and eddies and rivulets of almost indescribable complexity, paragraphs' worth, as the osmanthus-scented Chard steps into the light. Only a slight—believe me, *slight*—brevity in the finish precludes the third plus. Another 100% Mareuil, and if you want to know why many people think this commune should be Grand Cru, you need only taste this one wine.

The blend is, as always, complex. 55% CH from 2015 (zero grassiness!), 38.5% PN from 2014-2013, and 6.5% still PN made in cask, from 2014.

I don't repeat my “horny librarian” trope any more, apt though it was, but this is a wine that's crazy-sexy and wants to show you how smart it is, or else crazy-smart and wants to show you how sexy it is.

Marc Hébrart Spécial Club Brut, 2013

+ + +

6/750ml | KMH-313

There have been great ones over the years—2002, 2008, 2012—but none as otherworldly as this, the most exquisite young Champagne I have ever tasted.

Deg. 8/29/17, it is quite different from the '12, but just as sublime. 2012 croons, and this one whispers. '12 leaps like a gazelle; '13 flaps its gossamer white wings. '12 is clearly and tangibly great; '13 is ethereally and hauntingly great. '13 is a little like 2008, but with less prominent acidity; still, it's in the family of high cirrus-y skies with mares' tails and ice-rainbows. I wish I had four plusses to give it. Each pure beautiful element of Champagne is carefully arranged to be examined and identified, until they all melt together into Pleiades of nuance and structure. It's an ivory-pale bride, shining with bliss and love, even through her gauzy veil.

This weightless masterpiece is 30% PN from Mareuil (*Faubourg d'Enfer, Croix Blanche, Pruche and Côtes*), 25% Aÿ (*Cheuzelles, Pierre Robert, and Le Léon*) 35% CH old-vines Mareuil (*Beauregard, Ramonette and Buisson Saint Loup*) and 10% CH Oiry and Chouilly (Justice and Montaignu). It is also a Coeur de Cuvée.



Marc Hébrart “Rive Gauche Rive Droite” Grand Cru Brut, 2012

+ (+)

6/750ml | KMH-712

We have 50% Aÿ PN (from *Pruche, Cheuzelles, Longchamp and Chauffour*) and 50% Oiry-Chouilly-Avize CH (*Justice, Montaigne, 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.

JP knows I'm more an admirer than a lover of this wine, and perhaps that prompted him to bring out some old vintages. But neither the '10 nor the '08 jostled my conviction that oak-tinged Champagne is an idiom perhaps unsuited to who he is—as much as he seems to love them. Still, as you see, I offer them all and find them to be wholly impeccable examples of a *type* to which I am relatively cool.

Finally, if you have any notion that my fulsome language is created in order to sell more Hébrart, wrongo dongo. We're maxed out. We can't get more wine. Before much longer we're gonna have to allocate. If anything I should subliminally encourage you to buy something else. Alas, truth is truth.

HENRI GOUTORBE



REGION / SUB REGION

Vallée de la Marne / Aÿ

VINEYARD AREA

22 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

10,000 cases

VILLAGES AND SOIL TYPES

Aÿ Grand Cru,
Mareuil-sur-Aÿ 1er Cru,
Mutigny 1er Cru,
Hautvillers 1er Cru,
Cumières 1er Cru,
Chavot 1er Cru,
Bisseuil 1er Cru

(Cretaceous chalk, limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Pinot Noir
25% Chardonnay
5% Pinot Meunier

Stylistically speaking these are somewhat “mainstream” by grower standards. When they’re in form they offer a sumptuous yet focused Champagne that shows textbook flavors of brioche and saffron, and textbook Aÿ flavors of malt and blueberries. They can be vivid and bright and loveable. Yet the last few years have been somewhat pitiless toward them, starting with the bad-potato thing of 2005 and somehow clinging. There is also a generational transfer to young Etienne, though his father is not only still engaged, he’s the president of the Club Trésors. I have the sense Etienne has plans, and wants to do great things, and I also have the sense this handoff is a work in progress. So, I’m picky. You won’t find old-vines Petit Meslier fermented with grasshopper antlers in an underground amphora

shaped like your large intestine. So yes, the wines taste like Champagne “should.” But as with any grower, there are quirks and specificities.

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

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

+

12/750ml | KGO-1

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

Henri Goutorbe “Spécial Club” Brut, 2006

6/750ml | KGO-206

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

Henri Goutorbe Millésime Brut, 2007

+

12/750ml | KGO-407

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

Henri Goutorbe Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KGO-6

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

Henri Goutorbe Rosé Brut N.V.

12/750ml | KGO-3

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

Henri Goutorbe Aÿ Rouge, 2012

12/750ml | KGO-001

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

ANTIQUES

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

Henri Goutorbe “Collection René” Brut, 1997

++

12/750ml

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

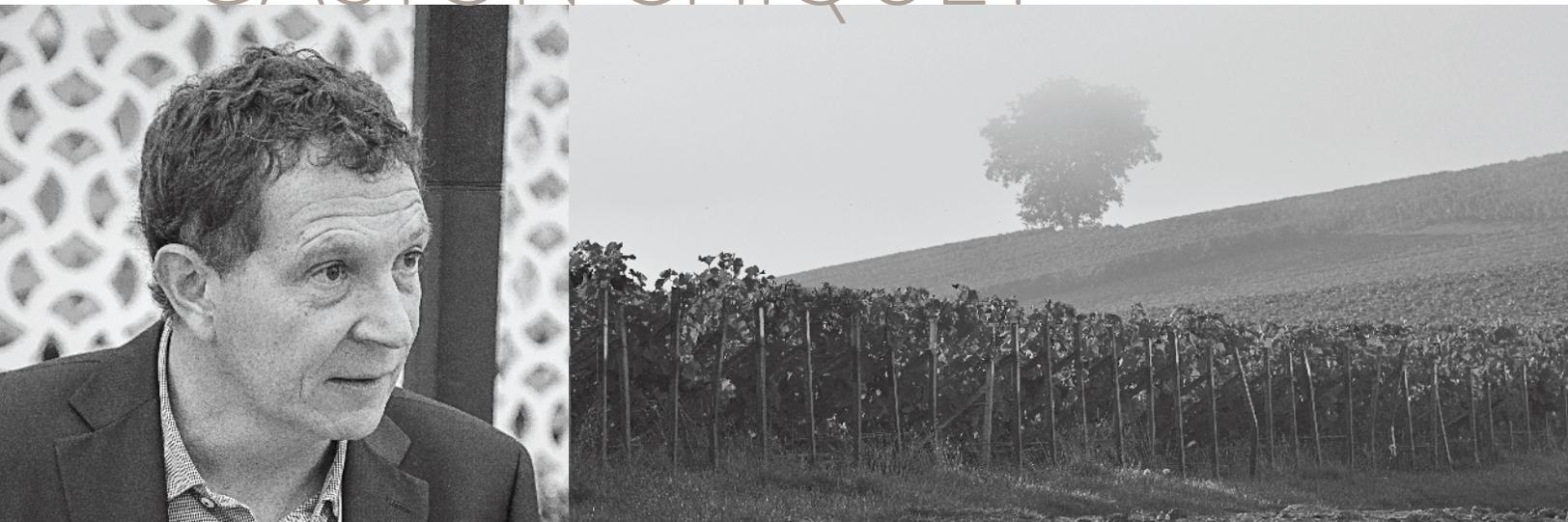
Henri Goutorbe “Collection René” Brut, 1987

++

12/750ml

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

GASTON CHIQUET



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*.

OK, back to the old guys. I haven’t looked at what I wrote since the occasion itself, and I got pretty raunchy even by my standards. The first wine—which I guessed as a 1976 but which was actually a ’78—prompted me to pen, “The soul doesn’t melt so much as laugh diabolically at a great filthy joke.” It was that kind

of wine. Ridiculously good, all-over-you mature Champagne.

Then came a 1981, the normal NV, and again it was in perfect shape and seriously tasty. Usually when Nicolas plunders the cellar there are problematic bottles, cork mostly, either actual TCA of just “failed” corks that let too much air into the bottle. Today, though, was miraculous; every wine was flawless.

And this was dramatically true of a literally astonishing bottle—indeed a *half* bottle—from the vintage **1949**, a wine I’m sure none of us will ever forget. I think I’ll spare you the dithyrambs I scribbled, but dude, the wine was *alive* and vital. Almost 70 years old, and a half-bottle!

It looked like being one-of-those-times, and so a final bottle was brought out for us. It was the first bottling of *Blanc*

de Blancs d’Aÿ, which was also “The first white Aÿ in the world.” The vintage was 1950. The wine was beyond “generous,” it was on the sorrely silvery side, shady and drippy, a gray day’s reverie when the angels stop in for a visit. A mystery permeates the air, and even the angels are stirred (and they *know* the mystery); the wine has a vivid side and an inferential side; the former is aloe and mint and the latter a deep vein of salt, like tears you haven’t wept. Deep into the finish there’s a kind of yielding, not only to the numinous charge of the flavor. You feel—I feel—pulled into a dream, rising into it, as if I needed to soar, and there was no death in sight, just dreams, low light, and the knowing spirits close at hand.

Quite an early evening.

Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-1

In essence this wine combines the pumpnickel-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.

The currently available wine is 2012-based, deg 5/2017, and there was neither Millésime nor Club in 2012—so all that material is in here. That makes this wine bigger than usual. There’s some ’11 in the reserve wine, whose personality is not entirely subdued, but the finish is big and rolls over any “issue” I might have. The wine is actually quite impressive.

It will be succeeded at the end of 2018 by a 2013-base, which I tasted *à la volée* of course w/o dosage. Unusually the reserve wine (all 2009) is just 7% of this. The wine is more typical, beautifully balanced and nutty.

As always the wine is 40% Meunier, 35% CH and 20%PN.

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

12/750ml | KCQ-2

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.

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

Gaston Chiquet Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCQ-8

Deg 11/2017 and 2014-based, with 13% still red (7% from 2009, 6% from 2013), with the ’09 being Meunier. It’s a calm, silky version of this typically delicate rhubarb-y wine. A whispering, interesting wine, clear diction, lots of berries but not gushingly fruity.



Gaston Chiquet Spécial Club Brut, 2009

++

6/750ml | KCQ-409

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

Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2008

+

12/750ml | KCQ-308

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 Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Brut, N.V.

+ (+)

3/1500ml | KCQ-2M

Deg 10/2017, this is on the way to intricate, etched detail; iron and boxwood lead into a typically tight silvery cerebral Magnum. Like your herb garden on a cool Fall night.

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 grapemust concentrate is going into Champagnes whose producers are want to speak of terroir and sometimes of organics. Up till now, when I've been able to taste direct comparisons, I've preferred the traditional liqueur. So JB put me to the test. We would line up the wines in order of perceived sweetness and would guess which type of dosage was used.

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

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 | KRG-11

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.

By the time you read this we’ll be ready to ship a new edition, 2014 (53%) and 2013 (47%), from which I saw a non-dosage preview that looked very good, with a pronounced fragrance of Meunier. In fact it’s 35% Meunier, 36% PN and 29% CH.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, 2012

(+)

12/750ml | KRG-212

Same thing—we tasted a non-dosé preview of a wine we’ll ship this summer. 75-25 PN/CH, with excellent potential, warmly ripe and giving. I’m a jump its bones.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut, 2009

+

12/750ml | KRG-809

Deg 11/2017, it was my first actual taste of the finished wine in bottle, and it’s a generous enveloping vintage of this perennially outstanding wine **AND VALUE**. Less vamping than the ‘08, with a pleasingly sweet-straw countrified profile, less brioche than pound-cake. Assertive in JB’s style, which I find joyful.

Geoffroy Les Tiersaudes Brut Nature, 2013

+

6/750ml | KRG-636

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.

Geoffroy Les Houtrants Brut, N.V.

(+)

6/750ml | KRG-616

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.

In the last year the wine has become more caramelly and less nutty. More oatmeal maybe. The finish is savory and salty and the wine overall is more generous and sumptuous. We should have kept our hands off it earlier! The 2011 peeks in and out, but when it’s absent the wine is thoroughly yummy.

Geoffroy Terres Millésime Extra Brut, 2006

++

6/750ml | KRG-635

Deg 7.2017, 70-30 PN/CH and again my first look at the finished wine in bottle. From a Zalto “Universal” it’s wildly sweet and lush in the chocolatey ‘06 way. It is much fresher, more silvery and salty in the Zalto “white wine” stem. They are *completely disparate wines*. So if you want a tasty Hershey-Bar Champagne then by all means enjoy the (dreaded) Universal. But if you want liveliness, animation, complexity and interplay of flavors, a coat of many colors, not to mention a fabulous Champagne, use a tulip for god’s sake.



Geoffroy Millésime Brut, 2004

6/750ml (mixed pack, 2 x 2004) | KRG-637

++

Geoffroy Millésime Brut, 2002

6/750ml (mixed pack, 2 x 2002) | KRG-637

++ (+)

Geoffroy Millésime Brut, 2000

6/750ml (mixed pack, 2 x 2000) | KRG-637

+

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

The 2002 is quite the masterpiece, from a vintage that isn't always "performing" as well as we hoped at first. Deg 1/2014, it's 60% PN, 35% CH and 5% Meunier, and it's a grand '02 in its mid-stage; hawthorn and parmesan, a malty note hints at botrytis or even Semillon-like lanolin; has the structure and energy of a young wine, but the sauce is reducing and the bird is almost done...

The 2000, 70%CH and 30%PN, shows the vintage's typical sorrel and brassica. It was a green tea, matcha powder kind of year. This is well preserved, but drink it before the '02. It has a lovely herbal minty note that flows into the finish. The '02 is a classic whereas this and the '04 are less symmetrical, with '04 buzzing and hissing and '00 yielding and, very slowly, sinking. (A lot of vintage-2000 was made because of "2000" but the wines are not tired but *tiring*, and it's time to drink them up.)

Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KRG-9

+

Was there ever a better vintage of this wine? Much more than the usual fruit-bomb, this is a panolply of complexity and flowers, especially roses and *groseille*. It should take us to the Fall, but it would avail you to be, well, grabby.

I did taste a 2014 without dosage and had no reason to doubt it would be effective. But '13 is stunning.

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

6/750ml | KRG-13

+

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

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

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.

Wines are shown in the sequence we tasted them.

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

12/750ml | KMS-624

He experimented—of course!—with two types of *tirage*, crown cap and cork, and cork was inestimably better. (The biggest difference, he says, occurs in the first year of *tirage*.) The cork-aged wine is toasty, generous and tertiary. It's a tribute to Cédric's father, 100% Meunier and all from Cuisles. Half-half 2014/15, it has zero dosage, and in that idiom it's a pretty impressive wine.

Moussé Fils "Terres d'illite" Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KMS-512

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

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

The newest deg. 10/2017 remains a paragon of complexity and salts.

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

12/750ml | KMS-625

A late-disgorged version of this; it's 50% 2013 and the balance a perpetual reserve going back to 2003 (which is 0.04% of the blend now!) Deg 12/2017, so 4 years on the lees. 80-20 Meunier/PN, the wine is entirely savory and grainy, like toasted walnut bread and dark-meat turkey. It's drier than I think it needs to be. You may feel otherwise.

Moussé Fils Spécial Club les Fortes Terres Brut, 2013

6/750ml | KMS-613

The site-name will appear on the back label. The wine is of course 100% Meunier; Cédric's were the first *Spécial Club* wines to be all Meunier.

Deg 11/20/17, this is a classy and silky edition of what it becoming an iconic Champagne in its way. He says "white peach" and I say it is lacy, chiseled and dignified, even rock-dusty, and as refined as Meunier can possibly be. But also serious and starched with a super-complex finish. It's both a superb Meunier and Cédric's *finest* wine to date.



Moussé Fils Lieu Dit La Varosses “Anecdote” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMS-7

All 2013, deg 8/2017, an interesting and almost angular CH; green forest herbs, silvery, petrichor, subtle ginger and mint; it grows and spreads in the glass, showing '13's buzzy transparency along with its claw-like grip.

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

12/750ml | KMS-8

Now 50% 2015 and 50% the perpetual reserve from 2003-14. This is the “NV-Brut” in the range. Deg 10/3/2017, it has the '15 grassiness and/but...it's also really alive and hyper both for Meunier and Blanc de Noirs in general (it's 80-20 Meunier/PN). Impressive if not exactly sedate, a snappy salty herbal wine with only a note of tomato-water announcing it's a red-only Champagne.

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

12/750ml | KMS-9N

Deg 10/2017, the wine is overt and jumpy, and you need to observe the finish to see where this might go. It starts out rhubarb-y and rose-hippy but moves toward deeper vinous seriousness and a fine savory complexity. It's 92-8% Meunier/PN and based on '15 though with an algebraic complicatedness of blending that's beyond my feeble English-major abilities.

Moussé Fils Spécial Club Rosé de Saignée Les Bouts de la Ville Brut, 2014

6/750ml | KMS-614R

Deg 2/21/18 but even so the aroma is fabulous. You imagine those pink “Biscuit de Reims” cookies fresh out of the oven and eating superripe strawberries while you let them cool down. This is serious hooch! Rugged '14 Pinot aromas lead to an insurrection of fruit and leathery savor, but kicked into overdrive by a manic jittery energy, yet it clings to the soft palate in a hypnotically beautiful finish.

*(A QUICK CLOSING NOTE. WE OFFER A FEW **RATAFIA** SORT OF AS A SIDELINE, AND WE'RE GOING TO START OFFERING CÉDRIC'S ALSO, WHICH IS, PERSONALLY, THE MOST INTERESTING RATAFIA I HAVE EVER TASTED.)*

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 | KBA-1

This calling-card wine is 50% 2015 (and without grassiness) and 25% each '14-'13, deg 11/2017, 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, 2012

12/750ml | KAB-212

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

Henri Billiot Rosé Brut, N.V.

(+)

12/750ml | KBA-4

With the same vintage assemblage as the NV Brut, this does show a very small grassiness, which I am at a loss to explain. Otherwise there's a fine Ambonnay fragrance, and a spazzy restless palate. Disgorgement may play a role here. There's a lot to like and a couple things to wonder about.

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

(+)

12/750ml | KBA-3

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

2013 is still the most recent vintage, only a more recent disgorgement. The wine is *recherché*, long and spicy, with a slight eau-de-vie flavor and perhaps sweeter than would be ideal. I'd describe it as "outside-the-lines." Whether you find this fascinating or off-putting, I can't predict. I myself swing between those views.

Henri Billiot "Cuvée Julie," N.V. (2012)

12/750ml | KBA-6

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.

(NOTE—there is a final wine from 2013 called "Essence Billiot" that's 100% PN and which purports to be the top of the range. I only tasted a non-dosé sample disgorged while we sat. The wine is inherently absorbing and interesting, and my final choice will depend on its final dosage.)

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 de-ranked 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!

Jean Lallement “Tradition” Brut, N.V.

+ +

12/750ml | KLT-1

Deg 1/9/18, 80-20 '14-'13, and as always 80-20 PN/CH. Even allowing for fresh disgorgement 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 pablum 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 | KLT-2

Deg 1/3/18, 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, 2010

+ +

6/750ml | KLT-410

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

Now deg 1/9/2018 the old school malt-and-mealiness freshens in the glass but this remains a komodo dragon of terroir. The 2012 comes along later this year.

Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.V

+ +

12/750ml | KLT-3

A new (1/9/18) deg of the 2013 we know from last year, and it has only gotten better. The wine itself is 100% PN; taste it some time aside the Gimonnet 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**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pehu-Simonnet “Face Nord” Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KPS-1N

2014-base with 30% a perpetual reserve started in 2005. Deg 1/2018. Excellent and typical aromas and the palate is classic Pehu, “bronzed” and salty and full of Verzenay character, spicy and generous and glossy. 70-30 PN/CH with all the Chard coming from Verzenay.

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

+

12/750ml | KPS-5N

I noted this as 2013, but don’t know whether the label will indicate it. Deg 12/2017, it’s all malo (noteworthy because David once said he’d “never” do malo, but it works for this very dry wine), and 100% Verzenay. A rugged manly man’s Champagne, wonderfully balanced, a muscled stud with a silk shirt, salt and spices and the feral depth of Verzenay. Also 80-20 PN/CH.

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

+

12/750ml | KPS-3N

A 2015-base, it’s essentially the basic NV with 6% red of 2015; deg 2/2018 it’s hugely attractive (and only a little grassy); generous and strong yet gracious; tons of fruit though not “fruity,” it’s less mealy than Lallement’s, a big *HERE I AM* sort of wine.

Pehu-Simonnet “Face Nord” Millésime Extra Brut, 2008

++

12/750ml | KPS-408N

I had oft-voiced doubts about this wine, but 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 Les Perthois Blanc de Noir Extra Brut, 2012

(+)

12/750ml | KPS-8N

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.

(OTHER WINES: The 2011 Mailly *Les Poules* has had its chance, I think. It’s a good ‘11 but I’m sort of fed up with that vintage. Same goes for his *Mesnil BdB* which is also ‘11.)

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

A white-hot young grower in Verzy who will become a Club member shortly if he hasn't already. I have more than a nodding acquaintance with the (very agreeable) man and with his quite particular Champagnes, but it would be silly to write this text when my colleague Gabe Clary has a much deeper exposure to the estate, through meetings and visits and hanging out and drinking the wines (which I have only tasted, which is not the same). I am convinced, or they wouldn't appear in these pages, but the guy who should write about them is Gabe.

So take it away Gabe.

Earlier this year, I took a weeklong trip to Champagne, with my colleague Lauren Reches, to visit people we work with as well as a number of young growers that are shaking things up in Champagne. Viticulture has come a long way in the region, driven in part by the generation of growers that Terry started working with in the 1990s and the generation that followed them. This new group of young growers—who are being referred to as the “Third Wave” of RMs, with a nod to French cinema -- are following in the footsteps of Alexandre Chartogne and Anselme Selosse before him, challenging the ideas about what Champagne is and how it is made; growers like Aurélien Suenen, Flavien Nowack, Fabien Cazé and Sébastien Mouzon.

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 and were not yet exported to the U.S. 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. I collected my bottles and we departed for the Mosel, a two-hour drive.

Terry is Johannes Selbach's “Champagne-Sherpa” taking cases of fizz from growers we visit to Haus Selbach, on the Mosel. Selbach's house feels like a home away from home. Dinner was being orchestrated by Barbara Selbach we were all together, sitting in the kitchen, laughing and talking. Johannes Selbach always serves wines blind and the first was a Selbach Sekt from the 1990s. I offered to pour the next sparkling wine, again, blind. I went to the cellar and pulled a sleeve over the Atavique label, Sébastien Mouzon's second release.

*Tasting this wine was a very different experience than the champagnes we were tasting just days before, from Lallemand 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. Mouzon's wines are mineral and quieter. Years later, talking to Sébastien Mouzon, he described what I was tasting that evening, as “**the differences between Verzenay and Verzy.**”*

In Verzenay, the mineral is inside the fruit. In Verzy, the fruit is inside the minerality. This is a crystalizing way to think about these two villages. The wine was not loud, but adamant—it was confounding in the best possible way; nothing else was quite like it. Returning home, I found that the wines actually were being brought in by a very good, boutique importer. I was happy just to be able to drink them and explore the wines a bit more.

Last year, Cédric Moussé recommended we taste with a grower that he said was “a wonderful guy and one of the best growers I know”. It turned out to be Sébastien Mouzon, who we met at the winery, off a little street in Verzy. Sébastien took us on a tour of Verzy, and bumping around in the back of his white vineyard van was big fun: he’s a very open and energetic person and his enthusiasm is contagious. He showed us the three distinct hills in the village, digging up soil samples and explaining that the village is really three distinct terroirs:

The first hill, in the direction of Villers-Marmery to the east, the soils are chalkier, better for Chardonnay.

The next hillside is rich in silex, one of the very few places that this exists in Champagne; 200 years ago, Verzy was home to a flint quarry.

The third hill, in the direction of Verzenay, the soils change again, with more clay soils, similar to what’s found in Verzenay.

I visited again this year; I like Sébastien. We get on well and I wanted to know more about what he was doing in the cellar after seeing the vineyards. Sébastien

started as the 9th generation of the family to grow grapes in 2008, an auspicious vintage to begin his work. He was interested in farming organically, in using biodynamic treatments and indigenous fermentations. “I made the harvest and the wines were in tank. I waited one day for the fermentation to start. Then the second day I was still waiting. On the third day finally, fermentation starts but there is so much volatility that I had to send the entire harvest to the distillery. So, I started in 2009, in actuality.” Fermentations are now done pie 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. Sébastien preharvests 20 berries from each vine for this; the thinking goes that the individual yeast trains will recognize each other in each parcel.

The estate is just over 7 hectares, almost all in Verzy, split over 50 different plots. Almost sixty percent of the vineyards are planted to Pinot Noir, while Chardonnay makes up just under 40 percent with four percent Arbanne, Petit Meslier, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris. Viticulture is certified organic and tinctures of horsetail, dandelion, wicker, nettle, yarrow and oak are used in addition to the biodynamic horn manure 500 preparation. Horses are used for ploughing and sheep are used to control cover crops. Grapes are harvested with high physiological ripeness, with biodynamic viticulture allowing for balanced sugar ripeness. Fermentation and elevage is done in a mix of steel tanks and 500 liter 4 to 5-year-old Jadot barrels, the only estate in burgundy that has their own tonellerie. Sébastien feels that these barrels are a perfect foil for his wines. Malolactic

is always allowed, as this lets Sébastien use less sulfur. 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. Alcoholic fermentation is natural, using pie de cuve and the secondary fermentation is done with “Quartz”, the selected yeast from Fleury. The wines aren’t filtered and the amount of sulfur used at the estate is very low. Sébastien feels, as many growers do, that a period of aging after disgorgement is necessary. None of the wines are released before they have rested on the cork after disgorgement for at least 6 months.

An avid experimenter with many projects in the works, Sébastien has been dynamizing chalk... and playing with terra cotta vessels.

When we finished tasting vin clair out of barrels we moved to the tasting room and opened the full range of wines. The wines here 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. Mineral, and incisive. If you’re looking for creaminess you won’t find it here. Sébastien belongs to the Club Trésors and later this year his first Spécial Club, 2012, will be released. I haven’t tasted it yet, but based on the character of the other wines, I imagine it’s a masterful wine.

It turns out that the timing of our visit was just right as Mouzon wanted to change the way he did business in the U.S. After talking and tasting the current releases with Terry we began working with Sébastien Mouzon in late March.

Mouzon-Leroux L’Atavique “Tradition” Extra Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KMO-001

“A transmission from generation to generation. We are vigneron for 9 generations transmitting a passion for wine, but also know-how.”

The current release is 80% 2013 and 20% 2012-2011, 65% Pinot Noir, 35% Chardonnay, 25% vinified in oak barrels and 75% in small vats. En tirage for 32 months and aged 6 months post disgorgement. This is the entry level wine, but it’s dizzyingly complex. This wine is not “about” fruit, though there is a characteristic pinot flavor present and an evenness, a steady handedness here. It’s bright and has a directness, a drive that’s full of energy while the underlying soil specific, almost flinty flavor of Verzy is on full display, carrying into the long finish.

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

6/750ml | KMO-003

"Progresses through time. Ascending, moving upwards, rising."

Assemblage here is 50% 2013 base Atavique and 50% 2010–2012, 60% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay, vinified entirely in barrel. En tirage for 40 months. This isn't "Atavique+" in terms of its overall flavor. It's different perhaps deeper, even more complex wine, but not at all heavy and strikingly mineral. It has a slightly more dense and coiled core than Atavique. While the balance here is astounding and the finish long, you get the feeling that you're looking at a waxing moon, knowing that the entirety of the wine is just out of view.

Mouzon-Leroux L'Incandescent "Rosé de Saignée," N.V.

6/750ml | KMO-002

"When light gives color."

All from the 2014 vintage, this Rosé de Saignée, made entirely of Pinot Noir was macerated for 18 hours in tank before fermentation in 25% oak and the rest in tank. En tirage for 28 months. This is a wild Rosé, recalling Vincent Laval's Rosé. It's deep in color and its tone is darker, with broader red fruit character than the Solera wine, but with an intense and quite chalky minerality. It's a wine for autumn rather than summer and wonderful tertiary notes emerge with time making me think of cool weather and forest floors.

Mouzon-Leroux L'Angélique Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature, 2012

6/750ml | KMO-004

"Light, ethereal"

This is the Blanc de Blancs from the 2012 vintage; all Chardonnay and vinified entirely in barrels. En tirage for 56 months. Bright, floral and white, chardonnay aroma and a pure fleshy fruit which give way to a strong, almost overpowering mineral signature which builds and envelops the fruit almost entirely, finishing with a pure saline and flinty flavor.

Mouzon-Leroux L'Ineffable Blanc de Noir Brut Nature, 2012

6/750ml | KMO-005

"Cannot be described and also a measure of stubbornness."

This is the Blanc de Noirs from the 2012 vintage; all Pinot Noir, all in barrels. En tirage for 60 months. The aroma is pure Montagne Pinot! It's an exhale of red fruit and earth. This is zero dosage and works well in this mode—there is enough *gras* to carry the fruit through the finish. There is a complex mid palate here, intertwining a woods-y, smoke-y character with a bright bend of fruit giving structure and harmony to the wine.

Mouzon-Leroux L'Opiniâtre Blanc de Blancs "Sans Soufre" Brut Nature, 2010

6/750ml | KMO-006

"Very opinionated, obstinate"

100% Chardonnay from the 2010 vintage, vinified in oak barrels. Zero sulfur, even at harvest. En tirage for 66 months. As noted, this is an "opinionated" wine. It's intense, darker and smokier in character than Chardonnay normally shows; it's a different face all together. With time, the fruit emerges, with typical dark cherry and red, but in tandem with a dark saline character. Broad, but not ripe and juicy, this is not a wine for everyone—it's almost starched, upright and intense.

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

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

Brad was accurate describing Arnaud as "humble," though I myself would say he's exceptionally thoughtful, and humility follows naturally from that temperament. His wines, also, are careful and focused, not especially gushing. A curious facet of a visit to this domain is how good the Vins Clairs are. Two of the '14 Chardonnays reminded me of tasting Riesling at Geil, which I had done less than two weeks earlier. There were lots with malo and others without, and pH ran between 3.06 and 2.95 (!) and of course this translates eventually into Champagnes that the palate can "read" as phenolic, especially when you rush-taste through a bunch of them. You know the old trope about Champagne with oily food? These boys will sandblast any goop off your tongue, believe me.

He experimented with cover-crop-

ping 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 Claires*. 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.

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

12/750ml | KAM-7

80-20 2014/13, deg 8/2017; it's toastier than last year (this seems to be an element in 2014) and has less pure fruit and ethereal refinement, but what it does have is more salty energy, more *qui*. The finish is a bit sardonic, but there's plenty to appreciate here.

A. Margaine "Le Brut," N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-1N

50% 2015 with the reserve wines encompassing 14-13-12-11. Deg 1/2018, and 88% CH to 12%PN. There's just a hint of grassiness but there's his typical refined, lacy detail and class, and this wine reconfirms the upward path I've noted in the last few years. Finely chalky, especially in the finish, with excellent balance. Still, the grassiness is atypical.

A. Margaine Spécial Club 2012

6/750ml | KAM-412

All CH and 100% malo, 25% was aged in wood, deg 12/2017, this is an absolute Margaine classic. High tones like '08 but roasted corn like '09; a great slender power here, a regal assertive wine, blatantly chalky; it wants years but man it's hard to resist right now. The vampiest Margaine wine in some time.

A. Margaine "Cuvée M" Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-4

This is a solera, deg 12/2017, consisting of every vintage from 2002-2012, bottled in 2014. It has found itself since last year, though the 2011-issue is somewhat obtrusive, at least until the warm complex finish. 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.

A. Margaine Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-2

Here is where Arnaud comes closest to perfection. Still the 2014-base, deg 12/2017, it's the most sheerly *pretty* Rosé in this (or any) offering. The secret is a kind of demure articulation. Seemingly dewy and bashful, it actually has a lot to say. The Chardonnay component is actually the base of *Spécial Club*. It unfolds and surprises with each new sip. 75% CH, 13% PN and 10% still red PN.

A. Margaine Rosé de Saignée Brut, 2012

12/750ml | KAM-812

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.

A. Margaine "Le Demi-Sec," N.V.

12/750ml | KAM-5N

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

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

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

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

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 | KVM-1N

Deg 9/2016—so a good solid time on-the-cork; the assemblage is as it was last year, 50% 2014 and 25% each '13/'12, and 70-30 CH/PN. This wine seems to have benefited most from Laurent's discontinuing his old "Cuvée Creation," some of whose fruit is used for this wine now. For this is a lovely Grand Cellier, most of the way to integration and the exotic vanilla note, with only a slim point of cherry indicating the small distance yet to travel.

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or" Brut, 2013 + +

12/750ml | KVM-613

I wonder if a year from now we'll be talking about '13 the way we did about 2008 a few years ago. Because this is looking more and more like magic. This wine is lively and gushes the fragrance of mirabelles, with its typical sandalwood aromas arriving on the mid palate and into the finish. Classy, buoyant, almost comically long.

Deg 6/2017, it's 80-20 CH/PN.

Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2010 + + +

12/750ml | KVM-510

No surprise: This is gorgeous. Will there be a better 2010? And will Laurent *always* make the best wine in normal or "difficult" vintages? Not his best wines, mind you—the best in all Champagne? This is another in a noble chain of manic vintages (2001, 2007) as separate from the rich sedate vintages (2006, 2009). It's electric, quivering, goose-fleshed, shimmery yet hedonic yet weightless yet as energetic as a kitten jumping after a laser.

Vilmart & Cie Blanc de Blancs Les Blanches Voies Brut, 2009 + + (+)

12/750ml | KVM-709

Way back in the day, Vilmart 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 Vilmart

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.

Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2008 + + (+)

3/1500ml | KVM-508M

Deg 11/2016. Clearly this will be great—will, because as is often the case with Mags it knits slowly and cerebrally but with a skein of a thousand colors—and it takes its sweet time. Already stunning, it will rend your soul into beautiful shreds in mid-to-late 2019.

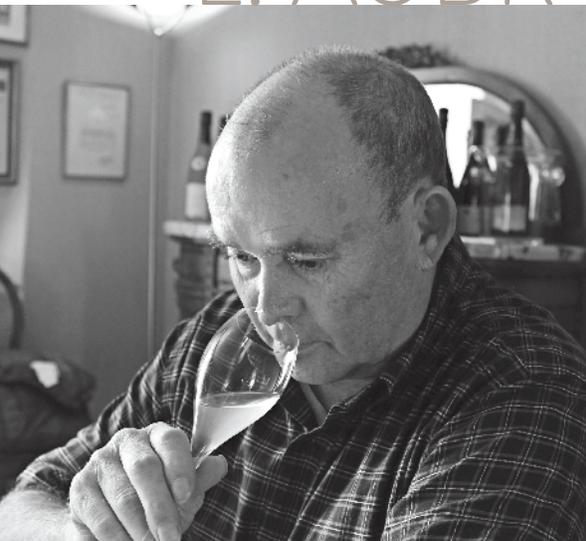
Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Rubis" Rosé Brut, N.V. + +

12/750ml | KVM-3N

I don't remember a better version of this. Blends 2014/2015 (and shows zero grassiness), deg 11/2016, shows a fantastic elegance and almost ethereal fruit; it's both hedonic and firm and has a rare equipoise of height and depth. A tomato-water note in an animated, flowery Rosé. Honestly this is almost silly it's so miraculous.

WHAT a collection at Vilmart this year!

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

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

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAB-1

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

This edition is a 2015-base with 50% perpetual reserve. No grassiness! 40% Meunier, 25% CH, 30% PN and 5% "other. Deg early 2018—**as were all the wines tasted** - , dosage a little less than usual. It's a frisky version of this, with lots of fruit and salt and quite forthcoming even so freshly disgorged. It's almost suave. It's less briny than usual, less brassy, more "fine." Less Malpeque and more Fanny Bay.

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

12/750ml | KAB-414

"The old vines of the countryside" was probably the first of its kind in Champagne, to include all the heirlooms. It's more common now.

Ready? 10% Meunier—10% Pinot Gris—10% Pinot Blanc—10% PN—20% Arbanne—20% Petit Meslier—20% CH. A little less severely dry than usual. May be why it's such a beauty; exotic and recherché yet also elegant and refined and *fondue*. Has some green minty notes but overall it's as radical as one can get and still answer to the paradigm of Champagne.

L. Aubry Fils "Ivoire et Ébène" Brut, N.V. (2013)

12/750ml | KAB-713

60% CH, 30% PN and 10% Meunier. I liked this much more than a rather dour 2012; it has more fruit and mineral and salt. It's essentially more attractive, and its customary oak doesn't glare at you crudely. Sorrel and underripe plum and a finely pulverized mineral.

L. Aubry Fils "Aubry de Humbert" Brut, 2009

12/750ml | KAB-309

40% CH—40% PN—20% Meunier. Curious how this relatively "classic" wine is often the ultimate Aubry—rugged, uncompromising, rural. In a disgorgement funk today, but 2009's robust holler suits it better than '08's sleek polish. It's named for the Archbishop who laid the cornerstone for the Reims cathedral.

L. Aubry Fils Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KAB-2

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.

Meanwhile, this is 2015, and a good one. It's 40% CH—40% PN—10% Meunier and 10% *still* Meunier. A fine year for this, typical profile, leads by fruit but quickly curves away, yet in '15 it's more forthcoming than usual, and quite a riot of blueberries.

L. Aubry Fils Sablé Rosé "Nicolas Francois Aubry" Brut Nature, 2014

12/750ml | KAB-614

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 reducto 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 Blanc, 2013

12/750ml | KAB-813

It uses all the white grapes—hence *Blanc des Blancs*—in this case 30% CH—20% Arbanne—30% Petit Meslier and 20% Pinot Blanc. Has a sweet aroma of fresh fish, and a generous leesy expressive palate with a stern salty-herbal finish. This I do like. Don't overchill it. Powdery mineral, quinoa, rye crisps, trout roe. He says "smoked, like smoked salmon."

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 Phillippe Chartogne (and drinking some urgently needed caffeinated beverages...) I learned that Alexandre was stage-ing at Selosse. "That's all I need; now he's going to want us to buy three dozen wooden barrels..."

Sometime in those years Elisabeth brought her (then) young son to meet my wife and me at L'Arnsbourg, a remote 3-star in the northern Vosges National Park. I'd been singing its praises to her, that it was stellar and affordable, and she wanted it to be junior's first 3-star meal.

Awwww! I wasn't surprised when Alexandre assumed the estate, and I wasn't surprised that he was ambitious. What did surprise me, and continues to surprise me, is that he is the most passionately curious vigneron I know, not only in Champagne, but just maybe anywhere. He is pursuing something that doesn't take the form of accolades—though these will surely come—and hardly even asks for *answers*.

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

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

It begins with a new/old approach to vineyard work, bio-dynam-ish, one might say. Critters (sheeps and horses), soil analyses of remarkable detail, each aspect of viticulture challenged and changed as necessary. Cellar work is also excitingly new. Indeed there's almost too much information to give here. Alexandre'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 Selosse: biodynamics. Here are his words:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Will we ever learn?

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

12/750ml | KCT-1

Deg 12/2017. 50% 2015 and 50% a multi-vintage reserve, half-half CH/PN, low dosage is *house-made* using cane-sugar (no more MCR). It does show the '15 grasses but is otherwise an excellent strong edition; lands a little lighter-footed than earlier and has an acorn tertiary aspect like some echo of Iberico ham.

Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvee Chamin de Reims” Brut, 2012

6/750ml | KCT-934

A Chardonnay from red iron-rich soil, deg 12/2017, this is quite different from *Heurtebise* (from which we're between vintages), and the dosage struck me as insufficient, but the wine is all inference and mineral and herbs and a curious flavor I can't identify—sort of ozone-y, harissa, hyssop, seaweed—a curious wine!

Chartogne-Taillet Rosé Brut, N.V.

12/750ml | KCT-6

Deg 1/2018, this wine is sensational, the most improved wine in the stable, taking its place among the most serious and expressive rosés I offer—or anyone offers. Marvelous richness of fruit and earthiness. More robust than '13 but less muscular than '12. I liked it so much I forgot to record the data.

Now we taste a series of parcel-wines from **2013**. I'm not sure if/when they'll become available, but they were so fine I took notes.

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!

First a pair of **Beaux Sens**, comparing MCR with Alex's liqueur and also different dosage levels. Both wines were excellent, especially the lower level which was the *house-made liqueur*; they had the almost lacy profile and clear diction of Moussé's wines. For me, ++

Next up was the **Orizeaux** PN, *house-liqueur*, and a wonder of elegance and positive radiant fruit, salty and chipper and up for anything. +

Finally a resplendent **Couarres Château** PN, which is quickly becoming my very favorite among these; an exceptionally complex fragrance of chalk and white flowers; the palate is gorgeous, dispersed into rivulets of silvery powdery nuances, an astonishingly sophisticated PN, the culminated dialogue of site, vintage and man. ++(+)

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 “raped into dryness” by ideologues and chumps.