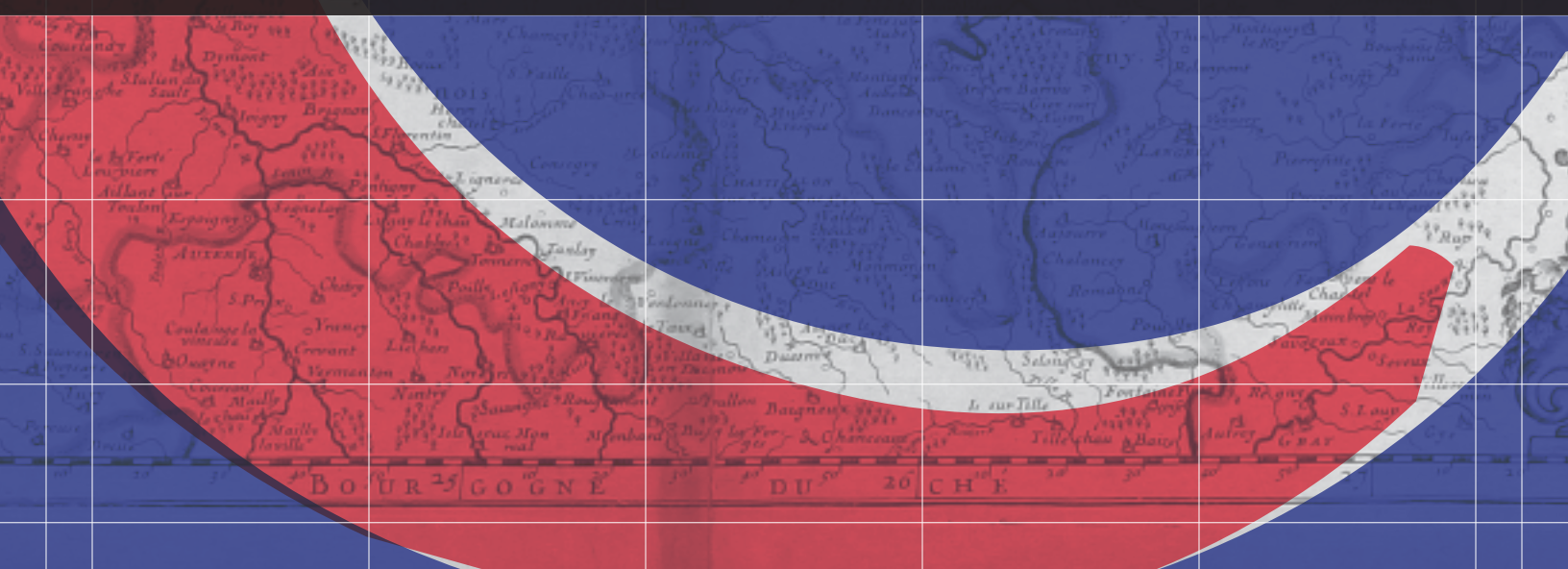


Champagne 2013

Terry Theise Estate Selections





Theise Manifesto

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

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

*Distinctiveness is more important
than conventional prettiness.*

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

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

“I’ll speak not as a wine grower, but as a wine drinker now; when I drink a wine, worked by people who spent three times longer in their vineyards, who always followed their grapes, who suffered the same climactic conditions as their vines, I dream. I dream, and it gives me pleasure, because I know there is a story, work, patience, passion, and the unique beliefs of the wine grower.”

- ALEXANDER CHARTOGNE

“...The borderline between enough and too much is a crucial aspect of the wine drinking experience. Today it is not at all uncommon for wines to make a pretty plausible and superficially attractive impression in the first moment—sweet and fruity aromas, then a soft, round taste—but after only a glass it starts tasting like unbearably gooey kitsch. The wine has not changed, rather the drinker has realized that the liquid in his glass is all make-up and silicone, possibly lacking any real body beneath these cosmetics. I call this taste fluffy white bunny because this type of wine appeals to our BABY-TASTE. Unlike adult-taste which is culturally-determined and therefore a serious obstacle to trans-cultural wine brands—the undeclared goal of the handful of huge companies who today dominate global wine sales—baby-taste is the same the world over. The truth is though that hardly any wines naturally have a fluffy-white-bunny taste. Nearly all of them acquire this in the cellar where the technical possibilities for the manipulation of wine are now almost unlimited. Only computer-generated virtual reality is more completely malleable, which means that in these corporations’ industrial production facilities the taste of vine biodiversity, of place and of regional wine traditions all become part of the COLLATERAL DAMAGE in the global wine sales war ...There are other descriptors for this NOWHERE-PLANET-WINE taste which is determined by marketing plans and quarterly figures. Reinhard Lowenstein of Heymann-Lowenstein in Winningen/Mosel calls it Plastico-Fantastico-Viagra, making clear how the enormous success of this wine style is based upon artificially stimulated desire...”

- STUART PIGOTT

Contents

Introduction // 1

CÔTE DES BLANCS

Pierre Gimonnet // 6

Varnier-Fannièrè // 10

Jean Milan // 12

Pierre Péters // 14

VALLÉE DE LA MARNE

Marc Hébrart // 16

Henri Goutorbe // 18

Gaston Chiquet // 20

René Geoffroy // 23

Moussé Fils // 26

MONTAGNE DE REIMS

Henri Billiot // 28

Jean Lallement // 30

Pehu-Simonet // 32

A. Margaine // 34

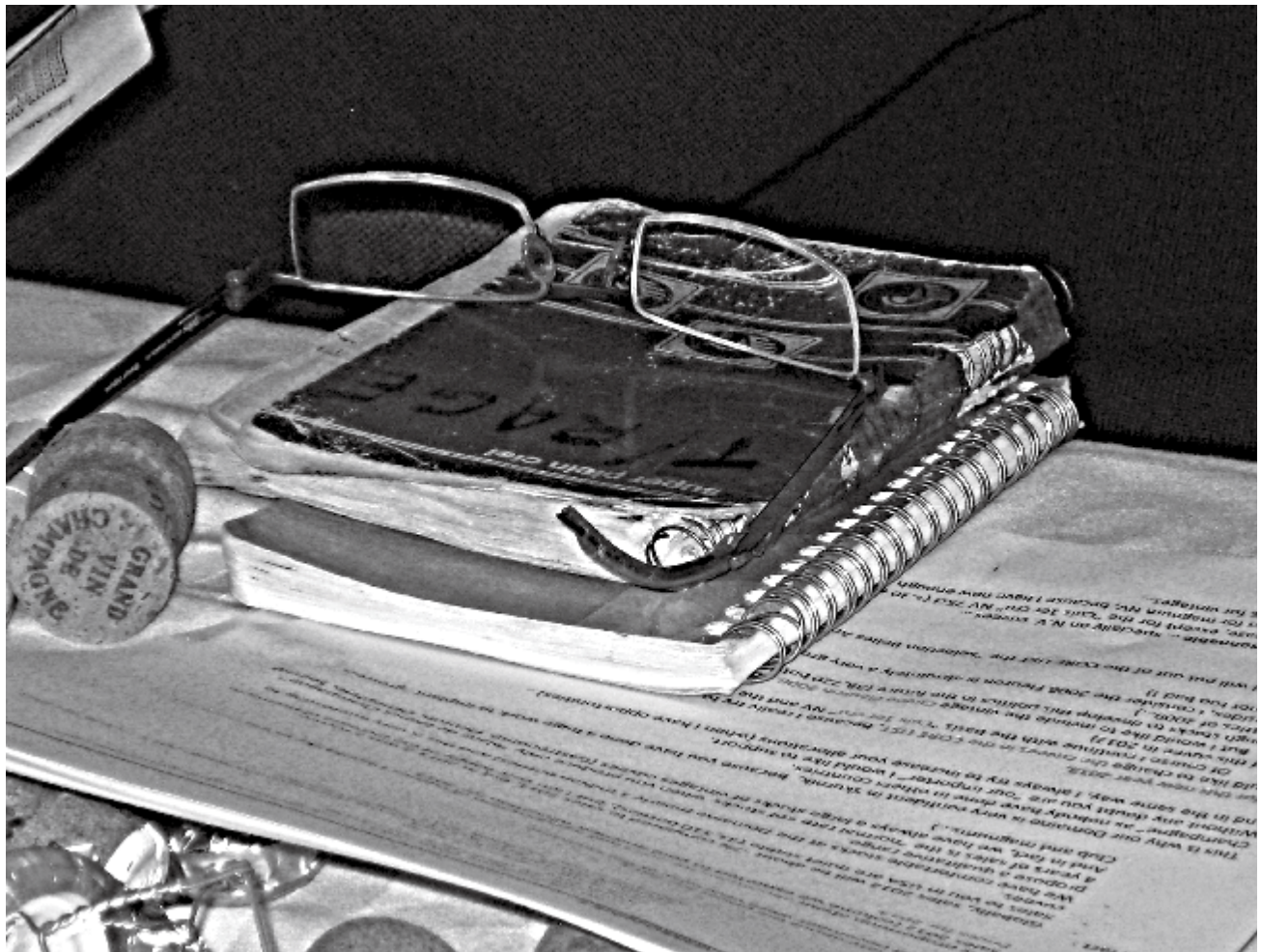
Vilmart & Cie // 36

L. Aubry Fils // 40

Chartogne-Taillet // 43

Champagne Vintages // 47

Introduction



I had a perfect time in Champagne last month, if by “perfect” you understand it to include sliding 200 yards backwards down an icy hill in an ill-equipped taxi in a blinding snowstorm. That was something short of perfect. But everyone was happy, I learned a ton, and the wines showed well.

These *are* happy times for farmer-fizz. In a year when overall Champagne shipments to the U.S. were down 9%, ours were up 4%. There are more good growers on the market all the time. The share of the RM category has grown considerably, nearly a full percent in the last year alone. Journalists are talking to every cool grower. The cool growers are talking to one another, which believe me wasn't always the case. The increased attention being paid to every aspect of Champagne has had a (mostly) favorable effect on the négociants also, who are less secretive and who even sometimes say things that aren't self-serving bullshit. If you look only at the leading American wine writers paying careful attention to Champagne, you have to agree the status of coverage has grown exponentially

higher. Take a bow Josh, Brad, Antonio, Peter, and prepare to welcome Mr. Schildknecht to your peerage.

I've generally spent this intro text considering all the ways it's whimsical and wry to tweak the Big Houses for all their silly behaviors (and mediocre wines), but I think I'll ease off a little. I'm grateful that business is so good. My growers and I are making better friends with each passing year. Most of you have well understood why it's nicer to buy Champagne from families than from factories.

Just two little points to make, though. There's still a few stubborn holdouts who persist in repeating the argument that all Négociants are not evil and not all of their Champagnes are awful. Then they get all populist and claim we should drink whatever we think tastes good. I find such an argument staggeringly obtuse, and seriously unnecessary.

If you want to consider the Big Houses based on how they *behave*, i.e., how they ration information, how they treat their customers, how they treat the growers they buy grapes from, you'll quickly learn that most of them are...

um, not very nice. Whenever I have a spasm of indulgent tolerance, people who know the region better than I do are quick to remind me how silly it is to cut these guys any slack at all. Apart from which, to them I'm just a flea.

Most of the Big Brand Champagne is ordinary mediocre wine. It's industrial, and tastes like it. It is, arguably, "reliable" and there's something to be said for that. I admire how decent some of the wines are, considering how and in what volume they are made. But insisting on drinking them because you should "drink what you like" is a waste of time and money.

It goes without saying that honorable exceptions exist. All of us know who they are. And it *should* go without saying that I'm talking about the basic NVs here; the Tête-de-Cuvées are almost always excellent and sometimes superb, and cost about 70-100% more than they're worth.

One of my growers painted a bleak picture of typical vinification at a Big Brand facility. His cousin is a cellar-rat there. First the must is centrifuged and chaptalized and pressed very quickly with cultured yeasts, enzymes and nitrogen. The result, already denuded of much of its original flavor, is aged in stainless steel and racked frequently to avoid any H₂S taint, fined and filtered and rendered, in effect, neutral. (Pierre Aubry told Jefford the way raw materials are treated in Champagne made him feel like a "luxury sugar-beet grower.") There is nothing especially shocking here; these are industrial products, after all, guided by expediency and market research. But the worst is yet to come. What really constitutes the celebrated "house-styles" of the Big Brands has less to do with their grape sources and more to do with various *additives* present in the dosage liqueur. "After they've done everything they can to remove all flavor from the wines, they then add it back at the end with doctored dosage." I was told.

All of this is entirely to be expected, but it does I think compel us to ask; do we want to buy wine from these guys? Especially wine with so much expectation attached! "Champagne" carries a charge, and even those of us who argue for its everyday usefulness at-table must admit that, emotionally, Champagne is used differently than other wines. We invest our hearts in it, whether we're celebrating or consoling, and in those moments do we really want to be observing these solemn or glad occasions with something a suit-with-a-spreadsheet designed?

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 Cumieres 3-4 days before he's allowed to start in the category-B vineyards, and Cumieres *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.

Another gratifying thing was to see the growing sense of *activity* among the growers in the region itself. There's the 3rd annual tasting with the theme "Winegrowers continue to revolt in the name of Champagne's terroirs!" being held in Ay. Eighteen growers will take part, a virtual who's-who of the hotties: Agrapart, Bérèche, Chartogne, Doquet, Geoffroy, Goutorbe, Laherte, Tarlant among others. Such a thing would have been unheard-of back in 1997, but now there's an ignition of enlightenment. And Champagne, forever the most moribund of regions, is now among the most interesting.

And there are more growers than ever on the U.S. market, 178 in 2011. That's a lot of growers, pal. And the market-share for this cunning little category is 3.43%. Still, when I started this Quixotic thing in 1997, the share was 0.62%, so we have traveled a distance.

I opened my existing Champagne catalogue and saw I'd written a desperate note; "*Must* we talk about residual sugar any more?" This is the inevitable downside of the Champenoise entering the current.

This year was the year-of-the-dosage-trials, as growers let me further in to 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 4g/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 myriad 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.

I am also willing to accept the truism about the blender's art. Blending is certainly an art when done well, though this doesn't address the matter of whether and when it's necessary. The fact is there isn't a single decent Récoltant who sells the Négocier his best grapes! Rather the opposite. And for any single Négocier who truly practices the "blender's art" there are two dozen who're dumping a lot of mediocre fruit into one big tub.

There's a fragile balance of power in Champagne. The Houses need the growers to supply them grapes. Many are abjectly dependent on their network of cute little paysannes. The growers claim to need the Houses to act as flagships, furthering the good image of Champagne throughout the world. Publicly the Houses put on a tolerant face as regards the growers. Privately... well, you see.

One grower with whom we discussed the "ethics" of marketing grower-Champagne said "We ourselves are really not in a position to criticize the Grandes Marques, because they break new ground for Champagne, open new markets, and eventually we get our small share of it too. We'd never have the ability to do that on our own; we're too small. Look, we taste around, we know *very* well how mediocre their wines are, but we need them."

"It sounds like you also need us," I observed, "to fight this fight for you, to say the things you know but can't say."

"Exactly," came the reply.

Champagne Fleury was threatened with a lawsuit because the label on their **Rosé** bore a certain resemblance to Perrier-Jouët's Fleur de Champagne (never mind the Fleury was a Rosé, in a clear bottle, unlikely to be mistaken for PJ's wine except by the color-blind), thus invoking trademark-protection issues, PJ's having effectively trademarked flowers apparently. I can only imagine how threatened they must have felt by the 100 cases of Fleury Rosé rampaging through the American market. But still, zero-tolerance and all that. Around the same time I learned that Clicquot was suing a sparkling wine producer in *Tasmania* who had the temerity to use a yellow label on their fizz. Perhaps the Houses should collectively trademark VOWELS, so that the growers would have to call their wine "Chmpgn."



WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “BRUT?”

One thing it isn't is drier than it used to be, despite those news reports that “Brut” would be confined to 12g.l. or below, instead of the 15g.l. which was formerly allowed. Well, that is not exactly true; it's *truthy*, as Mr. Colbert would say. Because this fierce new rule permits a tolerance of 1.5g.l. in either direction. “Nothing's going to change,” is what I was told, again and again.

One time I ordered a vintage Blanc de Blancs from one of the better *négociants*. It ought to have been good, and it was. Out of curiosity I left half a glass to go flat. Tasting it at the end of the meal, I was startled to see how sweet it was.

The next morning at Pierre Gimonnet I tasted his N.V. Brut, which had 6 g.l. residual sugar. This was certainly dry Champagne, correctly called “Brut.” But a commercial Champagne with **15 g.l.** sweetness (the

highest legally permitted, and very often seen across the big brands), low acidity, neutral character, all of it disguised by CO₂, is SWEET wine. It tastes like a Rheinhessen Kabinett with 30 g.l. residual sugar.

And both of them called “Brut”!

The *dosage* liqueur is one of two things, either wine (of varying type) to which cane or beet sugar is added, or concentrated grape-must. And naturally, growers' opinions differ!

Insofar as all the must-concentrate seems to hail from the Languedoc, I have some doubts. Uneasy is the mouth which speaks of *terroir* in one breath and describes adding Languedoc must-concentrate to Champagne in the next. Even more uneasy the mouth intoning its organic credentials while adding chemically-produced Languedoc must concentrate to his wine instead of the organic alternative: sugar (organically grown) dissolved in his own organic wine. What you have to probe to learn is

that must-concentrate is much easier to work with than conventional dosage liqueur. Easier means cheaper, and an earlier end to the work-day.

A basic conceptual error is to consider *dosage* exclusively a corrective device by which an inadequate wine is made viable. Thus you hear growers say “My wine is so good it doesn’t *need* a high dosage.” What further complicates the issue is that *sometimes this is true*. But sometimes not! For me, the idea that *dosage* is a necessary evil to be minimized at all costs is short-sighted. It also distorts the grower’s view of his wine, because he is only seeing through a prism of sugar. *Dosage* should be adjusted according to a wine’s *beauty* and to its aging capacity.

A competitor in New York published some sales material saying his farmer-fizz was hipper than mine because it was drier. How he knew that, I have no earthly idea. (Why he did it is clearer; just random crapwad behavior.) My Champagnes are *all over the place* in residual sugar – as it should be! Beware of anyone who comes at you belching doctrine, because the only sensible doctrine is to be suspicious of doctrine altogether. And no doctrine I know in the wine world is as misleading and pernicious as the dry doctrine.

CHAMPAGNE AT THE TABLE

I warn you now; if we do a wine dinner I won’t allow Champagne to be used as an aperitif and ignored thereafter. Not when it’s one of the easiest slamdunk food wines of all. Many of you know this already, so I’ll spare you the exegeses. I have always disliked bombast and ostentation in any aesthetic object, and wines that scream to be noticed are exactly those I find easiest to ignore. But wines which slide smoothly onto the palate and dance in sync with food are the wines which, paradoxically, have the most to say to us. And Champagne, among such wines, is perhaps the most refined and sensuous.

THE 2005 PROBLEM

As recently as a year ago, I felt fairly confident that many 2005 Champagnes suffered from an off-aroma and flavor resembling rotten potatoes or moldering mushrooms. Among all the various explanations offered as to the possible cause, a geosmin infection seemed most plausible. The problem, at first denied, was now being discussed openly, and the CIVC (and credit where it’s due, many of the big houses) were spending money trying to get to the root cause.

With the passing of a year, I’m more in the dark than ever. Some of the affected wines have actually *shed* the yuckies and are now tasting clean. I have no idea how this could have happened. If it is random bottle-variation, then: why?? If it is some *thing* that passed into and then through the wines, then: what?? And how?

Peter Liem reports having experienced the phenomenon with several 2006s – which I have not. But

if this is true, then what does it suggest? Let’s remember, a starchy aroma and also the scent of fresh button-mushrooms are typical for many Champagnes. Is 2005 aberrant only by having exaggerated these ordinary things? Or is it alien? Again, we don’t know, I don’t know, and the only sensible thing to do as a professional and a human being is to keep tasting, let all hypotheses be provisional and malleable, and admit the limits to one’s knowledge.

Whether one likes 2005, assuming you have a pristine one, is a simple question of taste. They’re heavy-footed and, by Champagne’s standards of finesse and grace, a little crude. As always, exceptions exist. But it’s a vintage for tasters who like ‘em gutsy.

I repeat my admonition to resist seeing this in overbroad strokes. I am not boycotting 2005. But I will refrain from offering many wines I’d otherwise have expected to offer. And when I do offer an ‘05, I’ve vetted it as best I could, and believe it to be not only sound, but significantly worthwhile.

Indulge me a minute. When I did a Champagne lunch for the Chicago trade last October, I found myself talking a lot about the benefits of being wrong, or being clueless. When I was younger I wanted to appear authoritative, and I thought the way one did that was to affect omniscience. And to state big strong opinions. As the mystery of the 2005 vintage deepened, I found I felt happier. The demolition of successive theories was a helpful lesson in humility, and a reminder to always be prepared for surprise; wine knows more than we do, and it *always* has the last word. It seemed more valuable to share this with my fellow professionals than to sound like I Knew-My-Shit because I harbored no evident doubts. I wonder if it did any good—who knows?

There’s more conversation about reduction in Champagne, but one year I learned that the so-called *Gout de Lumière* (the taste of light) is often mistaken for reduction. A gentleman named John Woodward wrote this very useful explanation.

[The *gout de lumière* is] “light-struck taint caused by methionine and vitamin B2 degradation with the generation of a bevy of noxious smelling thiols. It will occur in just a few weeks on a retail shelf, even sooner under bright fluorescent lighting, and will persist in the bottle through cellaring.” To which I would only add, it is of course most prevalent in clear-glass bottles, even *frosted* clear-glass, which need to be wrapped in UV-ray repelling paper. I experimented in the ol’ home cellar, putting one bottle of Rosé on the wine rack where it would be exposed to daylight, and I left another in its case. Opened them both after 30 days, and the difference was apparent.

There are more oaky Champagnes than ever before. Trendy. Ugh, for the most part. Though some are very fine, the problem arises because oak always tastes... like oak. It’s like that period in cuisine when everyone was cilantro-crazy. Again, many of these oak-driven Champagnes are fine and even excellent, but to me they’re guilty until proven innocent.

Pierre Gimmonnet

Côte des Blancs // Cuis



vineyard area // 28 hectares
annual production // 20,800 cases
villages & soil types // Cramant Grand Cru, Chouilly Grand Cru, Oger Grand Cru,
Aÿ Grand Cru, Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru (chalk); Cuis 1^{er} Cru (chalk and clay)
grape varieties // 98% Chardonnay, 2% Pinot Noir

Didier is proof that you can't just let the cat's whiskers out of the bag; if any part of the cat gets out she all gets out.

First he breached his 100% Chardonnay rule with the scandalous *Paradoxe*, which contained the alien Pinot Noir. And now, heaven help us, he has a Rosé. And even more amazing, this man who has always insisted that blending is indispensable to creating elegant Champagnes, is now planning a trilogy of single-commune wines from the outstanding 2012 vintage. Chouilly, Oger, Cramant; maybe just this once, he says. Uh huh!

Gimmonnet's is a polished domaine as small-growers go, with his 28 hectares, the most in the Côte des Blancs. He's renovated his reception area, and you can now taste as the delicate ladies and gentlemen I know you to be. It is, dare I say, elegant. But then Didier wants to find some piece of information about a harvest gone by, and instead of pulling it up on his up-to-the-minute I-Pad (nowhere to be seen, in fact) he pulls it from a decidedly ratty pocket-sized little notebook, where all the data are scribbled by hand. This I just love.

After seven years of tasting *vins clairs* with Gimmonnet, I'm beginning to grok his thinking about these "ingredients" in his pantry. I'm also better able to understand his cognitive unease at the new alien terroirs with which he has to work, in Oger and Vertus. They

don't fit in the existing recipes. So either those recipes must change, or new recipes created.

The wines of Cuis, especially from the climat "Croix Blanche," are fresh and redolent of fruits and flowers, especially quince and peonies. They give a lively femininity to a cuvée, and often are viable on their own, as wines. Didier feels that a certain amount of Cuis is indispensable to his style, even though it costs him the Grand Cru designation in many instances. That's integrity.

Chouilly I admit I find obscure. It shows very little fruit as-such. Instead there's a berried tartness and a serious spine of structure alongside an indirect minerality. The climat "Mont Aigu," down on the plain, "smells like Gimmonnet" according to... Gimmonnet! The very old parcel in neighboring "Fond du Bateau" (planted in 1911) often recalls Grüner Veltliner in its forceful char.

Its neighbor just across the Cramant line is called "Les Gromonts." Suddenly there are flowers and quince again, along with a tactile crushed minerality. Who knows why they put the commune line just there, when we all know terroir is a hoax.... Cramant in general is the Riesling lover's Chardonnay. "Buissant" is open and tangy; other climates echo Riesling at its greenest and most iridescent.

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

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

Cramant is complex and incisive, not powerful.

Then came the “Terres de Noël”—utterly different, sweet-smoky like cherry tobacco, but suave and yummy. But happy as he is to have this outstanding vineyard, Didier can't see where it fits in his style. It's too smoky, too masculine; even 5% of it in a cuvée dominates the cuvée. Though he was intrigued when I suggested it as a stand-alone wine for his zero-dosage Oenophile cuvée. The wine has the belly-richness an extremely dry Champagne needs.

Didier is very much the gadfly as regards yields, and quite proud about his own, which are generous. He could easily flim-flam it; we all know the right things to say, but he is convinced the press has gotten it all wrong. His honesty is bracing. We want it to be simple but nature isn't like that. For me the only way to view the issue that comes anywhere close to the “truth” is to look at each vine, how it's pruned and how its production is guided and managed.

Nor should we ever forget the question of vine density.

In a region where 8,000 vines per hectare is common, a grower who has 10,000 may have what look like “high yields” on paper, but his yield-*per-vine* is lower than his neighbor's. In this as in all value-weighted questions in wine, the easy thing is to form and assert an opinion based on such scraps of information as you've accumulated – or on the person you think you want to be. “The cool kids think low yields are a must, and I want them to accept me.” But the true, hard work is to actually *examine* the question and not shrink from its intricacies, or insist on easy answers. They'll say you're scared to take a stand, but you have, and it's a smarter stand than they take.

Didier believes and is delighted to tell you that too low yields in Champagne make for wines of opacity, like over-reduced sauces; black holes of intensity through which no flavor can emerge. He prizes instead a kind of moderation, transparency, and elegance. And none of you have ever complained his wines are dilute, because they are not; they are just what he says they are.

Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V.
Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 12/375ml
Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 3/1.5L

KPG-1
 KPG-1H
 KPG-1M

Permit me an anecdote. I was on my way to dinner at SPQR in San Francisco, and they have an all-Italian wine list. I wanted Champagne and figured they'd indulge me especially if I shared. So I wandered into D&M wines down the street, and found a bottle of Gimmonnet NV in the cold box. Lucky me. When it was opened my companion and I were amazed. “This is the best bottle of Gimmonnet NV I've *ever* had,” we agreed. We also agreed it was among the very best bottles of any Blanc de Blancs NV we'd ever had.

The bottle was disgorged in 2009. That was why. Three-plus years on the cork and the whole thing is transformed. If you've never aged this wine a few years, believe me, you have no idea how stellar it is. End of anecdote.

“Cuvée 144” was disgorged November 2012. It builds on 2010 (80%), and the reserve wines consist of 2009 (9.8%), 2008 (4.2%), 2007 (5.2%) and 2002 (1%). But this isn't the whole story. The wines are stored not in tank but *in Magnums* to preserve their freshness, and they are in fact **the N.V. blends** of those years. In other words, if I write—X—percent of 2008, that means the 2008 *also* contains a mélange of many different vintages. So you have a kind of chain-reaction of complexity. It's one reason this wine is so stylish and complex, even though it hails from a single commune—Cuis.

The new one is a typical young Gimmonnet based on a cool vintage – in this case 2010. It's as always; articulate, classy and mineral; on the fennel, caraway and wet-forest frequency, with a blatantly chalky finish. It's *swank*.

The MAGNUM is not the same wine, but a December 15, 2012 disgorgement of the NV of two years ago, i.e., based on 2008 (72%). It's cuvée 133, in fact. It needs time, just a few years; the potential is splendid. “The Magnum is a perfect size for me and my wife. My wife doesn't drink.”

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

KPG-5

A preview; will be sold late in 2013. It's 90%CH and 10% PN from Bouzy. Based on 2011. 35.8% Chouilly (Montaigu), 27.5% Cramant, 11.7% Oger, 14.8% Cuis and 0.4% Vertus. A preliminary impression (as it's still on the lees) is one of delicacy, berries, class, salt and umami, and the cuvée is symbiotic.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Gastronome” Brut, 2008

KPG-208

‘08 is a really *really* good vintage, but like many vintages with high acidity and keen flowery aromas, it may go through a mute phase—but it hasn’t yet! The blend combines five villages for the first time: 43% Chouilly, 29% Cuis, 16% Oger, 7.5% Cramant and 4% Vertus.

After ‘08’s customary refined floweriness comes a steely jab of chalk. I sense a floral youth and then a fervently chalky midlife and a potentially glorious maturity, over a 15-20 year arc. The length and detail are striking. This ‘08 is ladylike, albeit a seriously determined lady.

New disgorgement October 2012.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleuron” Brut, 2006 + (+)

KPG-706

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleuron” Brut, 2006, 3/1.5L + (+)

KPG-706M

Disgorged October 2012; I’ll mention the low dosage of 6g/l only because of a sage remark of Didier’s; “It’s not a question of the level of sugar or acidity; it’s a question of elements.”

For me this is usually Gimonnet’s most masculine wine. It’s strikingly leesy and chalky, the kind of wine y’all would call “killer;” mussels and black pepper, and pungent with ‘06’s gorgeously weird play of roundness and pointedness. Already expressive, it will hugely reward another 7-10 years.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Oenophile” Extra Brut, 2005 +

KPG-305

The Fleuron blend without dosage. Disgorged October 2012, it’s 23% Cramant (from the “heart of the terroir”), 45% Chouilly, 8% Oger and 24% Cuis. The wine is certainly strict though not remotely severe. Stocky, fleshy, like pasta-water when you sifted the pasta out after it was done. Chalk-dust. Honestly it’s unfathomable how a really nakedly exposed wine like this could be so wonderful from 2005.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Spécial Club” Brut, 2005, 6/750ml + (+)

KPG-405

By far the best ‘05 I’ve tasted. Disgorged Sept. 2011; the wine is entirely more aerial and soaring than the usually cloddish ‘05s; deeply mineral and very long, it seems to rise on thermal columns of freshness yet conveys a serious depth; langoustines and black truffles and 2nd-flush Darjeeling; not quite classic Gimonnet – ‘05 being ‘05, but I’m really touched to know that such an expression is possible from this vintage. Look for it the last part of this year. 57% Cramant, 30% Chouilly and 13% Cuis, and mostly the venerably aged vineyards.

New disgorgement November 2012.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Millésime de Collection”

Vielle Vignes de Chardonnay Brut, 2005, 3/1.5L +

KPG-605VM

Disgorged September 2012, it’s a necessarily superficial look at a wine with decades in front of it, but that first impression is one of salt, bergamot and old BaoZhong tea.



Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils “Paradoxe” Brut, 2006 +

KPG-906

66% Pinot Noir, 35% of which is Aÿ (Grand Cru) and 31% from a site in Mareuil called *Les Clefs*. The Chard also has a Mareuil component. We shipped it last year, and it's only improved; still a giddy party of fruit, yet focused, orderly and refined. Reminds me of Hébrart, though this is more sapid, stern and chalky. New disgorgement Oct. '11, it's a loving-cup of Champagne fun.

Two older wines, available in tiny quantities... 1996 Spécial Club, one of the still-great wines from that inscrutable vintage, every bottle I've ever had of it has been superb (and I bought a lot on-release); it's an atypical blend for Club —45% Cramant, 25% Chouilly and 30% Cuis, and the late-disgorged wine is insanely chalky, elegant and complex; incisively chalky and with none of this vintage's steely decadence. A ++ wine at least. Even more remarkably, there's some 1989 Spécial Club to be had, a historical artifact as there's no Cuis in the blend. It was the first among a series of stupendous '89s we drank this year – the vintage was a kind of leitmotif in our Champagne sojourn, also very late-disgorged (2012), and I didn't write a note, thinking we were just tasting for fun. It is a ++(+) experience though, and you'll be the luckiest person in your zip-code if you score any.

Varnier-Fannière

Côte des Blancs // Avize



vineyard area // 4 hectares
annual production // 3,000 cases
villages & soil types // Avize Grand Cru, Cramant Grand Cru, Oger Grand Cru (chalk)
grape varieties // 100% Chardonnay

I'm on a total Varnier kick these days. I don't know how Champagne can give more affectionate pleasure. Not only are they incisive in that graphite-y way, but they are correctly conceived as regards dosage. They exude class and fastidious detail. They are like the calligraphy of Avize. And this year I learned they have slightly lower pressure than many Champagnes – about 15-20% less. This may be why they feel so silky and limpid.

It turns out Denis has as much land in Cramant as he does in Avize, and I also learned one possible reason his Champagnes are so silky and refreshing: he micro-oxygenates the still wines in order to use less sulfur and to encourage the tertiaries to express.

Denis does full malo, and is another one who undertakes the back-straining work of the old Coquard press. The style is a theoretical hybrid of Pierre Péters and Larmandier-Bernier, but the fruit is unique. The wines are fastidious and etched; even his Rosé. You know those magnifying goggles the jewelers wear when they're inspecting a stone? Drinking Denis' Champagnes is like looking at flavor through those spectacles.

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



Varnier-Fannière at a glance // Tiny, 4 hectare domaine with exclusively Grand Cru land. Young vigneron making feline-snappy ultra-clear wines.

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

KVF-5

An *homage* to the style of wine his grandfather might have made, and the driest wine in the range. 40% Cramant, 40% Avize and 20% Oger, half-half '07-'08, disgorged December 2012. An incisive laser-focused fragrance in the green herb mint family; the '08 floweriness comes on; the palate is salty and a little stock-like as usual; it needs time on the cork to moderate its pointedness, but as it always *has*, I'm sure it will again.

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

KVF-1

As always one-third each Avize-Cramant-Oger, half-half '09-'10, and as always this excels from pure *fruit*, floral focus and the loveliest balance! It's just charming and tasty; why shouldn't a wine make you happy? This doesn't pander; it's digitally focused and classy and refined, but it has nothing to *prove* —especially “Look how dry I can be!” It only wants to ease your way into satisfaction, and express the silken chalky charm of the Côte des Blancs.

Varnier Fannièrè Rosé Brut, N.V. (+)

KVF-4

Disg Nov. '12. A complex blend and a departure from its predecessors; 30% '08, 40% '09 and 30% '10, with 8% still Pinot Noir from a fine grower in Ambonnay named Dethune, on a base of Avize and Cramant. It's a lot more vinous than before, less strawberry parfait and more ripe tomato, an excellent savory Rosé (though I'll miss the old delicate flowery girlish one) with clarity and breed abounding, like an ether of Burgundy.

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

KVF-2

This has an *outstanding* Grand Cru fragrance of pure graphite and apple; it's an exegesis of terroir, and as great as it's ever been. And it's nearing its conclusion, this specific cuvée, because the vineyard needs re-planting and so there'll be just three more years, after which it will become a mélange of old vineyards from all three communes.

Varnier Fannièrè “Grand Vintage” Brut, 2006 + +

KVF-306

Avize and Cramant. Tiny quantity, *stunning* quality. From selected lots with the highest acidity – in this case 5.2g/l with pH of 3.0 – the wine is almost extremely expressive, of '06's laser-chalk, of super-mineral parcels, but all with a thicker mid-palate; it's winsome and astonishingly hard to spit and at the same time it's seethingly spicy; a potion of jasmine just before the end; this is a virtuosic high-wire balance between seriousness and seductiveness.

Jean Milan

Côte des Blancs // Oger



vineyard area // 6 hectares
annual production // 9,000 cases
villages & soil types // Oger Grand Cru (chalk)
grape varieties // 100% Chardonnay

If you're new to this portfolio, then all you need to know is Milan is the best grower in Oger, and the wines thread the needle between minerality and fruits and smokiness, which is Oger at its most vivid and expressive.



The domaine is 6 hectares, and some fruit is purchased, in excess of the 5% limit whereby one is still a *Recoltante*. Thus you'll see a little "NM" on Milan's label, but this is nothing to be concerned about. There are growers who *deliberately* buy grapes, often from their cousins or other relatives, often as a means of flim-flamming French tax laws, and in some cases they too exceed the 5% limit.

If you know the portfolio, you will maybe remember than Milans had a few years where there were technical issues in many of the wines, the reasons for which were identified and fixed. The family was impeccably open and transparent with me, and though I'm sure I caused them

a few sleepless nights, we've reached the best possible outcome. I sat tasting this year's Champagnes and thought "This is *exactly* why I loved these wines in the first place."

Oger sits between Avize to the north and Le Mesnil to the south, and though it's tempting to suppose its wines are a stylistic bridge between those communes, I see it otherwise. There's more steep hillside land in Oger, a lot of it on a south-facing hill that gives the wines more generosity than, say, Cramant or Chouilly. Gimonnet finds them entirely alien to the cool green stony wines from his neighborhood. To him Oger is masculine and smoky, but again, I see it otherwise. Oger is big-bodied,

Jean Milan at a glance // Wonderful discovery in the heart of the Côte des Blancs. Champagnes of marvelous purity and focus.

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

yes, but it isn't burly, and if I use a word like "queenly," I hope you'll know I mean regal in a womanly way.

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

stands alone—and is better for it. The Champagnes I'll offer you are all 100% Oger.

Milan's 6 hectares are divided into 42 parcels; the average age of the vineyards is 43 years. Daughter Caroline has really stepped forward of late, taking over most of the cellar work including creating the blends, and she's the one disgorging (mostly by hand) every two months. Her brother prefers the vineyards, while their father moves slowly into retirement. A woman as powerful as Caroline is, let's say, conspicuous in Champagne, and I admire her derring-do.

All these wines were disgorged in December 2012.

Jean Milan "Spéciale" Extra-Brut, N.V. +

KML-2

This is back to being superb again; the best bottling in years. Half-half '08-'09, it has a wonderful fresh coolness, a perfect apple you eat in the shade, or a platter of Kumamotos on a breezy terrace—or both. It's markedly long with a rich fresh-bready finish; an Extra-Brut that seems sweeter by sheer force of charm and length. I don't remember a better edition of this impeccable wine.

Jean Milan "Sélection Terres de Noël" Brut, 2009 (+)

KML-509

This single-parcel bottling can be one of the signature wines of the Côte des Blancs in its best years. 72-year-old vines, this tastes much drier than its 8g/l RS, and lands like one of the masculine 1er Cru Chablis; it's round and chewy, almost like Peters' *Chetillons* without the mass; it's vinous and still muted from disgorgement.

Jean Milan "Grande Reserve 1864" Brut, N.V. +

KML-11

It's a blend of cask-aged wines from '03-'04, referencing an old, even atavistic style of Champagne—which explains the rope-enclosed seal. Good bottles of this Champagne are amazingly *food-like*, as if they wished to assume solid form, with the weight of antique furniture. This new rendition didn't seem as oaky or as *recherché* as it's been, but it's murmury and autumnal, with a meditative length and a lot of forest-floor. Try not to serve it ice cold, and don't look for "intensity" as much as depth and length. It's a wise old soul of Champagne.

Jean Milan Rosé "Glamour" Brut, N.V. +

KML-8

All 2010, 90% Oger Chard and 10% Bouzy PN, and if this unheralded vintage can give a wine *this* good, there's hope I didn't know about. Round and generously fruity; tomato-water and a tic of rhubarb; even just 10% of Bouzy is telling, with its meatiness spreading atop the chalk of Oger; the finish is delicate and reminded me of rhododendron honey. Buoyant and classy.

Jean Milan "Cuvée Tendresse" Sec, N.V.

KML-4

The label is a portrait of a woman, Caroline's great grandmother as a young wife, painted by her happy husband, Caroline's grandfather, who baby-sat Caroline when she was a little girl. Caroline created the cuvée as a tribute to them both, this lovely adorable wine, formed in the pure love of a small girl.

As always it's the "Spécial" with more dosage, but not a lot more; 20g.l. in fact, on the dry side for the genre. This one was hard to taste, as it takes longer to assimilate a larger amount of dosage following disgorgement, but pink peppercorn and rosewater and celeriac, and a salty fennelly finish seemed to show.

In effect you use this as you would a Kabinett wine; it even has hyacinth and wisteria notes, and lavender on the finish. Plus brioche and acacia-honey, with a suave sweet lick of hivebuzz. Where else can you get a "sweet" Champagne that's 100% Grand Cru, apart from Selosse? I will be drinking lots of this and I have more testosterone than the entire World Wrestling Federation, so there.

Pierre Péters

Côte des Blancs // Le Mesnil-Sur-Oger



vineyard area // 18.5 hectares
annual production // 14,000 cases
villages & soil types // Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru, Oger Grand Cru,
Cramant Grand Cru, Avize Grand Cru (Cretaceous chalk)
grape varieties // 100% Chardonnay

First the headlines. The estate is now up to twenty hectares. However, this won't prevent us from maxing out our allocations, and so starting now, in 2013, both we and you are going to need to plan how and what we purchase, or we'll have out-of-stocks by the middle of October.



Rodolph Péters is fastidious about these allocations. When we tried to order after we'd already reached our maximum, he seemed to be affronted. When I explained it was a nothing-ventured nothing-gained proposition, in case another of his clients hadn't taken their allocations, he assured me that all clients took their allocations. I want to be him!

He's making a second single-vineyard wine now, *Les*

Mont Jolis, a vineyard out near the Mesnil-Vertus road in the plain. He has six parcels there, and wants a feminine consort to the very "manly" wines of Chetillons. We'll see the results in a few years. The *vin claire* was excellent.

Finally there's a new non-vintage wine called *Reserve Oubliée*, the quantity of which is homeopathic. Alas, the wine is completely superb, so I'm dustin' off the knee pads.

Maybe Rodolphe Péters is consolidating his regime. He's passionate and proud. And when these wines are on – as they've been forever but especially for the past three years – you wonder if anyone in the whole Côte des Blancs is better.

At the beginning I had access to anyone I wanted in Mesnil, and after many months of tasting and visiting it was clear Péters was *hors classe*, an impression only strengthened in the years since.

He took us through our paces this year; seven *vins claires* (including the experiments with avoiding malo) and for each of the actual Champagnes, multiple cuvées. Rodolph harvests later than his father did, so there's a phenolic "sweetness" to some cuvées that mimics sugar. Tasting this way is like exercising a new muscle in your body. I'll report how it was, as it happened.

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

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

Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V. +	KPP-1A
Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V., 12/375ml +	KPP-1H
Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L +	KPP-1M
Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V., 1/3.0L +	KPP-1J

First we tasted the 2008-based wine, which we had on the market two years ago. Bear in mind—Péters performs what they call a “perpetual solera,” which means the NV contains whichever vintage is current, *plus the previous blend*, and so each iteration contains a certain quantity of very old wine. Or you could say it is a mature solera that’s constantly refreshed.

This ‘08-based wine is hyper-aromatic; it was the best in many years, and it’s the one I have in my cellar right now.

Then we tasted the ‘09-based wine we shipped last year. It’s rounder and saltier, more brioche. Flowers in ‘08, butter in ‘09.

Finally the 2010, disgorged in December 2012. It was gnarly from disgorgement, but with time it will resemble the ‘08; perhaps more overtly chalky, less hyacinth and wisteria but more jasmine. Surprisingly dense yet pixilated pulverized oyster shell. Time on the cork will really reward this wine.

Pierre Péters Millésime Brut, 2008 + (+)	KPP-208
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Disgorged December ‘12; it has the sweetest fragrance of any vintage since ‘02, really high-toned white hyacinth; the palate is sleek to the point of feeling stretched; it’s drier than the ‘06 was, more sinewy, with long oyster flavors; quite “straight” and scrupulous and logical. ‘06 is more flattering: ‘08 more incisive.

We previewed the 2009 also. Back to overt charm. Rodolph says quince and pink grapefruit, plus “a touch of sunlight.” Superbly elegant and intricate for the vintage. Likely ++ quality.

Pierre Péters Cuvée Spéciale “Les Chétilions” Brut, 2006 + +	KPP-306
Pierre Péters Cuvée Spéciale “Les Chétilions” Brut, 2006, 3/1.5L + +	KPP-306M

Disgorged November 2012. An imposing fragrance leads to a foamy, fleshy palate; there’s nothing inscrutable here, this is an obvious masterpiece, less earthy and recherché than ‘05; tertiary blasts of chalk and mint; it’s finer-grained than the meaty ‘05, with less espresso-savor than ‘02 or ‘00. Ending notes of chartreuse.

Pierre Péters Rosé “For Albanne” Brut, N.V.	KPP-4
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Based on 2010 with 20% of the previous blend. This disgorgement has 8g/l RS, which he’s contemplating reducing with later disgorgements. I would decide otherwise, as the balance here seems perfect; it’s all ultra-ripe tomatoes and rhubarb jelly, rich and vinous, a rosé in the solid vein, that defied categorization and is virtually unique in the Côte des Blancs. In other words: Peters!

The Chardonnay (from a *climat* called Musette) is blended with macerated Pinot Meunier, the specific details of which are guarded coquettishly. And though I’d like to know, I don’t need to know, because the wine is convincing.

Pierre Péters “Reserve Oubliée” Brut, N.V.	KPP-310
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This is all a bit of a mystery, and I suppose it’ll be in terribly short supply, but—the intent was to offer an NV that was “mature but not oxidative,” and what I tasted was the “perpetual reserve” based on 2007, kept in tank an additional year, bottled in 2009 and aged on the cork. Most intriguingly, the *dosage* is a must-concentrate *they made in-house*, the first time I have heard of this; furthermore, it was aged in a 60-liter barrel of old wood from Cognac, making it the only Péters wine with any wood flavor. And the wine was explosive, wonderfully expressive and not “mature” but indeed tertiary; all the things you desire from Champagne but have had to age yourself.

What will be shipped to us—assuming we get any—is 2008-based and ought to be even better.

Marc Hébrart

Vallée de la Marne // Mareuil-Sur-Aÿ



vineyard area // 15.5 hectares
annual production // 8,750 cases
villages & soil types // Avize Grand Cru, Oiry Grand Cru, Chouilly Grand Cru,
Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru, Bisseuil 1^{er} Cru, Avenay Val d'Or 1^{er} Cru (chalk)
grape varieties // 70% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay

There's always a surprise here. We were tasting vins clairs and two samples were poured, the first was a little clunky and showing its oak, while the 2nd was more refined and higher toned. They were the same wine.

The first was unfiltered, the second filtered two days before. An interesting moment to pay a call on one's assumption that filtration is always evil, eh?

Jean-Paul has 15 hectares now, thanks to the purchase of two new parcels in Aÿ and one in Avize, which is wonderful news. He now has sixty-eight different parcels.

This came up when we were talking about biodynamics. You can probably infer the rest.

It's not that we're sneering at bio-d in any way. I respect the practice and any vintner who commits to it. What I do not respect are outsiders who claim the right to judge a grower's moral or environmental conscience.

The fruit of Mareuil Pinot Noir is unlike any I know in Champagne: firmer and less malty than Aÿ, altogether less chunky than Bouzy, not unlike Verzy but richer, far more comme il faut than the savage power of Verzenay, less softly perfumey than Ambonnay, less smoky than Cumières. Indeed if it were Burgundy, Mareuil could well be Morey-St.-Denis.

The estate as such exists since 1963, but it was in 1983

that fils Jean-Paul began to grow it, joining the Club in 1985. Along with Chouilly, Oiry, and Mareuil there's land in Bisseuil and Avenay Val d'Or — all 1er Cru. It's 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay, with vineyards averaging 36 years old. The wines undergo malo.

I have always been fond of these wines, but either they've gotten better or I've gotten less stupid, because in the past several years I find them almost without peer, not only in this portfolio but *anywhere* in Champagne. I'll tell you why. I know of few if *any* wines that so deftly combine the utmost fruit expression with the utmost focus and precision. Think about it. As a rule when you reach a certain point in either fruit or precision, one precludes the other. Not here! Here you get hi-def fruit of such clarity you swear you could taste each grape.

As such it hardly matters whether you're in the "fruit" camp or the "terroir" camp or the "rock-head" camp or just the "indefinable-Champagne-something" camp because these wines will give all of you everything you'd ever want.

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

KMH-6

Disgorged October 2012, the wine is 40% Oiry and Chouilly and 60% Mareuil. 80% '09 and 20% '08-'07. There's more power than last year's rapturous '08, but it's still lithe and incisively mineral, long and with Grand Cru solidity (because as far as I'm concerned Mareuil is Grand Cru); balance couldn't be better, and this wine will really start singing later this year.

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

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

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

KMH-1

Marc Hébrart “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V., 12/375ml (+)

KMH-1H

Disgorged Oct. '12, and now 60% 2010 to 40% '09-'08. It's 82% PN (from Mareuil, Aÿ, Avenay Val d'Or and Bisseuil) and 18% CH (from Mareuil). One of the most improbable PN-based NVs in all of Champagne, it has euphoric varietal fruit but is cirrus-clear, with the texture of cool steel. This one's a teeny bit slimmer than last year—that's 2010—but round 'n red yet as pointed as an acupuncture needle. The equipoise between chalk-dust and sweet fruit is striking.

Marc Hébrart “Sélection” Brut, N.V. ++

KMH-2

This ostensibly “superior” NV isn't exactly better; it's different. Higher-toned, more of what we normally think of as Champagne flavors (brioche, saffron, lobster). If I had to pick just one single wine from this whole happy mess to reassure a timid drinker that the Champagnes don't taste “weird,” it would be this one. But unlike nearly every mainstream Champagne, this is focused and precise and vinous.

This is the best bottling I can recall. Disgorged Oct. '12, it's 80% 2008 and 20% '07-'06. 65% old-vines PN from Mareuil and 35% CH from Oiry & Chouilly.

It's superb, a paradigm of Champagne at its most elegant and seductive. Long, lacy finish of talc, chalk power, jasmine and cox-orange. And it is **ONE OF THE VERY BEST VALUES IN THIS PORTFOLIO!!!**

Marc Hébrart “Prestige” Brut, 2007 (+)

KMH-407

It's now had the time I felt it needed when I tasted and bypassed it a year ago. This was in fact the Special Club blend, and was approved as such, but the quantity was too small to bottle as Club.

Disgorged Nov. '12, it's 60% PN from Mareuil and Aÿ, and 40% CH from Oiry and Chouilly. The aromas are expressive, and only a nip of steel indicates the cool vintage. Lacy, intricate sun-on-snow poise of warmth and brilliance, and just ludicrous length.

Marc Hébrart “Special Club” Brut 2008, 6/750ml +++

KMH-308

The single best young wine I tasted in Champagne this year, and as good as it gets.

Disgorged November 2012, the blend is the same as the above '07-vintage, but this is of another order, and shows 2008 at its most sublime. Lunar, mystic aromas, it's why the vintage is so exquisite and potentially great. And no mistake—this is great wine that has everything, plus the dancing animation of all its hundred elements; Champagne at its most bewitching, all leading to a truly astonishing and endless finish that *defines* complexity and beauty.

Marc Hébrart “Rive-Gauche-Rive-Droit” Grand Cru Extra Brut, 2006 +

KMH-706

The wine is vinified in 3rd-use barriques. It's 50% Aÿ PN (from Pruche, Chauzelles and Longchamp) and 50% old-vines CH from Oiry (Justice) and Chouilly (Montaigu). Disgorged 5 Nov. '11. Unfiltered, no cold-stabilization, ambient yeasts.

Wary as I am of oaky wines, I loved how the '04 developed and it's clear I was too cautious, and underrated it. This '06 starts with elusive fragrance, but not overtly oaky; the palate though is more explosive, rich and generous in an extravagantly manly sort of way; salty and stocky and brown-buttery with even some carob. Air awakens the aromas, and the wine has depth and sex-appeal.

Disgorged September 2012.

Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V.

KMH-5

Disgorged November 2012, and 50% 2010 CH from Mareuil, 41% 2010-2009 PN from Mareuil, and 9% still red 2009 from Mareuil. Normally one of my favorite Rosés, this one was stingingly young and rather muted, aloof, yet something in it was curiously long. One to watch.

Henri Goutorbe

Vallée de la Marne // Aÿ



vineyard area // 22 hectares
annual production // 10,000 cases
villages & soil types // Aÿ Grand Cru, Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru (Cretaceous chalk, limestone)
grape varieties // 70% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay, 5% Pinot Meunier

These are the most conservative of the Champagnes in this collection—or I could also say, the least radical.

When they're in form, they show a sensuous generosity and a suave maltiness that typify Champagne for many drinkers. But they also show an atypical precision and terroir character that identifies them as growers.

If you've visited the region recently there's a fair chance you know the family, as they've opened the very popular and badly needed Hotel Castel Jeanson in Aÿ, just a few steps from the winery. If you're a grape-grower in Champagne you almost certainly know Goutorbe, as he's one of the leading vine-nurserymen. When word reached me they would indeed be interested in export, I was delighted that no one had grabbed them.

I'm also really pleased to find a supplier for Aÿ Pinot at last. There's a consensus among fizz-heads that the "top-5" Grand Crus are Aÿ, Ambonnay, Verzenay, Cramant and Mesnil, and for me Aÿ has always stood out for its special malt and blueberry aromas and overall class. If, as I've written elsewhere, Ambonnay is Volnay or Chambolle, then Aÿ is Vosne-Romanée.

The problem of the potato-y aroma has peeked in at this house, and while it is improving it isn't entirely gone. It's not there at all at the Special Club echelon, which creates an odd skew in our numbers, as Club outsells the basic NV. You might see individual wines come and go from this offering, as I screen the dubious things away. This isn't because I'm perfect and know everything; it's because if there's any doubt, even about my own abilities, I won't gamble with your trust for its benefit.



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

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

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

KGO-1

This was disgorged in July 2012; it's based on '07 with “15-20% '06” and I was surprised when the fragrance was tatory. However, this cleared away in about two minutes, and was never present on the palate. So, um—???

I tasted it from different kinds of glasses, and what seemed to happen was, after a few minutes the Champagne became solid, elegant and classic of its malty type, with aspects of mirabelle and sweet straw; the way it always is and the reason I'm so fond of it. So, this is *potentially* the best it's been for at least three years.

Henri Goutorbe “Spécial Club” Brut, 2004, 6/750ml + +

KGO-204

You aren't going to believe me, but this wine is every bit as good as the 2002. It's different, naturally; it's the granita after the richness of the '02, with all of '04s tensile precision and high-definition relief and incisiveness; the usual malt is paired with a cool string of verbena, the wine is silly-long for its brilliance, and it will flesh out under the cork. A more dramatic success than the '02, a year when everyone's wines were outstanding.

As always this is 100% old-vines Aÿ, and this new January 2013 disgorgement will have recovered by the time you taste it; it's a proud wine and quite seductive, doughier than many '04s, with notes of clementine and Satsuma, sweet straw and blueberry.

Henri Goutorbe Rosé Brut, N.V.

KGO-3

Disgorged 12/12, and now all '09, 35%CH and 65%PN. The wine is rounder and more generous than last year's, with length and with a sternness the '09s seem to be showing. I remember feeling the same way about '99s, which then slimmed down and became tasty and elegant, so I wonder whether this heavy-footedness in many '09s is just a phase. The Aÿ blueberry is markedly vivid here, and the smell of the season's first fresh Sockeye.

Gaston Chiquet

Vallée de la Marne // Dizy



vineyard area // 23 hectares
annual production // 18,300 cases
villages & soil types // Aÿ Grand Cru, Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru, Hautvillers 1^{er} Cru,
Dizy 1^{er} Cru (belemnite chalk); Crugny, Nanteuil la Forêt (chalk and clay)
grape varieties // 45% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Meunier, 20% Pinot Noir

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 of 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've sometimes heard myself say that Chiquet's N.V. is what Moët & Chandon's *should* be. There's a walnutty style they have in common. Mind you, I don't clamor for opportunities to drink the Big Fella, but one time we were surprised with a bottle and two flutes waiting in our room when we checked into a hotel we frequent. Curiosity got the better of me, and we opened it. The Champagne was "correct" and a little bland and featureless, and I felt sad that it represented "Champagne" to so many unwary people, who probably don't think they like Champagne and wonder why it costs so much. Yet at the same time I felt considerable admiration; considering the volume that's churned out, this wine might have been much worse. I felt it was an industrial wine made with a certain scrupulousness. The parent-company's business practices are another story, but the wine held up its end. Of course it was the Brut Imperial, and it was a European bottle....

I was at Chiquet less than a week later and played that Moët back in my head when Nicolas' N.V. was served. Chiquet has more character in every way, more fruit, more interplay of flavors, clearer diction, just more interesting *and tasty*.

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

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



Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V.

KCQ-1

Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V., 12/375ml

KCQ-1H

Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V., 3/1.5L

KCQ-1M

Something I just love about Nicolas is he really *does* care about adjusting his disgorgement schedules so we’re not always tasting cruelly woozy inexpressive wines. So: this is disgorged in July `12; it’s 82% 2009, 8% 2008 and 8% 2007. Again, most of the NVs are now based on 2010, so this is more poised and relaxed. It’s 40% Meunier, 35% CH and 25%PN, and it’s a round, almost earthy edition of this reliably lip-smacking wine; energetic yet graceful, and while it has less Meunier than usual, it shows more; it also has the length and that adamant sternness of `09, especially red-grape cuvées.

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

KCQ-2

Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d’Aÿ Brut, N.V., 3/1.5L

KCQ-2M

Y’all are used to this by now, but when I first introduced it back in 1997 it was pretty rad to have 100% Chardonnay from one of *the* grand PN terroirs in Champagne. I think it’s still the sole chance to see pure Aÿ terroir abstracted away from the Pinot Noir that almost always expresses it, or is presumed to.

Nicolas himself tends to like his stronger vintages whereas I tend to like his filigree flowery ones. So he likes this `09 and I preferred last year’s `08—though I also like this one. It was disgorged in October `12, and it’s smoky and almost burly; hard to believe there’s no red fruit in it. I think it needs time to work out a charred, scorched note that extends into the finish. It helps if you like a corpulent wine, and I may be too critical. I suspect mine will be the minority view...

Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2004 +
Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2005

KCQ-304
KCQ-305

The '04 ought to be available until October, so we'll see the year out with this vintage. It's the same disgorgement we've always had—Sept. '11—and it remains a singular and lovely PN statement (60% w. 40%CH), one of those wines that attracts a zillion associations; mine have at various times included blueberry, thyme, chervil, burdock, basil oil, mizuna, Sencha, chalk and rose hips.

(The '05 was rusky, toasty and mussel-y, so in fact quite promising, and very clean.)

Gaston Chiquet Rosé Brut, N.V.

KCQ-8

Disgorged August '12, and all 2009. Where the '08 was like a potion of blossoms, this is like roasted green tomatoes. It's *assemblage*; the still-red is half-half '08-'09. The fruit is just lovely, and while it's robust and sizeable it's better balanced than many '09s, though it's big and chewy enough. 2009 was on the low side in acidity and thus received less dosage than it often needed.

Gaston Chiquet "Spécial Club" Brut, 2005, 6/750ml +

KCQ-405

Disgorged June '12. It's the acceptable face of '05, the scent of fresh white mushrooms or impeccably good oyster mushrooms, and a delicate chalkiness; it makes a strong case on the palate; it isn't heavy and there's a good stiff chalky length and a doughy richness. The length feels almost slender, and the finish was like cold-pressed grapeseed oil, not quite nutty. I'm impressed.

It's 33% from flat vineyards in Aÿ, 33% from the steep Chardonnay sites that also give the Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ and 33% PN from Hautvillers, from "our best *climat*, the Colombier."

(NOTE: there's some 2004 Club in reserve for release in 2014, possibly alongside the new 2007 Club. Nicolas was concerned all the '04 would vanish before it really showed its best.)

Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Brut, 2004, 3/1.5L + (+)

KCQ-704M

This is the **2004** vintage, disgorged June 2012. It has the magnum-stiffness to start, and then it's like you're watching the metal melt, and then that cool magnum fruit arrives, and that serene glowing complexity; sleek tarragon-cut with verbena and chartreuse and flint. As pretty as it is now, something is still encased in ice. Can we wait 5 years? I'm not a patient guy...

NOTE: all this talk about the "burly" 2009s prompted Nicolas to open a 1989 Club, as it was another low-acid year that was thought to be maybe a bit graceless at first. He disgorged this bottle in 1995 and stored it upright to avoid cork. It was sensational, an imposing amazing fragrance, classic '89 smoke, could have been a '71 or '70; militantly splendid and gorgeously "sweet." Hard to comprehend the complexity of all these different smokes and heaven-fruits. It's full of noisy genius, this wine; no repose to be gleaned. That's fine; an alpha is welcome from time to time.

René Geoffroy

Vallée de la Marne // Cumières

vineyard area // 14 hectares
annual production // 10,400 cases
villages & soil types // Cumières 1^{er} Cru (calcerous soils, sandstone and clay)
grape varieties // 41% Pinot Noir, 37.5% Pinot Meunier, 21.5% Chardonnay
Ampeles Certification // lutte raisonnée



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



We would taste a single Champagne with five different dosage levels as well as different types of dosage; traditional liqueur and “MCR” (*basically must-concentrated-rectified*), the method JB prefers, and one about which I have voiced a certain wariness.

To remind you, I know that MCR is easier and cheaper to work with, and it conveys a heavier sweetness, so you can use less and still obtain the sense-of-sweetness you desire. I worry that the only source is the Languedoc, and it troubles me that conventional Languedoc grape-must concentrate is going into Champagnes whose

producers are wont 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.

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



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.

The family has moved into brand new quarters in Aÿ, on the same street as Deutz and on the same street as Goutorbe, which gives me two suppliers on the same rue. This place rocks. The winery is constructed so that Jean-Baptiste never has to pump any more; everything can be handled by gravity. He also (finally) has the space he needs. Look, basically what this means is that the most *excited guy in Champagne* can now do everything he's always wanted to do. And so his estate, already among the best in the region, will climb to new altitudes.

Something's always up at Geoffroy. He's planted a field-blend in one parcel consisting of *all five* varieties (i.e. including Arbanne and Petit Meslier) to see, in effect, whether terroir trumps varietal. M He's likely to call it "Houtrants," which is the name of the parcel.

Each year we taste it in various stages, and it's coming along, though neither JB nor I have any firm idea how it will ultimately taste. The 2012 *vin Claire* is seriously good, reminding me of a Nussberg (the famous field-blend from Vienna vineyards). We saw a 2009-base still en tirage in magnum, and a 2008, neither of which were, let's say, open for inspection. A bottle of 2010 with 50% of the '08 mag started to show the shape of the beast. It seems basically *nutty*—but we'll see. It will surely be singular, and savory as opposed to floral or "fruity."

He's joined a group called "Ampelos" which practice the so-called "Lutte Raisonnée" (or "sustainable culture," or what the Germans call "integrated"

viticulture) which formalizes a set of practices just a baby-step short of certifiably organic, and enforces the protocols with random inspections.

To begin with, consider Cumières. This Marne Valley village is one of the few in Champagne whose vineyards are all exposed to the southeast, and it's usually among the first to start the harvest. It is red-grape land here; indeed, Geoffroy's still red is celebrated throughout the region. The Geoffroys own 14 hectares in Cumières, Hautvillers, Damery and Fleury-la-Rivière, 42% Pinot Noir, 39% Meunier, 19% Chardonnay.

Most of you know in Champagne the first juice from the press is known as the *cuvée*, and is deemed the best or finest. Then there's the *première taille* (first pressing) and the *deuxième taille* (second press), gradually thinner and rougher. Usually the *cuvée* consists of the first 2,000 liters from the press, but at Geoffroy they restrict it to 1,800 liters, which also increases the quality of the *première taille*. The musts are never centrifuged or fined. Many are fermented in wood, and Geoffroys avoid malolactic at all costs. I understand why. His wines come from warm vineyards, and he wants to preserve their acidity. And he *does* preserve their acidity, which I would argue is at odds with how dry he wants them to be. Which in turn is exacerbated (in some instances) by how soon after disgorgement they are sold. This is a very successful domaine, with no time to hold onto wines for 6-9 months post disgorgement. And so a fine collection of Champagnes could, I believe, be finer still with a wee bit more flexibility on the RS question.

This year I had the impression JB was also seeing the question as one of balance, rather than trying to "force" the wines dry. I don't mean to imply there was any sort of debate between him and me; far from it. We just talk as colleagues who can be candid.

René Geoffroy “Cuvée Expression” Brut, N.V.

KRG-11

Disgorged October 2012, and 70% '09 – 30% '08 – still the same assemblage as last year, but this later disgorgement is drier than last year's. The Champagne is like sweet straw in liquid form, with a delicate creaminess and a hint of porcini. A perfect by-the-glass for an Italian fine-dining place. '09 really knows how to enjoy itself in a wine like this one.

René Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, 2007

KRG-207

René Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, 2007, 12/375ml

KRG-207H

Disgorged November '12. 76% PN, 11% Meunier, 13% CH, and the majority done in (large) oak. Dosage is... higher than the '06: good for him! The wine doesn't *taste* sweeter. It has wonderful Pinot Noir aromas, like bacon as it cooks or a brioche made from goose fat instead of butter. I had no great hopes for '07s but this is delightful, maybe more agreeable than the impressive but uncompromising '06.

René Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut 2006 +

KRG-806

A new disgorgement of September 2012. At first the *very* dry profile of this wine was viable, but when it shed its baby-fat I started thinking it was a little stark. JB showed me a bottle he'd kept off to the side, to which he'd given more dosage, and when I tasted it I asked if I could obtain it, or something like it.

This is that wine. It's still not remotely “sweet;” it has 5g/l instead of 2, but it has what it needs to be something more than *A Study In Champagne*; this you can drink for joy. Like most '06s it shows a streamlined chalky buzz below a vinous juiciness, and its flavors of corn, lime, balsam, coconut and ginger are still almost imposingly expressive. If you've forgotten, 80% CH – 20% PN, no malo and 94% done in (large) wood. It remains **A STUNNING VALUE**.

(NOTE: the 2007 will be sold at the end of this year; I saw a naked sample of the wine en tirage and noted its promise. It's 80% CH, 10% PN and for the first time, 10% Meunier. It has less wood than the '06 - 45%)

Vintage Wines

I tasted four of them. The one we are currently selling is the truly outstanding...

René Geoffroy Millésime Extra Brut, 2004, 6/750ml + +

KRG-604

René Geoffroy Millésime Extra Brut, 2004, 3/1.5L + +

KRG-604M

It remains among the GREAT '04s; an electric, charged dialogue between Chardonnay in (subtle, murmur) wood and the whole panoply of verbena and wintergreen and cherry-smoke and spice-box. This disgorgement is Oct 2012, and the wine shows nothing faintly calm; it's a profound jittery beast.

The **2005** is...complicated. It needs more dosage than the sample had. The **2006** has fantastic potential.

But the real stunner was a gorgeous **1999**, salty and magisterial. It will be sold “some time.” It better be!

René Geoffroy “Blanc de Rosé” Brut, N.V., 6/750ml +

KRG-13

Possibly unique in Champagne: a 50-50 co-maceration of CH-PN that seems to give a kind of ether of rosé. It's all 2010 now, disgorged June '12, very dry. The reduction was stubborn in this bottle. When it eventually faded there was a determined original wine; crusty, snappy and tartly fruity, which itself slowly transitioned to a truly esoteric rendering of PN, blatant sandalwood and green pepper. The finish was long and echoey.

René Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.

KRG-9

René Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V., 12/375ml

KRG-9H

René Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L

KRG-9M

Disgorged November 2012; succulent Noir aromas lead to a curiously grassy palate, one I've associated with those ladybugs we've all read about. Or is the vintage fundamentally green tasting? Judgment deferred until I taste it a few more times.

Moussé Fils

Vallée de la Marne // Cuisles



vineyard area // 5.5 hectares
annual production // 4,100 cases
villages & soil types // Cuisles, Jonquery, Olizy-Violaine, Châtillon-sur-marne
(chalk, marl)
grape varieties // 80% Pinot Meunier, 16% Pinot Noir, 4% Chardonnay

It was my first appointment the morning after the big snowstorm that paralyzed northern Europe in mid-March. Cuisles is, let's say, not on the main road, and I was curious how I'd manage. But Champagne sure was pretty in the snow, and I managed to glissade my way there.

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

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

I visited twice and assembled wines both times. I emphasize this point, because I find it urgently necessary to drink the wines as *you* do, before I commit to a new agency. Tasting of course is fine, but wines are one way being "tasted" and another way being "drunk." And I need to see, as I work my way through a case, if the wines remain as interesting and attractive as they seemed at the

moment of "tasting." A wine that shows well but grows at all tiresome after the 4th or 5th exposure is too superficial.

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

Cuisles has 20-40cm of topsoil over what Cédric calls "schiste." The existence of such a soil in Champagne was news to all of us. He swears there is a vein of schist running from Villers-Sous-Châtillon directly through Cuisles, and to his knowledge it's unique in Champagne. If you go to his (or our) website you can look at photos. The sub-soils are porous but the roots can't penetrate them. Other soils are the usual mixture of marls and micraster chalk common to this part of Champagne – but we have to understand the geology behind Cédric's claim, and also resist the temptation to assume we're "tasting" it—though we're certainly tasting *something* and it might as well be schist.

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

Moussé at a glance // Our favorite among the Meunier pilgrims in the Marne Valley (and elsewhere), an up-and-coming young grower who's the newest member of the Club *Tresors*.

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

environmental standpoint; get in touch with us if you want the details. Cédric grows a little Chardonnay but only uses it for a Blanc de Blancs; everything else is all *noire*.

We tasted *vins claires* and also did dosage trials. Some of the basic NV we got last year was a bit sweeter than I personally preferred, and I was also curious to ascertain of

the two non-vintage wines could somehow be collapsed into just one.

Among the still wines was the 2012 Special Club blend, which was excellent. There will be a *new* Club wine, a Meunier Rosé from a 28-year-old vineyard, ambient-yeast fermented, no malo, and superbly pretty.

Moussé Fils “Or Tradition” Brut, N.V.

KMS-1

This wine will become incrementally more mature as the years pass, as Cédric kindly offers to age it longer for us to bring it closer in style to his “superior” NV.

I’ll share the dosage tasting with you. We tasted them blind. The *base-wine* is 50% 2009 and 50% ‘08-’07-’06, and as always it’s 82% Meunier and 18% PN. Sample ONE was very good and didn’t need to be sweeter. TWO was rounder, more seductive, more end-palate lemon snap. Good but the first was better. A blend of the two was better than either alone. THREE was more exotic, it tasted drier but I doubted it was. FOUR was too sugary yet still not cloying, only needlessly sweet. FIVE was “commercial” and charming, but lacked the specificity of farmer-fizz.

ONE had 7g/l.
TWO had 7.7g/l.
THREE had 8.4g/l.
FOUR had 9.1g/l.
FIVE had 9.8g/l.

Curiously, number three was slim and linear, though some tasters would (incorrectly) find it too sweet. The blend of one and two, giving basically 7.35g/l was ideal; serious yet round and substantive; masculine and caramelly. A really superior Meunier Champagne—so, we have our NV!

Moussé Fils “Noire Réserve” Brut, N.V.

KMS-3

The “superior” NV was disgorged Nov 2012; the assemblage is very close to the above, but the wine is older: 60% ‘08 and 40% ‘07-’06. The dosage is 7.7g/l; the wine is more serious, firmer—that’s 2008, of course—with less stomach and more ribs and shoulders; a logical wine with some maturity showing.

Moussé Fils Blanc de Blancs “Opale” N.V. +

KMS-2

This may all have been sold to one (very smart) customer, but if he leaves any for the rest of us... it’s where all of Cédric’s Chardonnay goes, and this one is masterly. All 2008, but an even smaller quantity than usual because some went into a vintage wine “For the family” that had Chard and PN. I mean, how dare they. Disgorged Nov 2012, this is a potion of white tea, jasmine; it’s spicy, salty and riotously floral, even mineral. As *pretty* as BdB can be.

Moussé Fils Millésime Brut, 2008 +

KMS-508

When I whimpered pitifully, I mean dude I made a total poodle of myself, begging for table scraps, he relented and let me have some. A little. This is the 50-50 CH-PN wine, never to be done again; disgorged January 2013, the palate is just wonderful, charming, fine-grained, cool and silky. He says it’s rare to get such ripe PN in Cuisles. The wine is piquant, elegant, fine-boned and delicious.

Moussé Fils “Spécial Club” 2008 Brut, 6/750ml

KMS-608

I tasted an experimental sample without enough RS; it had 4 and needed 5.5-6.0, but it’s slim and linear as ‘08 is. 100% old-vines Meunier. Can’t wait to see this in final form.

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

KMS-4

This is *their* NV, based on 2010—ours as you see is already older than what’s sold in France – assemblage with still PN, disgorged Nov 2012; right now it feels bifurcated, steel on one side and fruit on the other, but assuming it eventually knits, it will be yummy. Late in 2013 it ought to be charming.

Henri Billiot

Montagne de Reims // Ambonnay



vineyard area // 5 hectares
annual production // 3,750 cases
villages & soil types // Ambonnay Grand Cru (limestone)
grape varieties // 75% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay

Generational transfers can be tricky. But this was the first year I felt that Laetitia and her husband really had control of the domaine.



Serge has fully retired now. I had the sense his was an uneasy retirement at first, and he may have, let's say, hovered. A little. "My father had his formulas, and they almost always worked," said Laetitia. "But in his later years he may not have noticed when they didn't work, because he often didn't really taste."

That would explain the unevenness over the last 3-4 years, I said, and she agreed. She added that the "Cuvée Laetitia" was in the process of being changed, "to be fresher and not to have the apple taste." I shared my thought that there was one dud in the solera. It turns out Laetitia used to be a number of small tanks, but was shifted into a

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

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

single larger one at one point, and there was indeed a flaw in the large tank.

Of course what's curious about all this is, the so-called "flaw" in Cuvée Laetitia was actually enjoyed by many drinkers and *also* by knowledgeable reviewers, who saw its pear-droppy notes as exotic. And why not? But I still own old bottles of Laetitia, and she after whom it is named concurred when I said it was a *classic* of grower-Champagne, that had become perhaps *strange* of late.

The estate is also between Millésimes, so the

offering will be clipped – but what remains are the most encouraging bottles of Billiot for several years, and I can't wait to taste them again, and repeatedly.

Ambonnay is Pinot land; 350 hectares and only 20 of them Chardonnay. Ambonnay Pinot Noir seems to be the sweetest, most Volnay-like in the Montagne de Reims. (Bouzy, in contrast, is darker but more earthy, while Aÿ is firmer with less overt berried fruit). The Ambonnay signature might be strawberry, forest-floor, sweet-100s. All of which are certainly present in Billiot's wines.

Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V. (+)

KBA-1

Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V., 6/1.5L (+)

KBA-1M

They want to change this, and so we did dosage trails. But I had to say I liked the wines as they were; the (potentially) drier versions were coarse.

The wine is 50% 2010 and 50% '09-'08, disgorged January 2013, and rather shook up. It's potentially excellent and *pure* Billiot, with all their stand-at-attention Ambonnay fruit and the solid, *al dente* finish. I let a glass stand for 20 minutes and it really started to sing.

Henri Billiot Rosé Brut, N.V. + (+)

KBA-4

It's the same base as the NV, assemblage with still PN; disgorged in Jan. '13. We tried two blends, one with 4g/l and the other with... more. They weren't very different; like siblings who look alike but one of them is nicer. This PN from 2010 is really refined, compact, berried, with the *indigo* fruit that vintage also shows in Burgundy. Back in grand form, albeit not the exact same form; rather the form of the new generation, that plays in a darker register.

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

KBA-6

Now 2006 – I wasn't convinced last year, thinking it was too woody, but longer *en tirage* (disgorged Dec. '12), and with tamped-down RS - which lets the oak show through more. They themselves feel this cuvée has gotten too oaky, and plan to throttle back on it. But this is powerful, salty, quite stern, and—oaky. I don't find it blatant, but tastes differ. Let's call it *strong*, and not entirely in command of its own strength.

Jean Lallement

Montagne de Reims // Verzenay



vineyard area // 4.5 hectares
annual production // 1,700 cases
villages & soil types // Verzenay Grand Cru (limestone)
grape varieties // 80% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay

Michel Bettane was flipping through this catalogue and issuing various mutters of approval or otherwise, but when he got to Lallement he boomed out “Lallement: I discovered them!”



As well he did, and I can see why they appeal to him, as he lays high emphasis on precision, focus and a crystalline texture. All of which these Champagnes display. As do many others. But what very few Champagnes display are these virtues together with strikingly singular and distinctive terroir expression. I am always secretly delighted when Lallement's your favorite among these Champagnes. There goes the secret. If you want me to totally approve of your gnarly hippitude, just froth over Lallement and I'll donate my organs to your family.

Just four wines—but what wines! Original, complex, inimitable and yummy, and all from a young vigneron who's restlessly improving every year.

Starting with his 2004s the wines aren't filtered or cold-stabilized, and they are fermented with ambient yeasts. This tiny little winery, producing all of

1700 cases, is showing how things should be done.

Let's talk about this Grand Cru Verzenay.

It's a singular flavor and Lallement's virile style exemplifies it. This doesn't seem the terroir for someone who wants to make gracious or delicate wines. If it were Burgundy it'd be Nuits-St.-Georges; animal and savage. Juhlin accords it special praise, saying “The village produces the blackest grapes in all Champagne... rich, peppery and virile. As a Pinot village, Verzenay is definitely the genuine star of the Montagne de Reims... pepper and iron notes... persistently long and hard for many years before it settles down to utter perfection.”

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

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

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

And this is one of the *négoce* we actually approve of – one of the good guys. But this sort of behavior is hard-wired in them. Still, it would seem to be child's play to either call their bluff or just sell your grapes any old where.

It's not like there's a soft market for Verzenay Pinot Noir. But I didn't feel it was my place to ask. There was no way to phrase the question that didn't amount to "No *juevos*, huh?" But there was one thing I could do, and I did it. "Jean-Luc," I said, "If you kept your entire production, and are concerned there's no one to buy all the additional wine, I'll buy it. We can never get enough Champagne from you as it is." This seemed to register.

Of course there's more to it than that. To vinify another 800 cases would entail a large investment in space and equipment, not to mention a radical change in cash-flow and quality of life. Still, I hate to let the bully win.

Jean Lallement Brut, N.V. + +

KLT-1

We sometimes call it "the green label," but whatever we call it, it's the finest and most distinctive NV in all of Champagne. First notice its exceptional polish and detail. Then take an amazingly distinct expression of terroir, redolent and atmospheric. It's my personal favorite, but apart from that, its innate virtues speak well for themselves; signature flavors of apple-cellar, mead, heirloom honey, brewer's yeast, sometimes with lemon-balm and sorrel, other times with walnuts and herb oils.

It's the same *cuvée* as last year, just more recently disgorged—November 2012 in fact. If anything it showed leesier and chalkier than usual, and I had the sense there was more Verzy showing through. But really, this silvery crystalline being is just absurd, one of the treasures of the wine world.

80-20 '09-'08 and 80-20 PN-CH.

Jean Lallement "Réserve" Brut, N.V. + (+)

KLT-2

The blue-label, and our "Old Blue" is a good ol' dawg. Thank you for your response to my statement of last year that this was **THE BEST VALUE IN THE PORTFOLIO**. It is again. It probably always will be.

It reverses the vintages of the above, so it's 80-20 '08-'09. Different parcels go into it, giving stronger juice, and the signatures here are berries, orchids, violets; this one is seriously smoky and a *very* strong edition of this wine; it wants another year on the cork; the finish isn't quite as suave, barkier and crustier, more salt and at first more brash. Then watch as it gets all caramelized, like the "candy" of the brown-bits you scrape from the pan.

As usual this is more adamant, less still and lunar. It needs more time to get over disgorgement (Nov. 2012), and for the first time ever, I thought the 4g/l RS might have been a teeny bit higher. Yet the tertiary finish is remarkable, and all this needs is a year or two on the cork.

(NOTE: we're still awaiting the next vintage, 2008. He's in no great hurry to release it, and I'm barely willing to wait. But wait I shall, however impatiently.)

Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.V. +

KLT-3

If there's a more singular Rosé in Champagne, someone open it for me. Aubry has the blackberry but not the mint, nor is this as *iodé*, even as dry as it is; it's about flowers and even green-tea. It's 100% 2009 and entirely Verzenay Pinot Noir. There seems to be more fruit and less berry here—that's '09—it's explosively fruity in fact. Lavish silky texture, helplessly delicious and absurdly long.

That's what I wrote last year, adding that it was the best bottling to date. I bought that wine for the home cellar, have drunk it many times, and never had reason to eat those words. But it was an odd showing on-the-day, and disgorgement wasn't the culprit; July 2012 should be enough time for a wine with this much substance to recover. It was snowing all day that day, the atmospheric pressure was very low, and the first bottle Jean-Luc brought out was ice cold. And stubbornly reduced. The bottle was all torn to pieces, entirely different from any I'd opened. So I asked for another bottle, at cellar temp, and this one was immediately fruitier and more consolidated. It seemed sleeker, less "pulpy" than it tasted before, but it was a weird day. I report in the interest of *full* disclosure, but full disclosure entails telling you that a bottle I opened three nights ago was freakin' amazing. So you figure it out, smart guy.

Pehu-Simonet

Montagne de Reims // Verzenay



vineyard area // 9 hectares
annual production // 4,000 cases
villages & soil types // Verzenay Grand Cru, Verzy Grand Cru, Sillery Grand Cru, Mailly-Champagne Grand Cru, Villers-Marmery 1^{er} Cru (limestone);
Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru (Cretaceous chalk)
grape varieties // 78% Pinot Noir, 22% Chardonnay

Among the many things that made me happy last year was your discovery of this fascinating estate. Thanks! Take a bow. And pat yourself on the back, because these aren't the most hedonistic Champagnes I offer, though they are often among the most characterful.



And our hero David Pehu is a man on the move. In a couple years he promises an organic single parcel PN from Mailly (Les Poules), which should be interesting. He also plans to bottle a trilogy of Chardonnays, each from single communes: Villers-Marmery, Verzenay and Mesnil. Alongside these will be mono-commune Pinot Noirs from Mailly and Verzenay. So this is a grower who doesn't just talk about terroir; he wants it to show.

I was stoked to have discovered this man and his wines. Chartognes led me to him. It was hard to take a second supplier in Verzenay, first because of the diplomacies involved and second because the portfolio space is taken up with something redundant instead of something new.

But not really, as you will see.

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

The six hectares from which Champagne is actually bottled are divided into 39 parcels; there's some talk of producing a still Chardonnay from three parcels in Villers-Marmery.

Pehu-Simonnet Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.

KPS-2

Disgorged Nov. 2012; still all Mesnil, from parcels on the hill, and in fact it's the only pure Mesnil we have at the non-vintage level. It's all '09 now, really firm yet lithe, mineral yet creamy; it has the vintage sternness but also a real terroir spine; there's a certain bite that isn't sharp. If 2009s go the way I think they will, this could be wonderful.

Pehu-Simonnet "Selection" Brut, N.V. +

KPS-1

By its very nature this is remarkable Champagne; as glowy and sumptuous as one could ask from a "luxury" item, yet as specific and distinctive as one could desire from farmer-fizz.

It's 70% 2010 and 30% a "perpetual reserve" (as Péters does them) dating back to 2006. 60% PN (Verzenay-Verzy-Sillery) and 40% CH (Verzenay alone), disgorged Aug 2012; it's really creamy and fruit-forward, surprisingly more so than last year's, and it's entirely delicious and approachable—a "boy is this tasty" sort of wine; lots of terroir focus and breed yet doughy and sanguine. If you *must* have specific associations, think cardamom and salsify.

Pehu-Simonnet "Transparence" Extra-Brut, N.V.

KPS-5

All 2007, all Verzenay, 80-20 PN-CH, disgorged Nov. 2012, and very dry. It remains a *strong* terroir statement in a sternly dry yet perfectly balanced form; it's masculine and capable—it could fix your car—but it's a little stoic and broody, buckwheat-y and morel-like.

Pehu-Simonnet Blanc de Noirs Brut, N.V. +

KPS-6

This will always come from two *climats* in Verzenay, Pertois and Noues; this year it's all 2009, disgorged Dec. 2012; the aromas are dramatic, with some of the mead-like apple-cellar notes we know from Lallement, but Pehu's wines have more muscle and broader shoulders. It's long and crackery and salty. It should be in every swag-bag they hand out at IPNC.

(NOTE: there's a vintage 2006 in the wings for later this year; he's doing dosage trials now.)

Pehu-Simonnet Rosé Brut, N.V.

KPS-3

Based on 2010, with 25% of the "solera" started in 2006 and 8% still PN also from '10. Disgorged Oct. '12. Deep-fruited aromas, thick vinosity but also mussel shell and white mushrooms; a silky texture and the "shadiness" of '10. 2009 is blazing almost oppressive sunlight, but '10 is cool fresh shade. This is not a "lady's" rosé unless the lady is a NASCAR driver. I got hungry for duck-breast with "forbidden" black rice, morels and sunchoke.

A. Margaine

Montagne de Reims // Villers-Marmery



vineyard area // 6.2 hectares
annual production // 4,600 cases
villages & soil types // Villers-Marmery 1^{er} Cru (clay-limestone)
grape varieties // 90% Chardonnay, 10% Pinot Noir

It was a markedly strong “performance” among these wines this year. Most striking was the absence of what had been sometimes-phenolic astringency, and the return of the almost satiny texture I remembered from when we began together.

These wines have *polish*. I also had the most outrageously fruity Pinot Noirs among all the *vins claires* I tasted. Apart from which, I like Arnaud. He’s the real deal; he’s never on auto-pilot, he’s always thinking, always in motion, and he demonstrates a quality of sincere curiosity that I find reassuring.

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

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

Arnaud has also experimented with a *saignée* Rosé, to be offered alongside his regular Rosé in about three years. It was delicious! And a 2002 reserve wine we tried was so like Riesling it would have been guessed as Riesling by 90% of any grower in Germany.

Arnaud brought out some 2007 Pinot Noir in its red form for us to taste, to show the kinds of wines he’s blending into his Rosé. This wine was delightfully ridiculous; it reeked of strawberry, and was compulsively tasty. We wanted to sneak the bottle under our topcoats and basically, you know, vandalize our host.

Driving around Villers-Marmery you notice all the

Veuve Clicquot signs in the vineyards; they own a lot of vineyards here. And I imagine this Chardonnay is part of their “style” — if indeed this house even has a style any more — for these are unique Chardonnays. Yet I thought of the wines being blended away and felt nothing but regret. Why do anything to diminish the singular? Can there ever be too much distinctiveness in the world?

Villers-Marmery is an anomaly in the Montagne de Reims, an island of Chardonnay in a sea of Pinot Noir, you might say. You have a meter of topsoil, then chalk (in the Côte des Blancs it’s just 10 cm of topsoil). Yet Chardonnay evidently came to Villers by accident. Around the turn of the century one grower happened to try it and lo, it was good. Others followed. Now we have something unusual and actually gorgeous.

I tasted another grower’s wine from Villers-Marmery and it had that flavor, though without the class of Margaine. The village expresses a new face of Chardonnay and expands the range of possibilities for Champagne. Or so I opine. There’s evidently quite some debate about the particular clone of Chardonnay planted in these vineyards. I think you’d have to have a schoolmarmish palate to object to Champagnes such as these. In fact there’s some chit-chat about Villers (and its neighbor Trépail) being ideal for Chardonnay because its eastward exposition guards against Spring frosts, to which the Chardonnay is prone.

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

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

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

KAM-7

This wine's attracted a small coterie of enthusiasts who like a more austere Champagne than I myself do. But why should I block you? It's 85% '07, 15% '06, no malo; 36% of the wine was in 4th-year barrique with battonage. Disgorged Nov. 2012. Crisp texture comes as no surprise, but the chalk-dusty gingery mid-palate is intriguing. It needs a year on the cork to grow into the flavor beast it wants to be, but even now it's snappy in its angular way.

A. Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Brut, N.V.

KAM-1

A. Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Brut, N.V., 12/375ml

KAM-1H

The assemblage is complex for a small domain! 36% 2010—35% 2009, 10% 2008, 10% 2007 and 9% 2004. 92-8 CH-PN. Disgorged Jan. 2013. This is really superb crafting: more reserve wine and a more liberal dosage to mitigate the base-2010; it's his usual meyer-lemon, freesia, osmanthus and chalk; sleek and flowery, with incisiveness and expression.

A. Margaine "Special Club" Brut, 2008 6/750ml + +

KAM-408

This is completely stunning Champagne.

From three parcels: Brocot, Montmedy and Champs d'Enfer. 25% was done in wood, and 100% went through malo. Disgorged Jan. 2013. The reputation of '08 will be made with the first sniff of a Champagne like this. An extraordinarily feminine fine-grained wine, cool but not aloof, intense but contained, embedded chalkiness like the dust from a rockslide in the finish; ginger and Asian pear, and a texture like meringue, in a hauntingly pretty form, lyric and lingering.

A. Margaine "Special Club" Brut, 2006, 3/1.5L + +

KAM-406M

Disgorged Oct. 2012, this is amazingly open and generous for a magnum; again a flexible approach to RS is helpful, and if you're looking for a festive, polished and delicious large-format you needn't keep forever, here it is. 74% Champs d'Enfer ("Field of Hell") which is 86 years old.

A. Margaine Rosé Brut, N.V. +

KAM-2

Disgorged Nov. 2012. 76% CH, 24% PN includes 11% still red of '08 and '09. The base wine is largely 2010, and this continues his movement into a riper, fuller style for this wine; it's now among our medium-bodied Rosés—and the quality of the fruit flavor is amazing! Maybe even more amazing than the chalky wash on the finish, and the cherry-tobacco smokiness further below.

Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Demi-Sec, N.V.

KAM-5

Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Demi-Sec, N.V., 12/375ml

KAM-5H

Hardly a fusillade-o-sucrose here, but instead a delicate sweetness. Let's sneak in a bottle next time we go for dim-sum! You feel flowers spring up on your palate.

It's the *same wine* as the regular NV – none of this *we of course use the crap for our demi-sec because its many flaws are masked by the dreadful sweetness*. Not at this address! It's disgorged Jan. 2012, and you can use it as you would a *Feinherb* wine from Germany – with savory food that also contains sweetness.

Vilmart & Cie

Montagne de Reims // Rilly-la-Montagne



vineyard area // 11 hectares
annual production // 9,000 cases
villages & soil types // Rilly la Montagne 1^{er} Cru (calcerous clay and limestone)
grape varieties // 60% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir
Ampelos Certification // lutte raisonnée

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

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

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

In the early days when I first approached Vilmart and started working with Laurent Champs, I had mixed emotions about some of the Champagnes. Please note what "mixed emotions" actually means. It doesn't mean I doubted the worthiness of the wines or thought they were mediocre. It means I had *different* opinions about *different* aspects of the wines. I was thrilled with some, intrigued with all, and wondered whether a couple were too oaky.

There is a larger existential meaning to Vilmart, having to do with the circumstances of Laurent's father's life and the way these things have ramified for Laurent and for his wines. There is a gleam about them that isn't accidental. And without getting into the silly business

of who the "best" grower is, I'll let myself say that no grower in Champagne is more significant than Vilmart, and that the wines, which were already remarkable, have become almost uniformly beautiful.

Beautiful is a word we seldom hear in wine-speak. I can't really say why. It might be similar to the absence of the word "delicious" in most published tasting notes. We seem to approach wine as if it were a sudoku puzzle we had to solve by grasping at it with our intellects. Alternately, when we respond spontaneously and sensually, the emotions can't help but engage. There are plenty of impressive wines and even *exciting* wines that aren't necessarily beautiful. Some of the wines that certain tasters describe as "hedonistic" are merely gaudy and lurid. Beauty seems like a prerequisite for profundity, and I mean *true* profundity, not just the affect of significance by virtue of mere power. I promise you, if you vowed to start thinking about wine in terms of its beauty, even for just a day (or to humor me), you'd find yourself starting over. Most of what you know – or "know" – won't at all be useful.

When I reached the end of the tasting with Laurent this year, I felt as beauty often makes me feel, the presence of a certain silence. You notice the ever-present thrum is

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

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



absent, the grinding background buzz of just coping. The wine in your glass is a psalm. Everything everyone says is wonderful. You feel actually pretty dopey, melting away like you are. You hardly feel you have to speak.

In the early days I think Laurent was flying blind on the matter of oak, and his recent Champagnes have—wisely—presented a more integrated and elegant profile. Yet he is adamantly a vintner first, before he is a maker of Champagne: “We do wine first, then afterward we do Champagne,” he says. Every base wine without exception sees at least ten months in casks of varying size and newness. Once in a while there’s a brief disconnect between fruit and wood immediately after disgorgement, but 2-3 years on the cork make for a dramatic metamorphosis.

Matter of fact, I’ve found Vilmart among the most food-friendly of all my Champagnes, because they’re so gracious, so vinous, so lordly in their carriage.

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

I arrived this year while it was snowing, the first hours of what would be the big storm. I’d always associated Vilmart with genial weather, though in fact there must have

been some scuzzy days. Clint Sloan and I had eaten dinner with Laurent the evening before, and when I reached the domain (Clint having headed to Paris for his flight home) I ran into a wine writer who had a busy day awaiting him, and who was in quite a hurry. He dispatched the wines, took his leave, and then it was just Laurent and me.

A bottle arrived, an old Grand Cellier based on 1982, father’s wine. It was the color of butterscotch, and the smoky palate seemed just a little weary, until the ethereal finish, and the dying sweetness that’s so moving. Some old wines freshen in the glass, as oxygen releases what’s left of their fruity vitality, but this one didn’t really; it threw off its old-bottle funk, and revealed an old man without a lot to say any more, who might seem to be austere, but who cries when he remembers his wife. There are great wines and there are great experiences, charged moments, and this was one, to drink the faded glowing embers of a beautiful Champagne as the snow fell outside.

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

Some Notes on the Cuvées

GRAND CELLIER is not the regular N.V. Brut, but rather a superior N.V. or, seen from the other angle, the least among the luxury-cuvées.

GRAND CELLIER D'OR is the regular vintage wine, majority Chardonnay, from older vines, half aged in foudre and half in barrique.

COEUR DE CUVÉE is from the very oldest vines (all above 50 yrs.), 100% barrique aged, 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir. There seems to be some confusion about the age of the barriques used, arising perhaps by Laurent's sensible policy of letting the vintage decide. In any case, some of the oak will be new and some of it won't.

CUVÉE CRÉATION. This cuvée will end with the 2000, and the fruit it contained will improve the quality of the Grand Cellier and Grand Cellier d'Or. It started as a "millennium" cuvée (remember them?) and then continued, but it turned out it was one special cuvée too many for this 11-hectare estate.

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

KVM-1

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier" Brut N.V., 1/3.0L

KVM-1J

I'm coming to realize this cuvée needs three years on the cork to realize the ideal Laurent has for it. Until that time it is a mosaic of flavors, sometimes more unified than others. I tasted the current wine, which is creamy and *fondue*, and the upcoming wine, disgorged July 2012, available later this year.

The new guy is '10, '09, '08 and as always 70CH to 30PN, with the base wine aged ten months in large barrels. I thought this had some of the minty crackle of old Cuvée Creations (which are now going into it) but that may have been my fancy. The finish was good, and the finish is most of the way you can judge, when a young wine is stropy.

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or" Brut, 2008 +

KVM-608

80% CH now (to 20 PN) and the base wine is aged in barrique, but barely any new wood. I had very high hopes for this. And it's nothing like what I expected.

Disgorged October 2012, the aroma is compelling; white gentian and hyacinth; the palate is more a classic '08 than a typical Vilmart, but it's lissome, curvy and very Chardonnay. It could stand to be a touch sweeter, I thought. But the aerial whiteness of the wine is striking, as is the mineral length. I've long suspected that the '08s would enter a trough as their youthful florals subdued, and maybe this is an example. I *like* the wine hugely and yet still imagine I'm underrating it. It's very coiled. Almost more of a Grand Cellier stretching up than the miniature Coeur de Cuvée it usually is.

Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2005 +

KVM-505

By now you know, this is the "heart" of the free-run juice, the first 2,000 liters from the press, with the first and last couple hundred liters removed. It's become an iconic Champagne. And it's a markedly successful 2005, though an atypical Coeur de Cuvée. There's just a surmise of oyster mushrooms, and actually a nuance of oysters themselves, coppery ones like Wellfleets. The wine is swank and poised, not as seductive as this wine often is, but more chrome polish. The '05 character is not absent, but like Gimonnet's Club it's lighter on its feet than this often lumpen vintage. There's a wonderful finish of sea-salt caramels.

(NOTE: as a by-the-way, if you have the May 2010 disgorgement of the 2002 Coeur de Cuvée, you have a very great masterpiece, the best wine in the history of Vilmart, and the best Champagne I tasted this trip. This wine has everything.)

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

KVM-3

Disgorged September 2012, it combines 2010/2009 and as always is 90% PN to 10% CH. Also as always, it is *the* most singular Rosé in Champagne, and one could argue, the best at the NV level. This one's like a foamy vapor of Bonnes Mares. If you're new to it, think serious vinosity, main-course Champagne, and truly like a corona of red Burgundy.



The Magnums

Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier d’Or” Brut 2006, 3/1.5L + (+)

KVM-606M

Disgorged February 2012. All you need is patience, and plenty of it. Braised meat and root-veggie richness but with the cerebral austere reserve of young magnums. Incipient complexity, and markedly long.

Vilmart & Cie “Cuvée Creation” Brut, 1999, 3/1.5L + +

KVM-499M

Wow, some aroma! This has easily surmounted any disgorgement muteness it might have suffered from. (Dec. 2012, in fact). Corn fritters, mirabelle and strawberry; the palate is compellingly “sweet” and seductive, and has the spring-loaded tension behind the soufflé lightness behind the lobstery richness; it recalls the supernal 2001 Coeur de Cuvée in structure but has the candied lemon flavors classic to this soon-to-be-extinct cuvée. This will be the final vintage in magnums—but what a farewell! It’s interesting and buzzing with deliciousness. And it buttresses the case for 1999, which slimmed down and which we all (OK, I) underrated at first.

Vilmart & Cie “Cuvée Creation” Brut, 1998, 3/1.5L + (+)

KVM-498M

It feels younger and more archly pointed than the ‘99. Disgorged April 2011, it’s more Chablis-like, and you need to tolerate an angular profile; less flesh and dough and more citrus and ginger. Last year I wrote “langoustine, saffron and orange zest.” With air it gets like tapioca pudding atop which you sprinkled malt and chocolate powder. Still needs time (and air) but is on an upward climb.

L. Aubry Fils

Montagne de Reims // Jouy-lès-Reims



vineyard area // 17 hectares
annual production // 11,700 cases
villages & soil types // Jouy-lès-Reims 1^{er} Cru (clay-limestone)
grape varieties // 40% Pinot Meunier, 30% Chardonnay,
30% Pinot Noir (with Arbanne, Petit Meslier, and Fromenteau)

We spoke with Philippe Aubry about the 2005 issue, and mentioned a theory that geosmin was the culprit. He was unsure, and thus produced what came to be known as “Aubry’s Box Of Hell,” consisting of little vials of wine-flaws by which one learns to spot their special torments. You should have been the fly on the wall, with all of us sniffing at these teensy eye-dropper bottles and wrinkling our faces in disgust. We love our work, man. Next year we should ask him if we can sniff some glue.

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. I can tell the twins apart now, but only because Philippe had double-bypass surgery last April, and is a changed man. That’s not a happy reason, but he feels better and doesn’t smoke any more. I wonder if his palate will change, and if it does, whether his sense-of-sweetness will change. For this is always a very dry group of wines. 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.

Are there any Champagnes more original than these? And any Champenoise more iconoclastic than the Brothers Aubry?

If the quality of the “regular” wines weren’t enough, Aubry has something entirely original to show us. Under the heading Les Cuvées Precieuses are wines made

from ancient varieties like Arbanne, Petit Meslier and Fromenteau (Pinot Gris), still on the books as “approved.”

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 Aubry.

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

Aubry’s is a seventeen hectare estate with vineyards in Jouy, Pargny and Villedommange, all Premier Cru.

Aubry at a glance // Great find offering unique Champagnes. Among the best pink-fizz in the entire region. Be ready to have your mind expanded!

how the wines taste // Given the breadth of the range, it’s hard to make shift with a few telling descriptors. They are flowery and high-flying Champagnes, rather like a cross of Chartogne and Chiquet, but not exactly similar to either. Class, depth and detail are abundant. They are graceful, even when they’re intense.



L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

KAB-1

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L

KAB-1M

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V., 1/3L

KAB-1J

Half-half 2010-2009, 45% Meunier, 25% PN, 25% CH and 5% “other!” Disgorged January 2013. It’s the *least* dry wine in the range, with RS between 5-6g/l. I drink this a lot, because here in Boston it’s *poured* a lot, because it’s wicked-good with local oysters, because it tastes like local oysters if they were Champagne. It’s like the flesh and the shell, with a rusk-y, rocky length; coppery, apple-skin, rye, mineral.

L. Aubry Fils “Le Nombre d’Or Campaniae Veteres Vites” Brut, 2008

KAB-408

It means “the old vines of the countryside.”

20% “Pinots Gris et Blanc!” 20% Petit Meslier. 15% Arbanne. 15% Chard. 25% PN. 5% Meunier. The Chard was in casks of 205-liters, average 3rd-use. RS is 3g/l. Disgorged Feb. 2013, and shows it. It’s a complicated critter, with the whippet-sinew of ‘08, the chrome jaguar sleekness; right now the aromas are all Arbanne and Pinot Gris, but I’m curious to watch where this goes.

L. Aubry Fils “La Nombre d’Or Sablé Blanc des Blancs” Brut, 2007 +

KAB-807

A truly amazing wine, the best-ever vintage for this cuvée. 30%CH—20% Arbanne, 30% Petit Meslier and 20% Pinot Blanc; it’s spicy, wolfish, clear and precise, with the fluffy texture of the low pressure; but the iron-salts and rye-toast are striking, and the wine salivates for you on the finish. Disgorged November 2012.

L. Aubry Fils “Aubry de Humbert” Brut, 2006 +

KAB-306

Their “basic” vintage wine is named for the bishop who laid the cornerstone for the Reims cathedral. It’s equal parts CH (in oak) PN-PM, old vines, a *couver de cuvée*, disgorged February 2013; the wine is elegant and regal and dense and long; lots of roasting poultry aromas—roasting, period, the veggies too; plus argan oil, dried fruits, blueberry. A guy’s Champagne, almost rugged, but generous.

L. Aubry Fils “Dualis” Brut, N.V. + +

KAB-3

I need to say this in loud bold print: THIS WAS THE MOST REMARKABLE CHAMPAGNE I TASTED LAST MONTH. And it is the greatest wine I have tasted from Aubry. It will be in tiny supply, so grab some.

It’s a first for them, a new cuvée. It consists of 1998 Chard, aged in new wood for “two seasons,” no malo, and a “sablé,” i.e. 4 atmospheres rather than 6. There’s also 1999 PN that did malo, in 4-year wood for “one season.” It went *en tirage* in 2000 with “agrafé” (a cork, not a crown cap), and was disgorged in February 2013. Barely any dosage. Total production: 1000 bottles.

I’d had a disappointing bottle of praised-to-the-skies (and criminally expensive) Cuvée Winston Churchill a couple nights earlier, and as soon as I sniffed *this* baby I felt the gravelly darkness the Pol Roger seemed to have been striving for. My image-vision was of an old, stoic man who’s spent his life working outside, and when he comes in for lunch the smells of earth and smoke follow him. The wine is adamantly long, with a keen forest-y finish. The empty glass smells like pigeon and summer truffle. This is the very opposite of frivolous. It speaks to a depth the Aubrys don’t let you see otherwise. It is extraordinary, meaningful wine.

L. Aubry Fils Sablé Rosé “Nicolas François Aubry” Brut, 2006 +

KAB-606

Lower than normal pressure; “Sablé” is their term for it. 35% PN/PM co-fermented, 15%CH, 20% Arbanne, 20% Petit Meslier and 10% still red PM. It seems sweeter than the regular rosé, though in fact it isn’t. The Chard was done in barrique but it barely shows. This is the yummiest and least studious vintage I’ve tasted of this wine, wonderfully salty and tomato-ey; rich and generous yet still with a cool twiggy edge, especially on the deliberate, gravelly finish.

L. Aubry Fils Rosé Brut, N.V. +

KAB-2

I love showing this wine, especially to people who assume rosés will always be “fruity.” This *smells* fruity and tastes entirely bone-fricking-DRY, as if you’d distilled the taste of blackberries and somehow sucked out all the fructose.

This disgorgement (Dec. 2012) is 2010; it’s 35% CH, 40% PN and 12% Meunier, with the balance a still red from a back-vintage. This time the Chard saw (old) wood. The palate is silvery and tangy, and that hauntingly vague nuance of wood is wonderful, as is the deliberate, mineral finish. A strong edition of this.

Chartogne-Taillet

Montagne de Reims // Merfy

vineyard area // 11.5 hectares
annual production // 7,500 cases
villages & soil types // Merfy (sand, clay with chalk and limestone)
grape varieties // 40% Chardonnay, 38% Pinot Noir, 20% Pinot Meunier,
2% Arbanne



Introduction

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 Sellose. "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!

So 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.

Please note; to *experience*, not to "know." This year it was just him and me, tasting and talking; we did dosage trials of several wines, and this takes a person to the essence of tasting. The more we tasted the more wonderfully unknowable things seemed to be. Yes, it was possible to establish where the wines were most delicious

and expressive, and the two of us agreed almost eerily. But even then, it was impossible to predict what would work, and each formulation you tried to make was smashed by the next sequence of wines.

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

It begins with a new/old approach to vineyard work, bio-dynam-ish, one might say. Critters (sheeps and horses), soil analyses of remarkable detail, each aspect of viticulture challenged and changed as necessary. Cellar-work is also excitingly new. Indeed there's almost too *much* information to give here. Alexander's blog is a lovely source for info and updates, and the estate's website gives all the basics. Suffice to say there's a vivid spirit of inquiry here, the likes of which I have never seen in this habit-riven region.

Here's an example. Alexander has installed two fermentation/storage "eggs" in the cuverie. He had an exchange last year with Kevin Pike, parts of which I reproduce (having edited misspellings etc.).

Dear Kevin,

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

- In the barrels, the lees from the fermentations are moving casually. The winegrower decides

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

how the wines taste // Extremely spritzy and highly leesy—one wine made me think of Gimonnet's Cuvée Gastronomer! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

Chartogne-Taillet

Montagne de Reims

to make a batonnage or not for many reasons.

- In the eggs, the Brownien movement helps the lees to be always in contact with the wine. This really helps me to reduce the sulfur amount (thanks to the natural lees production of sulfur), but also regroup the lees with the wine who are for me two inseparable elements.
- The result is:
In the barrels: more wild in the barrels, more variations, possibility to lose the freshness of the wine, but have a big advantage, let a big oxidation level for the wine, and we often obtain the best result in wood (if it's not woody and hiding the flavors, and also if the parcel is a very good one).
In the eggs: a pure but also breathy wine, more thin and delicate than in the barrels. The lees do not influence the wine too much, but also do not give the wines reduced aspects as it often happens in the inox vats.

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

Kevin then wrote:

Alexandre:

This is very interesting and helpful; thank you for sending the pictures and the explanation.

The Chardonnay from the eggs definitely looks more leesy. Because of the Brownien movement in the eggs being so constant, how do you settle the lees so that you can then remove the wine from the egg? In a vat or barrel, gravity would do most of that. So how do you do this in the egg?

The reply:

Kevin,

If I understood your question, you want to know how I put out the lees from the wine before the bottling.

If it's the right comprehension, I've got many answers, but none that could be a definitive one: The first thing I focus on is the lees comprehension

and the lees function. I mean, if the lees are good during the ageing of the wine before the bottling, why those same lees couldn't be useful during the ageing in the bottle? Their function is mainly nutrition and protection.

So I judge that could be very interesting to keep the lees in contact with the Champagne and only during the disgorgement, I put them out.

So for this reason, I tried this year to make the Champagne with the lees in the bottle.

But in the other hand, if those lees are too much influencing the wine, I tried to put those lees out with the technique you just described in your question: The gravity during 2 days before the bottling in an Inox vat.

So I tried, and I'll see the difference... in some years once the wine will be ready.

Alexandre

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

The most important passion our young hero brings is a result of his *practicum* at 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 de Crus) is not aristocratic.

Merfy in fact lies in the so-called Coteaux de Vesle; it sits on what was once the beach of an ocean covering what is now the Reims depression. Thus its 60cm of sand over the chalk.

Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste.-Anne” Brut, N.V. + +	KCT-1
Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste.-Anne” Brut, N.V., 12/375ml + +	KCT-1H
Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste.-Anne” Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L + +	KCT-1M
Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste.-Anne” Brut, N.V., 1/3L + +	KCT-1J

*DOSAGE TRIAL FOR NON-VINTAGE BRUT: The base-wine is 60% 2010 and 40% '09-'08—it's 60% CH and 40% PN. The **first sample** was brash and snappy and oyster, maybe a tic too dry, but balanced in a lean sinewy way. The **second sample** was more coarse and unknit, hard and shrill. I suspected it was in the danger-zone, sweeter than #1 but not sweet enough and thus unknit. The **third sample** was prettier, more melodic and feminine. Best so far, very tender but not what I'd come to anticipate as his “style.” The **fourth sample** I thought was his style, fluorescent, snappy but with fruit. The **fifth and final sample** was back into fruit pulling mineral behind it, the opposite of #4.*

The one I liked most as a Chartogne wine was #4. Subjectively I hankered for #5. But that's just me.

The sweetness levels: ONE: 4.5g/l. TWO 5.5g/l. THREE 6.5g/l. FOUR (his and my preference) 7.5g/l. FIVE 8.5g/l.

The final wine is rife with stuff; mineral, savor, mead and apple and bivalve, entirely silky and *fondue*, entirely loving and grown up. It's far into Lallement territory now, a thrilling deep astonishing non-vintage Champagne.

Chartogne-Taillet “Les Orizeaux” Extra-Brut, 2008, 6/750ml +	KCT-808
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*DOSAGE TRIAL FOR THIS SINGLE-VINEYARD 100% PINOT NOIR: The **first sample** has a stunning aroma and a fabulous entry that becomes a bit dour on the end. The **second sample** shows more fruit, it's less avuncular, but the dialectic raises it at least a level, though the finish is still admonishing. The **third and final sample** shows more dosage on the nose, but not worrisome at this stage; it's a more mainstream PN, better balanced, though maybe a little too smooth.*

We then blended samples 1-2 and also samples 2-3, and agreed that this final blend was perfect; equal parts 2 and 3.

The sweetness levels: ONE *zero!* TWO 3.5g/l. THREE 5.5g/l. The blend of 2-3 gave us something in the neighborhood of 4.2-4.5g/l.

The wine shows a Pommard earthiness, salty and meaty and *salumeria*, bacony and savory and round and focused; far from the usual blurry Blanc de Noirs. The vineyard has more clay and limestone, the vine material is all *massale* selection.

Chartogne-Taillet “Les Barres” Extra Brut, 2008, 6/750ml + +	KCT-708
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*DOSAGE TRIALS FOR THIS SINGLE-VINEYARD UNGRAFTED OLD-VINES PINOT MEUNIER: The **first sample** has a formidable aroma and a palate balanced on-the-dry-side, but here it's OK, with so much fruit and animation. The **second sample** was similar but more extravagant, though the finish was curiously sweet-sour. The **third and final sample** was clearly The One. We both knew instantly.*

The sweetness levels: ONE 1.5g/l. TWO 2.5g/l. THREE (the final choice) 5.5g/l.

If you know the very fine old-vines PM from Lorient (in Festigny) this smells rather like it, but the palate is entirely deeper and chewier; spicy and profound, super-animated and dynamic; it's still very dry but with a more complex interplay of spices, like Chinese 5-spice in a glass; butterscotch and bacony savor; easily and by far the best PM I've yet tasted.

Chartogne-Taillet “Les Alliées” Extra-Brut, 2008, 6/750ml +	KCT-508
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A NEW BOTTLING OF A SINGLE-VINEYARD MEUNIER, FROM A GRAFTED VINEYARD WITH MORE CLAY IN THE SOIL.

I'll spare you the details of the *dosage trials* we did – write me if you want them—but in this case the third sample was clearly too sweet at 5.5g/l. and we both felt the wine was best with 4.5g/l, which was/is determinedly dry but with a wash of savors; it's chewy but more grass-fed veal than the gaminess of Les Barres. You may note a finish of some asperity, but what precedes it is so polished and porcini-like you barely register it. Another food fizz, a wine of solid boots with deep treads yet not heavy nor cumbersome.



Chartogne-Taillet Blanc de Blancs “Heurtebises” Brut, 2008

KCT-9

This is so stern and earthy it could almost be Chetillon; jasmine and lemon-zest, with green woodruff elements, even flinty. He intended it for oysters—or to *be* an oyster—and it’s a bit Sauvignon-ish. Alexandre agrees the vineyard gives wine with some pyrene elements, which dosage might blanket, or which could be exaggerated in high-acid years. I like this but I liked the `07 more.

Chartogne-Taillet Millésime Brut, 2006 +

KCT-306

His first edition of this cuvée; the `04 was still Father’s wine. (Or in that case, Mother’s.) Disgorged November 2012, still 60-40 PN-CH and made from the same parcels as always, so it’s his parents’ “formula” but his wine, with its vivid clear stainless steel aromas; plummy, tobacco-ey, with perfectly judged RS. You know, let’s just acknowledge these are arrestingly vivid wines, with almost mentholated aromas; they seem “chalky” (though this one grows on clay); solid laser-like coconutty, with a lovely conciliation of peony and duck breast.

Chartogne-Taillet Rosé Brut, N.V. +

KCT-6

All 2010, disgorged Jan. 2013, 60-40 CH-PN; it’s more silvery than last year’s but just as remarkable; red beets and tomato-water; it’s more oysterly, and the laser-like fruit is more embedded; this is a rosé with a statement to make. You almost eat it.

Champagne Vintages

These will make you humble.



Most of you know that the vintage-wines, i.e., the ones above the NV level but below the tête-de-cuvée level (if there is one) are where the values are.

It's tempting to start sussing a vintage when its wines begin to appear in the NV cuvées. Yet I find it can easily mislead, because the quality of material that goes into the *actual* vintage wine is different, and will often surprise you.

2009 is a case in point. It looked like a sunny round cheerful vintage as it entered the NV cuvées, but the vintage wines are quite adamant and sometimes even clunky and heavy-footed – or so it seems. 2009 recalls the young '99s, another vintage marked by yellow-fruit and which seemed rather vulgar on first glance, but those young ducklings turned into graceful swans with time. They slimmed down, became sensuous and silky, and started showing class. My “issue” with '09, such as it may be, is based on a suspicion that growers will react to its low acids and give the wines insufficient dosage. The vintage *seems* less sanguine and more kvetchy a year on. But I am beginning to learn that we hardly know just *what* a Champagne vintage will finally look like until it is *out of its childhood*. So the only accurate things to say about 2009 are, it is ripe and strong, less flowery than fruity, and it remains to be seen where and

how it will find its inner gracefulness.

2008 has been lovable from the first instant. It's a high-acid and extremely flowery vintage that always smells fabulous. It feels like an easy vintage to have a huge crush on. But I felt that way about another floral high-acid year, 1998, and when that vintage left its babyhood it went into a shell from which it is only just starting to emerge. But when you taste a wine like the '08 Special Clubs from Hébrart or Margaine, nothing like those were made in '98. So I'm tentatively declaring that 2008 is the best vintage of the decade after 2002, which it resembles in miniature.

2007 is... small, a modest year of barely adequate ripeness, in many cases. Yet even this little vintage has given some beautiful wines. They don't seem like long keepers though.

2006 looked like a big chummy galoot of a vintage as it entered the NV blends. Yet when the vintage-wines arrived, I was struck by the incisiveness of the chalky mineral blade-end that so many of them showed, especially the Chardonnays. At this point I'd say I really *really* like this vintage, and that it appears to be reliable. It doesn't



suggest any adolescent funks or tantrums.

2005 is the geosmin vintage or whatever the hell it is, or was. Its basic nature is an undisciplined power; it is not a gracious vintage, even when it's clean. Often it tastes like the soapacious side of Pinot Blanc. Yet one finds exceptions, wines of a certain gracefulness that absorbed their strength of fruit. And as for the dubious aspects, that rotten-potato thing so many of them had...all I can say is let's get ready to HUM-BLLLE... because we didn't know where it came from or why, and now we don't know where it's disappearing to (in some wines) or why.

2004 seems to have become the badge of entry into the society of True-Champagne-Lovers. It was a huge crop, and much of its wine was competent and unexciting. But the *best* of them were the purest most vivid examples of *green* flavors Champagne may ever have shown. Green like balsam, wintergreen, spearmint, chartreuse, tarragon, verbena, lime-zest. It isn't always a *fetching* vintage, and some wines need more time, but whew, when you land on a good one it'll curl your toes.

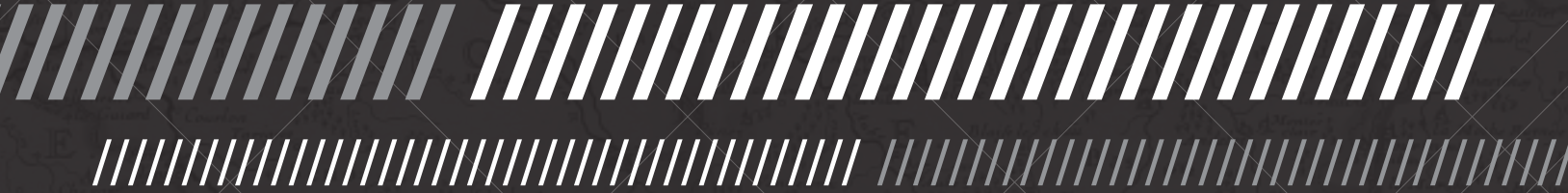
2003 gave few vintage wines, not because of the heat but because of the tiny crop. The wines were sometimes good and always atypical, as if someone were marooned in Chablis and tried making sparkling wine there—in a hot vintage.

2002 is the Great One, about which the only caveat seems to be the markedly quick evolution of some examples. Yet

for each '02 I think may be developing hastily, I open three or four that want to be left alone, as they should at this stage. In any case, the great wines of this excellent vintage offer everything the Champagne lover could ask for; focused aromas with flowers leading a charge including fruits and spices; textures of restrained power and keen expressiveness; flavors showing classic parameters, nothing out-of-the-way. Certainly a marvelous vintage; potentially a classic.

If you find any older vintages, *2000* is/was a good year that seems to be aging fast, so drink 'em if you got 'em. *1999* is a beauty, or has become one. It's the closest thing to the Champagne paradigm, and very tasty now, though the top Chardonnays will keep and ought to be kept. *1998* is back from its cave, and showing well again in a snappy acid-focused manner. Best in Chardonnay. *1997* was an undemanding and entirely decent year, which I haven't tasted in eons. *1996* is and will probably always be a conundrum. Is it *finito* now, since its fruit is over-mature and seems to have detached from a still-stinging acidity? Or is this just a phase? And how could it be a "phase" when so many wines taste so decadent? I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I *suspect* the vintage was misjudged by people who love acidity, and who often make the mistake of supposing wines age *from* acidity. But I also remember how profound those wines tasted in their youth, when we thought they'd never die, or even grow old. Then some of them got old before they were ever young.

Like I said, Champagne will make you humble.



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