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In Small Houses, Champagne Finds Its Soul

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LIKE any bottle of Champagne, Larmandier-Bernier's Terre de Vertus, with its tapered, graceful curves, can ignite the imagination. Simply glancing at it transports you to a world of tuxedos and gowns, where the music is soft, the dancing close, and elegance as near as a pop and a pour and a sigh. A more careful examination of the bottle, though, reveals a label completely at odds with the bubbly, urbane notion of Champagne. Its central image?

Dirt.

More precisely, it's a photograph of the gravelly, gloriously chalky soil of a vineyard here in the heart of the Côte des Blancs in the southern part of the Champagne region. For Larmandier-Bernier and other small producers that, unlike the famous houses, make their Champagne almost entirely from grapes they have grown themselves, this image of dirt conveys a truth that is often overlooked amid the elegant imagery: Champagne, above all, is a wine, made from grapes that grow in the ground. It should be thought of, like other great wines, as having a provenance — a terroir, as the French say — and a home on the dinner table.



"We make wine before bubbles," said Laurent Champs, the young head of Vilmart & Cie in Rilly.

These grower-producers account for no more than a trickle of foam in the river of sparkling wine that flows out of Champagne. But their significance far outweighs their numbers. Tiny Champagne houses like René Geoffroy in Cumières, Chartogne-Taillet in Merfy, Jean Milan in Oger, Pierre Gimonet et Fils in Cuis and Godmé Père et Fils in Verzenay produce excellent wines that demonstrate more than just another side of

Champagne. Rather than the smoothly consistent blends that dominate the production of the biggest Champagne makers like Moët & Chandon and Veuve Clicquot, these winemakers produce Champagnes with clear, pronounced personalities that bubble up through the wine, expressing the quirky nuances of each particular combination of soil, climate and producer.

In the hands of the best of these winemakers, the Champagnes are utterly distinct. The intense, almost austere minerality of the Terre de Vertus, or the equally lean and stony Champagne from José Dhondt in neighboring Oger, offers a marked contrast to the creamy fruit of a bottle of Michel Genet from Chouilly. Each of these wines is a blanc de blancs, made entirely of chardonnay from the Côte des Blancs, which is known as chardonnay territory. They are completely different from, say, the rich, round power of an Egly-Ouriet from Ambonnay, a pinot noir-based Champagne, which in turn bears little resemblance to another pinot noir-based Champagne, like one from Godmé, with its clear, precise raspberry flavors.



"Each village has a different style of wine, and within each village different locations have different styles," said Paul Couvreur, who, with his wife, Françoise, has joined forces with Becky Wasserman, a wine broker in Burgundy, to market grower-produced Champagnes. "These Champagnes are much more on the wine side. We sell to people who think that Champagne is not only bubbles and fizz, but chardonnay and pinot noir. It's wine you can think about."

Champagne is wine? This is news? Indeed, if you travel the narrow, back roads winding through towns like Rilly and Ambonnay south across the Marne River to Oger and Vertus, Champagne looks pretty much like any other wine region. Vineyards dominate the hillsides and flatlands, where the underlying chalk pushes up through the soil here and there in crumbly patches of white. In a chilly early November drizzle, the vines hang with resignation, seemingly counting the days until the arrival of the pruner's shears, a last few bunches of unpicked grapes waiting to be plucked by the birds.

In the small towns of this northernmost fine wine region of the world, where buildings seem to cluster for warmth, signs point in almost every direction to Champagne producers. Most are tiny. Aside from the several dozen big houses that account for more than 70 percent of the Champagne produced, only 5,000 or so of the 20,000 grape growers in Champagne also sell wine. Around 3,000 simply take their grapes to a cooperative, where it is made into basic Champagne for them, bottled and returned to the grower with a label slapped on. The remaining 2,000 make their own Champagne, often achieving something special.

Most of the growers sell to weekenders from Paris who back their Peugeots to the door and load up with bottles. A mere handful of these grower-producers make enough of their

own wine to export bottles to the United States, though their number is growing. Last year, grower-producer Champagnes accounted for 1.9 percent of all Champagne imported into the United States, said Terry Theise, the leading importer of such Champagnes, more than triple the 0.62 percent of 1997, when Mr. Theise put together his portfolio.

To most of the world, wine is wine, and then there's Champagne. No other wine has been so brilliantly defined by its marketing, which places Champagne at the center of weddings, ship launchings and other cultivated, congratulatory affairs, but never at the center of a meal, where you would put any other wine.

"These are food wines, intended to go with food," Mr. Couvreur said. The combinations practically suggest themselves. The more mineral-laden Champagnes would be exceptional matches for oysters, or for scallops in a sauce flavored with citrus and herbs. A more robust bottle would go exceptionally well with roast chicken, veal or rabbit. Almost any dry Champagne will go well with sushi, not to mention fried chicken.



Champagne and wine are perceived differently in other ways, too. Almost everywhere else, wine lovers want to know where the grapes were grown. In Burgundy, connoisseurs fancy they can taste the difference between wines from the Meursault-Perrières vineyard and its neighbor, Meursault-Charmes. Barolo fans know that wines from La Morra are distinguished by their elegant perfume, and wines from Serralunga d'Alba by their power. In Germany, Mosels are known for delicacy, Rheingaus for their voluptuous richness.

What's more, in almost every other wine-growing region, the best wine producers grow their own grapes, or wish they could. It's become a sometimes disingenuous cliché for winemakers to proclaim their desire simply to allow the grapes to express their terroir in the glass.

But not in Champagne. Few of the big houses own more than 30 percent of their vineyards. Even connoisseurs would have trouble naming the three key zones in the region, Montagne de Reims, Côte des Blancs to the south, and Vallée de la Marne in between, much less a fourth region, Côte des Bar to the southeast. And while the communes of the Côte d'Or might roll easily off the tongue of any Burgundy hound, few Champagne lovers could name any of the 17 villages ranked as grands crus, the highest classification. In fact, it's fair to assume that most people have no idea that Champagne vineyards even have a ranking system. What the public does know are brand names, especially prestigious ones like Cristal and Dom Pérignon. Although the big houses reserve their best vineyards for their high-end bottles, it will strike few people as odd that they see no need to even mention the provenance of the grapes.

"It's only at the grower level that a person can luck into a nonvintage Champagne that's 100 percent grand cru," Mr. These said.

To a far greater extent than any other wine, Champagne has celebrated the art of blending. Most Champagnes are a mixture of wine from three grapes — pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier — and a blend of different vintages. Nonvintage Champagne (or multivintage, as the big producers like to say), accounts for around 90 percent of all Champagne sold.

There are sound reasons for the development of this system. The grapes, grown in these northern vineyards, have historically battled each year simply to ripen. The annual struggle of the grapes gives Champagne the blend of fruit, intensity and acidity that distinguishes it from all other sparkling wines, but it also makes the Champagne business a risky proposition.



Some years the grapes didn't ripen enough, or at all, so for producers to depend only on the annual crop would have been highly dicey. Some years the pinot meunier, which provides perfume and fruitiness but little structure, does best. Some years it's chardonnay, and some years it's pinot noir. It might be a different combination each year, so by necessity in Champagne the winemakers blend what they have.

Over time the big Champagne makers turned this necessity into a virtue, so much so that the exalted image of the blender's art long ago overtook any notion of terroir in Champagne. "The names of the wine villages, for example, need hardly concern the wine drinker, for the essence of Champagne is that it is a blended

wine, known in all but a handful of cases by the name of the maker, not the vineyard," wrote Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson, in the 2001 edition of the World Atlas of Wine (Mitchell Beazley).

In fact, blending really can be as high an art as the Champagne producers assert. One need only taste a bottle of Krug Grande Cuvée, a blend of up to 50 different wines from six to 10 different years, to appreciate the level of complexity a blend can achieve. In the neat, laboratory-clean tasting room at Krug headquarters in Reims, Rémi Krug, who runs Krug, possibly the most prestigious Champagne producer, demonstrated the art of the blend.

With seven still wines in carafes in front of him, he poured into a tall beaker first a little 2003 chardonnay from Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, newly made yet already intense. He added

some supple '03 pinot noir from Ay, rich with a light raspberry edge; a leaner '03 pinot from Verzenay; and some seductively perfumed '03 pinot meunier from Ste. Gemme. Then he reached for some older wines. First a 2000 pinot noir from Ay, with aromas of wet earth; then some crisp, beautifully fruity pinot noir from Verzenay, from the great vintage of '96; and finally, some '90 chardonnay from Mesnil, already aging like a good white Burgundy, crisp and acidic yet with aromas of hazelnut and honeysuckle.

After sniffing and tasting, he added a few dashes of this and a dollop of that, and voilà. His blend was indisputably more complex and remarkable than any of the individual wines.

"Blending is not destroying individuality, it's creating a cuvée," Mr. Krug said. "We're not blending to correct, we're blending to enhance. If you would transform Champagne into Burgundy you would destroy it."

Of course, few big producers and no small producers can hope to match the elegance of Mr. Krug's blend. Krug Champagnes begin at more than \$100 a bottle and surely fit into the artisanal category. Most growers might produce 3,000 to 10,000 cases of Champagne a year, as against Krug's 40,000, which in itself is a drop in the ocean compared with Moët's two million cases a year. While the growers, too, blend their nonvintage wines, it is a far more limited composition, with wines taken from different parcels in the same general area, and covering far fewer vintages.

"We want to express the style of the village," said Pierre Larmandier, who, with his wife, Sophie, runs Larmandier-Bernier. "We can't make the sophisticated blends of the big houses. This is what we can do."

Slowly but clearly, consumers are gaining awareness of these small Champagne houses. As with heirloom vegetables and microbrews, their success depends on developing a small but select public for whom connoisseurship is as important as the wallet.

"What the big houses are seeing is that connoisseurs are looking for specificity and individuality, notwithstanding that we've spent the last 40 years saying great Champagne can only be blended," Mr. Theise said. "You definitely see the impact of this kind of thinking in that no less than Moët & Chandon is releasing single-vineyard Champagnes."

Moët first offered limited quantities of its three single-vineyard Champagnes, each demonstrating one of the three grapes of the region, in 2001, with the intention of promoting its own vineyards. These are intense, powerful wines, thoroughly unlike other Moëts, which are typically more balanced. "The way we present this trilogy has a bit to do with the world of still wines, rather than what is typical of Moët & Chandon," said Georges Blanck, Moët's head winemaker. "It's something completely new."

In fact, some of the greatest and most expensive Champagnes of all are terroir wines, produced in tiny quantities, like Bollinger's Vieilles Vignes Françaises, an all-pinot-noir Champagne from ancient vines in Ay and Bouzy; Salon's Le Mesnil from the Côte des

Blancs; and Krug's Clos du Mesnil, which comes from a single walled vineyard in the town of Mesnil. For Krug, the apostle of blending, this single-vineyard Champagne, which it started producing in the 1970's, was a complete departure. Mr. Krug calls it a "contradiction wine."

"So what," he said. "We're not selling concepts. We're selling pleasure."

These days, many of the grower-producers are selling all the Champagne they can make. Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy, who has about 32 acres in the Vallée de la Marne, is the fifth generation in his family to grow grapes in the region. While his family always made a little wine, they began to emphasize Champagne production in the bad years after World War II, when they were unable to sell their grapes to the big houses. In the 1970's, Mr. Geoffroy's father decided to keep all the grapes and turn them into Champagne.

Walking through a hillside vineyard in Cumières overlooking the Marne, Mr. Geoffroy's parcels were easy to distinguish from the others. The lush green grass growing between his rows of bare vines was evidence of his distaste for chemical pesticides and herbicides.

"If you don't have the passion, you won't make a very good Champagne," he said as he strolled the vineyard, waving at local hunters who also walked the rows, shotguns in hand, searching for rabbits and pheasants.

Passion can be expensive to maintain. Mr. Geoffroy said good vineyard land was going for 800,000 to 1 million euros per hectare, around \$400,000 an acre, enough to set up the Geoffroy family for several generations.

But that would mean sacrificing the graceful, lightly smoky Cuvée Sélectionnée that Mr. Geoffroy says expresses the personality of Cumières, and the winemaking facility underneath his grandmother's house. And that would mean more of what Mr. Geoffroy calls "normal Champagne."

"To me," he said, "that's not to my taste."

Côte des Blancs

PIERRE GIMONNET (CUIS)

Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V. (<i>IWC-91 PTS!</i>)	KPG-1	\$39.00
Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V. 12/375ml (<i>IWC-91 PTS!</i>)	KPG-1H	\$23.50
"Cuvée Gastronomer," 1999 (<i>IWC-91 PTS!</i>)	KPG-299	\$45.00
"Fleurons," 1996 (<i>IWC-89 PTS!</i>)	KPG-796	\$49.00
"Vintage Collection," 1996 1/1.5L (Wood Case)	KPG-696M	\$180.00
"Cuvée Oenophile Maxi Brut," 1995	KPG-395	\$51.50

JEAN MILAN (OGER)

"Carte Blanche," Brut, N.V. (<i>WS-92 PTS!</i>)	KML-1	\$39.00
Brut "Speciale," N.V. (<i>IWC-92 PTS!</i>)	KML-2	\$41.00
"Symphorine," 1998 (<i>IWC-92 PTS!</i>)	KML-5	\$58.50
"Cuvée Tendresse" Sec, N.V.	KML-4	\$42.00

LARMANDIER-BERNIER (VERTUS)

Brut Tradition, N.V.	KLR-6	\$45.00
Blanc de Blancs 1er Cru Brut, N.V. (<i>WS-90 PTS!</i>)	KLR-1	\$44.00
Cramant Grand Cru Vieille Vignes Extra Brut, 1998	KLR-298	\$51.50
"Terre de Vertus," N.V.	KLR-5	\$48.50
"Special Club," 1997 6/750ml (<i>WS-91 PTS!</i>)	KLR-397	\$59.00

Vallée de la Marne

RENÉ GEOFFROY (CUMIÈRES)

Cuvée de Réserve," Brut, N.V. (<i>WS-91 PTS!</i>)	KRG-1	\$41.00
"Cuvée Sélectionnée" Brut, N.V. (<i>WS-90 PTS!</i>)	KRG-2	\$48.00
"Cuvée Sélectionnée" Brut, N.V. 12/375ml (<i>WS-90 PTS!</i>)	KRG-2H	\$26.50
"Cuvée Prestige," N.V. (<i>WS-91 PTS!</i>)	KRG-4	\$60.00
"Cuvée 1995 de René Geoffroy," 1995 1/1.5L	KRG-5M	\$288.00

Montagne de Reims

VILMART & CIE (RILLY-LA-MONTAGNE)

"Cuvée Grand Cellier," N.V. (<i>IWC-91 PTS!</i>)	KVM-1	\$57.00
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"Cuvée Rubis," N.V. (<i>IWC-91 PTS!</i>)	KVM-3	\$51.00
"Grand Cellier Rubis," 1997 (<i>IWC-91 PTS!</i>)	KVM-397	\$92.00
"Cuvée Grand Cellier d'Or," 1997	KVM-697	\$65.50
"Cuvée Grand Cellier d'Or," 1998	KVM-698	\$67.00
"Cuvée Création," 1996 (<i>IWC-93 PTS!</i>)	KVM-496	\$93.00
"Coeur de Cuvée," 1997	KVM-597	\$101.00
"Coeur de Cuvée," 1992 6/1.5L	KVM-592M	\$198.00

CHARTOGNE-TAILLET (MERFY)

"Cuvée Sainte-Anne," N.V. (<i>WS-90 PTS!</i>)	KCT-1	\$39.00
"Cuvée Sainte-Anne," N.V. 12/375ml (<i>WS-90 PTS!</i>)	KCT-1H	\$23.50
"Cuvée Sainte-Anne," N.V. 6/1.5L (<i>WS-90 PTS!</i>)	KCT-1M	\$87.00
Blanc de Blancs, N.V. (<i>WS-90 PTS! IWC-90 PTS!</i>)	KCT-4	\$48.00
Millésime Vieille Vignes, 1996 (<i>IWC-90+ PTS!</i>)	KCT-396	\$51.00
"Cuvée Fiacre Taillet," N.V. (<i>IWC-93 PTS! WA-92 PTS!</i>)	KCT-2	\$57.00