



CHAMPAGNE 2008

terry theise
estate selections

“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 to 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

Why Drink Grower Champagne?

You should drink grower Champagne if you've forgotten that Champagne is WINE.

You should drink "farmer-fizz" if you'd rather buy Champagne from a farmer than a factory.

You should drink it if you'd rather have a wine expressive of vineyard, and the grower's own connection to vineyard, than a wine "formed" by a marketing swami who's studied to the Nth-degree what you can be persuaded to "consume." Do you really want to be reduced to a mere "consumer" when you can drink Champagne like a whole human being?

You should drink grower-Champagne if the individually distinctive flavors of terroir-driven wines matter more than the lowest-common-denominator pap served up by the mega conglomerates in the "luxury-goods" business.

You should drink it because it's honest REAL wine grown and made by a vintner—by a FAMILY just like yours—by a "him," not by an "it." You should drink it because it's better to buy wine from a person than from a company.

You should drink it because its price is honestly based on what it costs to produce, not manipulated to account for massive PR and ad budgets, or to hold on to market-share.

You should drink grower-Champagne because, like all hand-crafted estate-bottled wines, it is not a mere Thing but is indeed a BEING, expressive of where it grew and who raised it. In drinking it you help protect DIVERSITY, and diversity leads to VITALITY. And if you'd rather eat a local field-ripened summer tomato rapturous with sweetness instead of some January tomato you buy at the supermarket hard as a stone and tasting of nothing, then you should be drinking farmer-fizz!

contents

Map of Champagne	1
Introduction	2
CÔTE DES BLANCS	
Pierre Gimonnet	12
Varnier-Fannière	16
Jean Milan	18
Pierre Peters	21
VALLÉE DE LA MARNE	
Marc Hébrart	23
Goutorbe	26
Gaston Chiquet	28
René Geoffroy	31
MONTAGNE DE REIMS	
Henri Billiot	35
Jean Lallement et Fils	37
Pehu-Simonet	39
A. Margaine	40
Vilmart & Cie	42
L. Aubry	45
Chartogne-Taillet	48
<i>Champagne Vintages</i>	50

INTRODUCTION

When we finished the tasting of current cuvées at Hebrart, he asked us if we'd help him make a decision about the dosage level in the still-to-be-released 2004 Special Club. He would pour us six different options, side by side, and we could opine. I asked if he'd mix them up so there'd be no linear progression in sweetness, and he agreed.

Sample one was salty, long, echo-y, surprisingly good (for an '04).

Sample two was drier, chalkier, more studied, less fun.

Sample three was higher-toned, zingy and *long*, lunar and unearthly.

Sample four was rockin! Fragrance, power, verve. YES.

Sample five combined aspects of 1 and 4; finish seemed sharp; needs another year "en tirage."

Sample six is runway-model racy and skeletal, neither as good as the driest nor sweetest.

I had no earthly idea where the wines stacked up sweetness-wise. I guessed #2 was the driest and #4 the sweetest. I liked #4 best, followed by #1 and #5. We all agreed these were the best three examples, though we ordered them somewhat differently. That at least was encouraging.

One had 7.8 g.l. of residual sugar. Tasted sweeter.

Two had 11.25 g.l. of RS, and tasted *drier!* Somehow the dosage in #1 registered more expressively.

Three had 13.55 g.l. RS. By no means did it seem like the "sweetest" of the group.

Four had 12.4 g.l. RS. This was my favorite, though "12.4" sounds like "a lot."

Five had 9g.l. RS. So it did in fact mingle elements of 1 and 4.

Six, which seemed the driest, had 10.15 g.l. RS.

This was a wonderful and revelatory tasting experience, but what it revealed was anything but categorical. Rather, it gave me a renewed appreciation for the ambiguities of palate and the ambiguities of flavor components. And it gave me a very *much* renewed disdain for anyone who would reduce these things to formulas or ironclad principles. 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.

It was both candid and collegial for Hébrart to share his backstage-life with us, but this is what growers do,

many of them at least. It is very rarely what merchants or négociants do, though, and that's all right, it isn't a great moral failing. It becomes dubious only when the big fellow assumes the parlance of the little guy to make you believe he's one thing when he's actually something very different.

I was walking along a high path just under the woods on the Cramant hill. Below me was a perfectly sited



Vineyards and church in Cuis, from Gimonnet

vineyard, steep, facing due south, and peppered with those little markers that look like headstones that say who the owner is. The owner is a very large négociant. I thought about it as I walked. The négociant owns what looks like the best vineyard. He has more money than god. He has every bit of expensive new equipment probably still under warranty. He has enormous economies of scale by which to amortize his costs. He can hire people with all the know-how in the world.

Why, then, are his wines so mediocre? His best wines, such as those which use the fruit from the vineyard I was walking along, are very good – as well they should be. But why are they so expensive?

One Fall I did a little farmer-fizz tasting for a group of wine writers. I pissed a lot of them off. The orthodoxy on which they'd come to depend, and which was locked in place as the definition of Champagne, was under attack. Naturally it does me no good to piss people off. In this instance it's a by-product of getting peoples' attention, but no one wants to have to relearn something they figured they already knew. Plus I'm sure they'd received

all manner of suave and charming Gallic hospitality from the *negoçes*; it's what they're best at. It's in my nature to be agreeable and persuasive. But it's also in my nature to be annoyed by cynicism and hypocrisy.

At one point during lunch I was questioned somewhat pointedly. "Are you saying it's WRONG for the big houses to sell different blends in different markets?"

"Far from it," I replied. "What's wrong is to lie about it."

Please understand, our farmer-fizz bizz is quite robust, and the RM category as a whole has zoomed to a market-share of nearly 3%, from the .62% it enjoyed in 1997, when I started this quixotic little venture. I am jocund if not halcyon with contentment. It's *fun* to sell this stuff (and even more fun to get to *drink* it regularly), but what concerns me is the inevitable backlash. Not from you guys; from the Big Houses. Did you know, for example, they're bidding the price of grapes up so high that growers will be dis-incentived to do anything but sell? And once an RM decides to live the easy life of selling grapes, he becomes an indentured servant. All of us have seen the way the Goliaths manipulate prices to control market-share. Remember when the current darling of the commercial Champagne scene was dropping its pants around its ankles to get glass-pours? Look what it sells for now. Inflation hasn't gone up that much in that length of time!

We knocked a Big Brand off the Champagne-by-the-glass at a showcase account in a big city. The somm preferred to pour something with a story and a human imprint. The chef wasn't getting his produce from Sysco, so why should the somm get his fizz-pour from LVMH? Well, this would never do. The regional rep called and called. What would it take to get the pour back? A lower price? Free goods? More stoppers and buckets and aprons? Any other tchotchkes the somm needed? On the day I was there he showed me, with considerable incredulity, a brand-monogrammed necktie the rep had left on his desk with a note – "Will this be enough?"

"It's a relief to be dealing with wine merchants," he said.

David's still a very little guy and Goliath is still a big hulking brute, but after David's stomped on his toes for awhile suddenly Goliath is walking with a limp. Funny how a little blister can ruin your whole day . . .

I did a talk to the staff at *Per Se* in New York, who have been pouring Pierre Gimonnet by the glass since they opened. I didn't need to "sell" this group on the wine or the concept. In fact I barely knew what I needed to say to them, and so I decided to speak with gratitude and affection. I noted theirs was a highly food-savvy clientele, people who could probably tell you who grew the best salsify or mâche at the Union Square greenmarket, or knew about the fabulous veal from Four Story Hill Farms, and since this was the case, why should these same people be content to drink Frito-Lay Champagne? And I watched the pleasure spread over the room, as, somehow, I'd nailed it, anchored it in *meaning*.

Many of us instinctively recoil from "meaning." We're afraid we won't get it, or will get it but somehow



Grapes on the vine at Vilmart

not measure up to it. Or perhaps we like to think of ourselves as down-to earth, and this "meaning" stuff is too abstract. But we approach wine with almost obsessive hunger for detail—growers, grape varieties, vintages, soils, scores—and all I will ask is whether we would claim to spend so much time and effort on something meaningless. I fuss about the question because, of all the wines in the world with affectations to "quality," surely there is none as inimical to meaning as industrial Champagne. As far as the consumer is concerned, detail has been removed almost institutionally from these wines. And I see no reason to accept it.

Not when there are 2,200 growers who grow, produce, bottle and sell Champagne under their own labels.

In the city of Reims, on the square across from the great cathedral, are several touristy little wine shops. You'd expect them to be commercial, and they are. But one of them gave me a delightful surprise last year, when it displayed *an entire wall*, fully a quarter of the display space, of grower-Champagne.

Another shop I've visited to select from their outstanding choice of Armagnacs has added Vilmart, Aubry, Larmandier-Bernier and Gimonnet to the groaning shelves of *Négoçants*.

And most important, we are receiving many unmistakable signals of a sea-change in the acceptance of farmer-fizz. Perhaps most significant was the publication of a NY Times STYLE magazine (important to emphasize this was not a wine-piece) 1-paragraph blurb to the effect that all the hipsters were drinking *grower-Champagne* this season. And incredibly, one Friday's Wall Street Journal published a piece actually **recommending** grower Champagne as a perfect gift to give one's boss!

Big scores are all well and good. But when the *concept* enters the mainstream to this extent it can only signal one thing: we have arrived. And there is no longer *any* reasonable objection any customer can give for not ordering fizz from FAMILIES instead of factories.

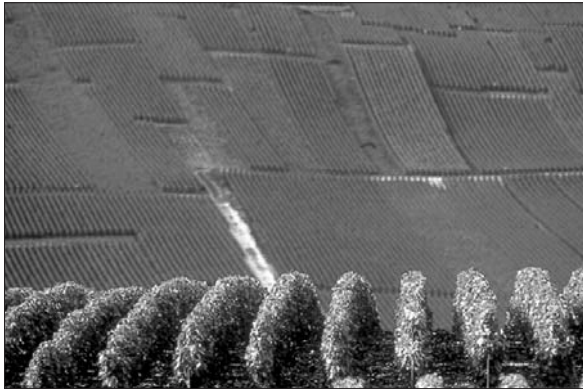
Thanks for all your work helping to make the sidewalks safe for the little guy!

No less than Andrew Jefford, in his epochal book *The New France*, begins his chapter on Champagne with these words: "*Champagne is on the verge of profound change. There is a growing realization that its viticulture has become slovenly and the subtleties of its terroir have*

been neglected. The era of good growers and great vineyards is just beginning.”

Damn straight !

If you are new to this offering, please let me ‘splain



Vineyards at Geoffroy

it. Farmer-fizz requires you to recalibrate your thinking about what Champagne really is. But it won't hurt a bit. It's a brave new world . . .

The first thing you are asked to do as a citizen of this world is to play a game of make-believe with me for a minute. Pretend you are standing in your store (if you are a retail-type personage) and Mr. Guigal, *the* Mr. Guigal, comes in announcing he has a brand spankin' new Rhône project he wants to introduce to you. Cool! He pulls out a bottle labeled "Rhône" and presents it to you.

"Only 'Rhône'?" you ask.

"Well, you know, the world is changing," he answers, "and people don't have time to remember all these little Appellations, *Hermitage, Côte Rôtie, Cornas, Gigondas*; are they really so different?"

"I thought they kind of were," you begin.

"Oh they are," he cuts you off, "but only as *compo-*



Snow in the vineyards at Geoffroy

nents in a blend! This wonderful 'Rhône' wine I'm about to pour for you has 11% Côte Rôtie, which gives finesse and perfume, 9% Hermitage for stamina and spiciness, 22% Cornas for body and meatiness, 20% each of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas for power."

"That still leaves about 18%," you note.

"Ah, that must remain a mystery. I really shouldn't have told you what I already did." He replies. "Well, we blend these wines together so skillfully that we can guarantee the same quality every year! And so we won't use a vintage date for the wine!"

"Oh really?" you wonder.

"Oh perhaps, in exceptional years, then we make a small amount for connoisseurs. And maybe once in a while we bottle some Côte Rôtie by itself if it's really good one year," he continues.

"You mean you're going to *discontinue* single appellations?" you ask in shock.

"Oh my goodness yes; who needs them? They don't matter in the least; in fact they're a pain in the neck if you want to know the truth. . . ."

You listen in horror. NO MORE HERMITAGE! Each of your beloved Appellations slaughtered, and for *what*? So someone can sell a blend that will always taste the same??? Your heart-rate increases, your skin gets clammy, and still he stands there smugly, admiring the perfect crease in his Lubian suit, reaching into his Hermes case for a fresh ascot. You try to scream *No! No! You*

"Champagne is on the verge of profound change. There is a growing realization that its viticulture has become slovenly and the subtleties of its terroir have been neglected. The era of good growers and great vineyards is just beginning."

-The New France

mustn't! but no voice will come. You awaken, drenched in sweat, bolt-upright in bed, recovering yourself slowly . . . "Thank God, it was only a nightmare. . . ."

Yes, it was a nightmare, for you. In Champagne, it is the actual wide-awake world. And we accept it, lulled into a state of infantile obedience by the masters of marketing in the luxury-goods conglomerates which own many of the "Great Names." Indeed Mr. Regis Camus of Charles Heidsieck permitted Jefford to quote him saying, "We're against terroir; we've very much in favor of blends." Well of course they are. "Terroir is an embarrassment to them, because they know their work snuffs out its expression; hence the dogma that 'complete' or 'great' Champagne must be a blended product," writes Jefford.

I was interviewed by a very sharp wine writer who was doing a piece on Champagne. He felt he'd spotted a basic contradiction in my argument, and asked:

"I guess where I need more clarification on your position is how you reconcile the isolation of Champagne *terroirs* with the necessity of blending. How do you explain away this paradox?"

TT: I don't, or I hope I don't. Look, there are a few true *monocrus*, and I suspect there'll be more and more in the coming years, as the young terroir-freaks work this angle. But there's an existential difference between

a big-brand wine blended from several hundred lots encompassing all of Champagne from the Aube to the Coteaux de Vesle, and a blend from a grower with 7 hectares all within a few miles of his cellar. It's not just a difference of *extent*, it's a difference of *essence*. No one quarrels with Chave's Hermitage, though we all know it's made from a dozen or so component wines from parcels scattered over the whole Hermitage hillside. The result is "individual" or "artisan" enough for all of us. But it's entirely apart from a co-op Côtes du Rhône coming from hither and yon. So I'd reject as false, the argument that unless Champagne is ENTIRELY unblended we have no right to speak about *terroir*. In short, I don't agree there IS a "paradox."

"And if this paradox is defensible," he went on, "then why can't the Grandes Marques resort to the same argument?"

TT: It's the wrong question. The crucial difference between houses and estates is the difference between industrial and artisanal. It's not obviated by stating "The growers blend too."

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.

But I need to take a step back. Why should we care? Most Champagne's an industrial product: so what?

I have a friend who was about to marry when, a week before the wedding, he and his fiance learned of her diagnosis with cancer, a bad cancer, a killer. They married nevertheless, and the eighteen months of their marriage were marked by the disease, its treatment, the endless round of doctors and specialists, and the pathos of her death. She was in her early thirties, and they were each the other's Great Love.

His friends did what we could to rally around him. Within a week or two after the death, we gathered in one of our homes to cook supper and keep our friend company. He and I had spoken often, of course, and shed many a tear together, but this was my first time seeing him, and so I brought a special wine, a Magnum of Vilmart's 1991 Coeur de Cuvée. And this is the first thing I want to tell you; what other wine can be at once appropriate for both celebration and consolation? The very sight of the tiny rising bubbles, dancing upward as if to snub their noses at gravity and exploding in a soft wash

of foam, are heralds of an unquenchable hope. And so it was; the Champagne itself was enthralling, and I watched my friend be drawn into its suave complexity, and I knew very well that for these few moments he was engrossed in *life*, free of the ache of his dead. The Champagne almost literally brought him back to life. What other wine could have done this?

I could never have given him a Big Brand Champagne at that moment. These are merely *things*, products. The Vilmart came from a family whom I know and am fond of; it came from a particular piece of the earth and it came with a human story embedded in each rising comet of carbon dioxide, from our patient earth through those people through me to my grieving friend, nearly as though our hands were all joined; this Champagne had a right to presume to console, because it had been watched over in its own human vigil.

There are varying soils, microclimates, and the particular insularity of rural Europe. The wines of the various villages are enthrallingly distinct from one another, and for a sensibility like mine, it makes no more sense to try and correct their "imperfections" by blending than it would to throw all of Selbach's Zeltingers, Wehlners,



Yeah, that's a 3 liter of Hebrart special club!

Graachers and Bernkastelers together in the quest for a "perfect" Mosel wine! Artisanal work has all the individualities of the hands and hearts which inform it. It is beautifully nourished by human tics and foibles. *Because* it is human, the perfection it occasionally attains has **value**.

I was asked to produce thumbnails on a few of the important villages in Champagne for a wine-list. Vamping, this is what I came up with.

CRAMANT: the "Riesling" of Chardonnay-Champagnes, maximum-mineral and sweet-herbal green tea flavors along with heirloom-apples.

AVIZE: smells just like a newly sharpened pencil, and also just as pointed. Refined and incisive.

OGER: Avize with more flesh on its noble bones.

MESNIL: the voodoo-doll of the Côte des Blancs, blossoming trees on a humid Spring evening, over a pulverized chalk structure so tactile you'll think they dissolved the stuff in the wine.

CUMIÈRES: For lovers of pork-belly everywhere — and who doesn't love pork-belly?

MAREUIL-SUR-Aÿ: Is the Morey-St-Denis of Pinot Noir based Champagnes; scrupulous, classic, firm.



VERZENAY: for the real seeker of earth-sex, these are rural, animal Champagnes with funky iris smells and the weirdest (and coolest) apple-hoppy-meady *terroir*-thang and yet the wines have SCHWING and are actually even refined. Don't worry be hoppy.

I've been tasting Champagne seriously for about thirteen years now, and it's an ongoing education. The idea of classifying entire *Communes* rather than individual vineyards complicates things. If I ask "What does Cramant taste like?" the

only appropriate answer is *Which Cramant?* The steep slopes, the vineyards in the flats, the north or the south side of the hill, the part near Chouilly? The best way to learn these distinctions is to taste the *Vins Claires* (the still wines), but I am usually a month too late to see these. So, one fumbles on.

In a recent edition of Edward Behr's magazine *The Art Of Eating*, Behr produced a piece on Champagne, which contains this gem of a quote from the proprietor of a Champagne House:

"You need a certain size to vinify well . . . to afford the equipment, which is expensive. A small vigneron will occasionally make very good Champagne, but he won't know why he did it."

As they used to say on Monty Python, oh what a giveaway! The speaker of this splendidly snide remark was *François-Roland Billecart*; yes, he of the impeccable "boutique" credentials. I shared this quote with most of my vintners, whose responses ranged from perplexed to derisive.

Yet let's give the devil his due. There are myriad "growers" who in fact cannot afford the equipment necessary to produce Champagne, and who deliver their grapes to various co-ops to have it "produced" for them. The finished fizz is delivered back to the "grower" with



his own label, and he hangs out his sign and sells "his" wine exactly as if he'd made it himself. And if you don't know to look for the teensy letters "RC" (Récoltant-Coopérateur) on the label you'd think it was indeed estate-bottled Champagne. I consider this somewhere between lamentable and shameful.

And if we consider the 2200 true artisan producers we

have to admit that most of them are ordinary. The ratio of gold to dross is about the same in Champagne as it is everywhere else; lucky for me, or how would I make a living? In fact we're close to maxing out most of our producers and have been looking for newbies. This inevitably gives rise to very mixed emotions; one is sad at the amount of mediocrity one encounters but encouraged by what one already has. There are perhaps—liberally—one or two hundred "producers of interest" in the Champagne region. But happily this number is growing continually, as the success of the first few breathes hope into the others.

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. Leaving aside the few true Great Names of Champagne (and we all know who they are), the fact is there isn't a single decent Récoltant who sells the Négocé his best grapes! Rather the opposite. And for any single Négocé who truly practices the "blender's art" there are two dozen who're dumping a lot of mediocre fruit into one big tub. Or even more distressing, buying tens of thousands of bottles of anonymous swill from some huge co-op *sur lattés* and slapping their label on them.

Don't think it isn't done. And don't for a single New York MINUTE think that, somewhere in a presentation-room inside a Big Brand, there's a journalist being fed the most putrid raft of shit about the "house style" as maintained by the exquisite "blender's art" while downstairs in the warehouse the Big Brand's labels are being applied to bottles from a co-op.

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 Cliquot 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.”

When I started this portfolio in the summer of 1997 I bent over backwards to be fair to the Big Guys. “Small is beautiful but big isn’t necessarily ugly,” I used to say. You could argue that Champagne is the finest industrial wine on earth and I might well agree, but never forget that Big-Brand Champagne is *indeed* industrial, with all that implies. Perhaps you could then avoid the queasy spectacle of them affecting the *patois* of the truly artisanal while actually conducting business just like Microsoft, except for the creativity.

Why do we assume Champagne must be a trans-regional blend? Because they’ve lulled us into such complacency we simply haven’t *thought* about it. Because if we, as wine lovers, ever did think about it, their hegemony would be threatened. They’ve had it very easy, and they’ve almost never treated you with respect.

I have heard, along with you, that Champagne is a brand-driven market, and “no-name” Champagnes have no chance. I say that’s a *self-fulfilling* prophecy. It is because we allow ourselves to forget that Champagne is *wine*. The marketing nabobs have done us a cruelty by selling Champagne as a beverage of occasion. How many of us have ships to launch these days? Champagne doesn’t *need* an occasion, it *is* the occasion! A good bottle of basic honest bubbly can be had for the price of a middling Chardonnay. Champagne flirts with the miraculous, but it is wine first or it is nothing.

Nothing if not responsive to every seismic goose-pimple in the market, a few of the big guys have started offering single-vineyard wines. It began with Leclerc-Briant and their Les Authentiques (which, by the way, hail from Cumières, where my man Geoffroy has been bottling equivalent wines for three generations now). It has continued—the irony is almost unbearably wonderful—with the biggest-of-the-big, Moët & Chandon, whose several single-vineyard wines are certainly much more expensive than comparable wines from growers, who don’t have all the marketing frou-frou to drive up costs.

But what’s most delicious about it all is the huge houses wanting to have it both ways. “Champagne is a blended wine,” they are wont to intone. “Great Champagne cannot be made from any single *Cru*, but only from the skillful blending of many different Crus as practised by our master blenders since the time the Cubs last won a World Series.” Sure, Bub. Is that why you want me to pay \$130 for your single-vineyard release?

FRESH & FREQUENT

Back in my Kronheim days, when I first began this portfolio, the company wanted me to consolidate my wines with their Grandes Marques so we could obtain

my wacko product without having to buy full containers. I was willing, and placed a small order to be consolidated with a shipment leaving France the third week of August. One night I awoke with a question. Could it be. . . ? No, it couldn’t; they’d never do that! But . . . better to be safe, so; I said to our traffic manager, “Ah, that Champagne container, the one my stuff’s on. . . ?

“Yes?” he said.

“What kind of container is that?”

“Thermal-insulated,” he replied.

“Then take my wine off it. I won’t ship that way.” I demanded. Thermal-insulation, which adds 10% to the cost of a regular “dry” container (as opposed to about \$1300 for a “reefer”) is how the whiskey-douchebags attempt to mollify their wine people. There is simply no alternative to shipping in reefers, and they know it, but they don’t care. This was an August shipment, people! And it contained many hundreds of cases of prestige Champagne, including perhaps the most prestigious one of all.

Ever wondered at the bottle-variation in many of the Cuvées Prestige? Consider this. Not only are they routinely mistreated in shipping, but they don’t deplete out of distrib-



utor warehouses very quickly, which in many cases—perhaps *most* cases—means they’re stored hot. We ship cold, we ship often, we store in a refrigerated warehouse; *our Champagnes are delivered to you in IMPECCABLE condition.*

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “BRUT”?

What indeed? 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. It’s popular with producers who like to use minimal *dosage*. In one instance I tasted the same wine with both dosage methods and significantly preferred the “regular” (i.e. sugar-in-wine), though in fairness I like many wines dosed with must-concentrate and doubt if I could identify which was which more than half the time. Still, 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.

Champagne — at least at the level of serious growers — is getting less sweet all the time. This is a bad thing done for a good reason. I’m entirely in favor of purity and honesty, but even more entirely in favor of elegance and deliciousness, and I often feel growers are doing what they (abstractly) feel they *should* do, but not tasting.

Mind you, the typical 15 g.l. prevailing among the commercial brands is a travesty, but the 5-8 g.l. prevailing among many growers is certainly more honest, but just as unbalanced. Most N.V. Champagne with less than 30 months on the lees is just too snippy and tart with dosage below 10 grams. Nor will it age gracefully. I hope this particular slice of zeitgeist is

just a phase from which growers will emerge wiser in a few years.

The 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.

I had a letter from Alexander Chartogne, who’s back at the estate after doing a practicum at Selse, by whom he was greatly impressed. “We can’t lower prices because we have to buy all these oak barrels,” his folks told me. Alexander’s an excellent young man who will make superb Champagnes. He wrote to ask what I thought of Chartogne’s level of dosage for the N.V. Brut. It sits about at 8-9 g.l., which is where I think it should be. I wrote him back saying “As regards dosage, in general my policy is to have no policy, but to search for the ideal balance in each wine. Thus I wouldn’t advocate a theory of “less dosage” or “more dosage” but would rather hope producers are flexible enough to give the wine what it asks for. I do believe that the current idea of always-less dosage is wrong. The guiding principles should always be harmony and longevity and pleasure-in-drinking. I have always appreciated that your family’s wines were sensible and logical as regards dosage, and I wouldn’t suggest reducing it, unless of course the base wines underwent a significant change.”



WHAT IN GOD’S NAME IS UP WITH ROSÉ?

You can’t get enough, we can’t get enough, *tout le monde* can’t get enough — and no one knows why. Every grower with whom I spoke reported batshit loony demand for pink Champagne. Do you know why this has suddenly become the must-have bubbly?

In truth Rosé Champagne is often an afterthought for merchants and growers alike, a brand-extender for the niche who appreciate it. Only a few Rosés receive the

same care the “white” Champagnes receive, and these are (properly) most highly prized, and the kind I try to offer.

Remember, Champagne can’t turn on a dime. If one perceives a demand now, it takes at least three years before one can respond. By which



time we’re all on to the next thing. So I was philosophical with the growers, though it frustrates me not to be able to give y’all what you *crave*.

There’s rather a dichotomy of approaches to Rosé. Some growers insist on using the *saignée* method (i.e. bleeding the juice of red grapes), claiming it gives them more fruit. Others demur, saying *saignée* creates inconsistencies of both style and color. This group would rather blend still red wine into a white fizz; they can fine-tune and calibrate, and they can use mature wine to add stature. Having tasted both good and not-so-good examples of both types, I have no preference. I only ask that a grower take all his wines seriously. If I sense a Rosé is slapdash or merely something contrived to meet a demand, or if I just don’t like it—you won’t see it.

One last point about the broader issues. I feel strongly that, as wine merchants, people who derive their *entire* living from the production of wine deserve our loyalty as a *priority*. The small, family estates I represent survive or perish on the sale of their wine. They are not owned by multinational conglomerates, and they don’t sell scarves, wristwatches, leopard-skin jackets or monogrammed ball point pens. Champagne for them is a wine with which they live, and live solely; it is no sort of lifestyle accoutrement. No picnics on the grass at Wimbledon or toasting the winners in a polo tournament here! If we want to remove some of the twit-appeal from Champagne, perhaps we can support the vigneron with dirt under their fingernails. . . . It works on retail shelves, *and it works on wine-lists*. If we want people to know that the category has value, we have to begin by *creating it as a category*. Call it what you will; artisanal Champagnes, domain-bottled, estate-bottled, grower-Champagnes, family-fizz, small-batch, microbrew, Podunk east B.F. Champagnes, whatever you think is the sexiest term. Then watch it take off!

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 slam-dunk 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.

Plus, hey; Chardonnay’s got to be good for **something**, right?

In fact, if you’ll permit a digression, I think I’ve discovered the one thing for which Chardonnay is indispensable. You can make *good* Champagne, even quite *interesting* Champagne with red grapes only—but you rarely make *great* Champagne without Chardonnay. Concomitantly, it is quite possible to make *great* Champagne using *only* Chardonnay. I have tasted a lot of *vin claire* now, and I can tell you they give more Chardonnay JOY than many, many of their more ostentatious cousins from elsewhere. Tasting in Oger I found the nearest resemblance was to *Riesling*: the still Chardonnay was flowery, gracious and limpid, even before the influences of yeasts and autolysis. Chardonnay adds not only flavor but also backbone and raciness, and it has a synergy with Pinot Noir which creates new flavors when the two are blended. Invariably, whenever a grower has two quality grades (e.g. an N.V. Brut and another *superior* N.V. Brut) the better wine *has more Chardonnay* in it, apart from longer time on the lees and lower dosage.

WHAT DO YOU GET WITH GROWERS’ CHAMPAGNES IN THE BOTTLE?

First, you get character. You get the taste of a small slice of terroir.

In general I’d say you get a younger wine than you do from a Grande Marque, as the small grower hasn’t the wherewithal to amortize the costs of maintaining large inventories. Yet with few exceptions, I don’t believe the soleras of the Houses are nearly as complex as they’d have us believe. Attentive drinkers of Champagne *know* there are peaks and valleys of quality among brands, notwithstanding vagaries of shipping and storage. When good vintages are available for N.V.’s, everyone’s quality spikes up, Houses and growers alike.

When I can, I’ll tell you what’s in the cuvées for each of my selections. I think you ought to know. This immediately distinguishes family-fizz from the “product” of the Houses, who’d rather cloak the details of their blends in shrouds of masonic secrecy. Blends do change and there



Chouilly Grand Cru vineyards

are small but significant variations from this year's N.V. Brut to the next one. The maintenance of a grower's style has more to do with whether the base wines do malo, with the amount and type of dosage, with the length of time on the lees, and with all the basic issues of winemaking.

The village or terroir styles have to do of course with soil components and structure, with the choice of grape and with the proportion of those grapes in blends, and with an indefinable habit of thinking, an aesthetic template that takes hold in the communal mind and tells the growers how the wines "should" taste.

And then, for better or worse, you get the character of the vintner himself. I'm sure many of the two thousand growers are pretty run-of-the-mill people who make pleasant, unexceptional wine. The cr me de t te, so to speak, is the same as everywhere; a few utopian wine-freak types who are driven to make superlative hooch. Once that's established (and a prayer of gratitude uttered) then it gets *real* interesting. You start to get into the **palate** of the vintner, the kinds of wines he himself



Oh-la-la! Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy and Kevin Pike enjoy a root beer float.

likes. There's more than one way to make great wine, remember. One man likes high-strung, nervy wines, likes them tense and dashing. His neighbor, equally conscientious and quality-driven, likes wines more creamy and elegant. Each can tell you why Champagne "should" taste the way he himself makes it. Some are tolerant, even embracing of differing styles. This is how your humble author defines *FUN*. Fun is the finding of creative diversity, by which we celebrate the human foible. Fun is *not* the search for THE BEST or the ONLY way or the RIGHT way. Fun is discovering that you're ticklish in more than one place.

GRAND CRU—SIGNIFICANT?

Yes and no.

There are seventeen Grand Cru villages in Champagne (out of several thousand altogether) and, as you might expect, there are opinions on the subject! I'd summarize them thus: there are a few Grand Cru villages which ought to be demoted, and a few 1er Cru villages which ought to be promoted, but by and large the classification is supportable. It was done, correctly, based on geological and exposure parameters. Yet oddly, it is not individual vineyards but instead entire com-



From left to right: *Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy, Denis Varnier, Didier Gimmonnet, Michael Skurnik, and Laurent Champs.*

munes which are classified, and no one supports this inexplicable oversight.

It isn't likely to change, alas. The genie is out of the bottle, and it's easier to live with a flawed system than to undergo the dreadful task of classifying site by site.

Cuis and Cramant are contiguous villages. And every honest grower will tell you the best of Cuis — which is 1er Cru — is better than the least of Cramant — which is Grand Cru. My colleagues are really digging into this issue, asking searching questions about single *climats*, which are the best, which wines hail from which specific land. As you may know, Champagne growers are largely forbidden from putting site-names on their labels. The explanation is theologically Gallic, and I don't even recall it. But I am convinced this is a fruitful avenue of inquiry.

Meanwhile, there is little doubt that most of the time, the Grand Cru pedigree will *show*, all things being equal. And that's where it is significant for the drinker, because a good grower in a Grand Cru village offers simply the VERY best value in all of Champagne. Contrast to the Reims- pernay dinosaurs, with whom you have to trade al-l-l-l-l the way up to their "luxury" brand and even then you sometimes don't get 100% Grand Cru juice. With a good grower in Grand Cru villages you get it with his basic N.V.!

WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE LAST YEAR

Other than changes among individual growers, which are discussed in their texts, the big news was the addition of 40 new communes to the Appellation *Champagne*. Three were booted out; those will be some very pissed off growers. Most who have solicited my opinion on the subject have expected me to froth at the mouth with indignation, but in fact I'm sanguine, and willing to believe the 40 newbies will not dilute the quality of the Appellation all in all. Much of it was land that historically made Champagne and was abandoned after the wars when there weren't the people to work it. Some



of it is very fine land which had been forbidden from replanting for bureaucratic reasons, which is to say bad reasons. And even if the quality of Champagne is diminished, it won't be the quality of *grower Champagne*. It'll be the big *négocçs* who buy grapes from the new communes. Anything that exposes them for what they truly are is ginger-peachy with me!

2002 Vintage-wines are everything we hoped they'd be.

There are now nearly 180 RM Champagnes imported into the US. When I began in 1997 there were 33.

The Club des Viticulteurs has a new member from whom the first Special Club 100% Pinot Meunier Champagne will emerge.

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.

HOW WE WILL CONDUCT THIS BUSINESS

We are going to have the wines in stock. I don't think Champagne is, properly speaking, a D.I. category, because it isn't vintage-driven. We'll do our best to keep all the wines in stock all the time, but I can already tell you that won't be possible! Certain wines are available in very small quantities, and sometimes there's an unanticipated RUN on something that sells it out in a single day. This being an inexact science, I apologize in advance if you can't get the wine you seek.

I will visit at least once a year to taste the new cuvées. They change as different vintage base wines come and go. While it's highly unlikely I'd discontinue a given grower's N.V. Brut, anything's possible. (One hopes I've selected growers of high-enough caliber to

obviate that risk. I think I have!) And other ancillary wines will come and go. So this offering will be updated each year.

Finally, I want to leave you with a chilling set of figures. In 2007 the top-3 Champagne Brands accounted for 62.4% of all the Champagne sold in America. Y'all like monopolies? I don't.

The 15 Brands in total—including the top-3—have the market in an 87.5% death-grip.

Grower-Champagnes occupy 2.95% of the market. But there is a limit to the market-share the growers can possibly claim. There aren't many of them, and they don't produce a lot. I think 5% would be healthy and sustainable. When I started, in September 1997, the share of grower Champagnes was 0.62% and there were fewer than three dozen of them on the market.s I'm not going to make much more than a minor nuisance of myself to the overlords at LVMH. But since most of you are ipso facto a little wine-zany or you wouldn't do business with me, I plea with you: help me stop the Bud-Miller-Coors juggernaut of the big brands, and let's foment a MICRO-BREW REBELLION among our Champagne customers!



A natural chalk pit showing the magical soils of Champagne

pierre gimonnet

cuis

One year I mentioned to Didier Gimmonnet that I'd begun thinking of wines in terms of color, almost in the manner of the synesthiacs, and this year he presented me with a massive book of works of sculpture inspired by the textures and colors of various wines, including his. I thought I was prolix in my tasting imagery until I read this book's daunting lists of descriptors. I wasn't sure whether to feel better or stupider. If you go to his little tasting room you can see the work of art his wines inspired. It is a congenial way to think about wine, or at least it comes naturally to me, but I'm not sure how I feel about a thousand-page volume weighing 17 pounds. Still, not a point score in sight!

We tasted *vins claires* again, which I always enjoy. As it happens 2007 was a so-so vintage in most of Champagne—stories varied by region and grower—and the two colleagues I had along had never tasted still wines before, and are in no special hurry to do so again. A leeeetle sharpness among the '07s. . . .

If there's a more interesting grower in this (or any) portfolio than Didier Gimmonnet, I ain't met him. Every visit I make here enriches me. That is because Didier wants you to know, and because he is unfailingly honest and transparent.

He's like a chef who takes you back into the kitchen and not only shows you what's in his pantry but also let's you taste each individual ingredient that goes into his sauces. *Here's the duck-demi, here's the veal demi (the last*



Didier Gimmonnet amongst the vines

batch is lighter because we didn't roast the bones as long . . .), here's the cream, here's the lemon, here's a little morel-liquid we add as an accent, and here's another morel-liquid from these little wild black ones that have more flavor. . . . The beauty here is in the pride and candor of the gesture: here is what we have to work with, here is how we think of combining these things.

Cuis is the bringer-of-fruit; it is often like a cross between Furmint, Chenin and Riesling depending on

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,500 cases**
- **Soil types: Chalk**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Chardonnay**

vine-age and vintage.

Growers in Grand Cru villages affect to condescend to Cuis, but Didier sees it as indispensable to his style. "Don't forget," he reminds us, "Bollinger has 25 hectares in Cuis. When you taste Bollinger you taste Cuis!"

CHOUILLY is a dark-horse Grand Cru because the village boasts none among the famous growers. Didier has two climates here, *Rond Buisson* and the very old *Mont Aigu*, each on steep-ish land close to Cramant. Chouilly can show outstanding solidity and a redcurrant nuance. Mont Aigu, I think, is quite important in the Gimmonnet-mix, a particular amalgam of quince, aloe vera and naked chalk. The Mont Aigu was total verbena and mineral, with a tarragon-y zing. Rond Buisson was more expressive and lovelier, wonderful mineral persistence, quite complete in itself.

There are several cuvées of Cramant. The Fond de Bateau (planted in 1911) is backbone and spice, with a sort of coarse flint and peppermint. Buisson (planted in 1913) is incredible, with green complexity and interior power, ore and fossils, hugely impressive. With each wine we tasted Didier told us which ultimate cuvée it would go into and in what proportion. The last of the Cramants was already a blend of three sites (two of them new acquisitions): Hautes Bauves, Prevot and La Croix – it was a big man who moves gracefully; juicy and stony. 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. It is a foreign ingredient in Didier's "pantry" and he can't contrive a recipe in which it might belong.

Gimonnet has a keen intuitive understanding of each site, the flavors they give, and the ways to combine these flavors into various *mélanges* for various purposes. But this interloper from Oger has a voice that's too conspicuous in the chorus. Now he has yet another commune to work with, as he's obtained some land in Vertus, but Vertus is a soul-brother of Cuis whereas Oger is Other.

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. Some of you know I like to fly in the face of all received wisdoms simply *because* they're received, and this business about yields isn't nearly as cut and dried as many would have you believe. Often the statement is inherently misleading: "We had 35 hl/ha last year" really means next to nothing. The vines may well have produced 80 hl/ha and the "excess" wine sold off. Yields must also be calibrated against vine-age and density of planting. 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.

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. Yet his temperamental cousin from Vertus, the equally passionate Pierre Larmandier, believes just the opposite, works with strikingly low yields, and achieves Champagnes of power and intensity with no loss of transparency. Not better, not worse, only different — and we get to love them both.

People sometimes point to this phenomenon to demonstrate the human face of *terroir*, that a person will guide wines in the direction of his preferences and desire. They will further argue that this is as important — many say even more important — than whatever fla-

vor might impart from soil. But my own instinct is to resist this notion: it muddies the water. For me there are in effect two *terroirs*; the geological (which comes first) and the human, and these are two aspects of a network of parameters which influence wine. But primary among them all are those flavors of the two Chouillys, the two Cramants, and the many Cuis.

Since 2002 Didier's the proud owner of a half-hectare of Pinot Noir from Aÿ and Mareuil-sur-Aÿ which I gather will be vinified and bottled separately. "In any case it won't go into the blends!" he said last year.

There was some buzz around the table about a fine grower in Cramant who has retired and closed the winery. I wondered if his vineyards might become available. Apparently not, much to my surprise, because it seems that the old ones are disinclined to sell their land to another grower; they'd rather sell or lease it to a *négociant*. I find this sad, but obdurately old-world in its taciturn way. Didier told me; "We too could sell the vineyards and winery and actually be able to retire. But I took this over from my father, and I hope my children will take it over from me." Yes, let's hope so. And let's thank Didier Gimonnet for carrying the Récoltant torch.

I think of all my growers on the Côte des Blancs, Gimonnet's Champagnes have the most "big-city" taste, the most *haut couture*, verve and polish. That isn't merely because I saw them being poured by the glass at (Michelin 3 star) Arpège, but because there's a faintly honed savor about the wines which gives them a silken finesse that defines the Champagne experience for many people.

Didier Gimonnet is a cheerful and hale sort of fellow who's both scrupulously honest and also another of those really-into-it wine guys. You can discuss his wines while you taste them in great analytical detail; he's interested in the aesthetics. With a somewhat larger estate there are certain capacities allowed by size: 150,000 bottles of reserve wine, for instance, kept in bottle and separated by *cru*.

Gimonnet at a glance:

25-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. I suspect some of it might be due to old vines, which impart a palpable creaminess. The majority of Gimonnet's vineyards are more than 40 years old, the oldest parcel (in Cramant) is more than 90. 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."

- KPG-1 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 1er Cru Brut, N.V.** +
 KPG-1H **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 12/375ml**
 KPG-1M **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 3/1.5L**
 71% 2005, 18.1% '04, 9.6% '02 and 1.3% 1999, disgorged 11/07; an unusually detailed and filigree and deft and complex wine, more than everything that a N.V. Blanc de Blancs can be. Indeed, I did a tasting with a local wine writer to whom I offered the leftovers to take with him to re-taste "except for the Gimonnet N.V.," I said: "That puppy stays *here*." There's a wonderful lacy mélange of balsam, chalk, green tea, wintergreen, peony, with fine diction.
- The next cuvée, based on 2006 (and available from the estate in June '08) is more thrusting and adamant, less "reasonable" and more assertive. Also "+" quality.
- Fascinatingly, the MAGNUM is an entirely different cuvée, which had been custom-bottled for a customer who didn't take the entire lot; it's based on 2003, and is even sexier and more polished, and also a "+."
- KPG-204 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Cuvée Gastronomer," 2004** +
 This is a wine with slightly less mousse than usual, specifically to be better at the table; such things were known as Crémants until the Champenoise had to relinquish the term in order to prevent anyone else from using Méthode Champenoise on their labels. It's always been a vintage-wine but not THE vintage wine. Disgorged 12/07, this is 49% Chouilly (for its "elegance"), 39.8% Cuis, and 11.2% Cramant (97-year-old vines, for its "plumpness"). 2004 can be green and almost catty, but this one is all mint and sweet *Sencha*, with a slim spine of chalk and white lilac and an amazing tertiary complexity that rides a cool wave of green and sea-air into a finish of herbal sweetness.
- KPG-300 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Cuvée Oenophile" Maxi Brut, 2000**
 49% Chouilly, 27% Cramant (all 40+ years old) and 24% Cuis, and of course *zero* dosage. This seems more austere than the '99 did, though still with its oyster-shell minerality; it is in fact the 2000 *Fleuron* without dosage, and it's oddly long, if skeletal and fossil-y.
- KPG-702 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Fleuron" Brut, 2002** ++
 The astonishing 2002, "the best vintage here since 1990," according to Didier, is 31% Cramant, 35% Chouilly and 34% Cuis. It has 2002's lovely fragrance of lilac and chalk; this is about as fine as Champagne can be, a perfect amalgam of power, elegance and floweriness, with endless mineral grip, an ethereal prettiness and an aftertaste of violets. This is about brilliance. With another year *en tirage* it's gotten lusher and more pillowy, but this is unfolding quite gradually for an 2002, and it's a classic *vin du garde*.
- KPG-902 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Paradoxe" Brut, 2002** +
 KPG-903 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Paradoxe" Brut, 2003**
 The paradox is the presence of 50% Pinot Noir from a climat called "*Les Clefs*" in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ (which also gave 25% of the Chardonnay, the balance from Cuis) and so this is quite the departure from our hero, the great apostle of the Côte des Blancs. The newest disgorgement of the '02 is 11/07; this wine's been in and out of the shadows; at first it showed huge fruit, after which it seemed curiously unknit, and now it is emerging again but differently, sleeker and firmer with more *confiture*. This wine is bobbing and weaving, and the finish line's a long way off.
- The 2003 is a different cuvée and another world. It's 34% Pinot Noir from Aÿ and Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, and 66% Chardonnay from Chouilly ("*Mont Aigu*"); the black fruit is much chunkier than in the '02; it's a stylish but fun Champagne, all too easy to gulp but with admirable interplay and complexity in a rich mouth-filling style.

KPG-499 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Special Club” Brut, 1999, 6/750ml** **+**

From a “pitiless” selection of 25% Cuis — 30% Chouilly (mostly Mont Aigu 48 years old) — and 45% Cramant (including the 86-88 year-old parcels) representing the *ne plus ultra* of Gimonnet’s *terroirs*.

’99 is a demanding vintage; while powerful it isn’t especially *fleshy* and it can sometimes appear brusque and blatant, especially in low-dosage bottlings. This wine is more luminous and elegant; an exquisite fragrance of cox orange and mirabelle; palate is generously silky, with a gauzy pepperminty breeze; smoke and peach like a tippy Yunnan. Enveloping, an embrace of flowery grip. More in store. With another year “en tirage” the wine is now a chalky riot of Champagne’s malty “sweetness,” with loads of ginger and orange zest; it’s spicier and less muscular than it seemed at first.

And with another two years *en tirage* the wine continues to change texturally, growing constantly more fluffy; flavors too are evolving, now water-chestnuts and coconut enter the picture. It’s more elegant with its longer lees-time though I still feel it would have been even greater with another gram or two of RS (it has six). You may feel otherwise.

KPG-699VM **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Vintage Collection” Brut, 1999, 3/1.5L** **++**KPG-699M **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Vintage Collection” Brut, 1999, 1/1.5L (Wood Case)** **++**

This is the same *assemblage* as the “Special Club” bottles, but it’s slightly drier (5g vs 6) and was just barely chaptalized. It seems *sweeter*, I’d have said “bizarrely” but really I should know better; also more mineral; Mags seem to age from the top down, so the mineral spine develops ahead of the fruit, but this is more classy and scrupulous and polished than the bottle.



varnier-fannièrè

avize

Denis Varnier, who looks like he'd be quite at home playing rugby, is one of those below-the-radar unsung heroes of winedom. In his inconspicuous way his Champagnes are poster children for grower-Champagne. That Avize signature of newly sharpened pencil (what the locals call "graphite") is as pronounced, and as important as any terroir imprint, whether Martha's eucalyptus, Bernkastel kirsch, Kirchenstück black-cherry.

I took them on when I hardly "needed" another estate in the Côte des Blancs, but character is why I do this, and these wines are animate and distinct.

Because the estate is so small and the demand from steady private clients is so high, the wines can be green upon release. I spoke with the very genial Denis Varnier about giving the Brut N.V. more time before disgorgement. He can do it for us, he said, but it might mean running out of stock for a time. Chance I'm willing to take, I replied. These very fine classics don't so much need time as *reward* it disproportionately. One year can make them twice as good. A Cuvée Saint Denis 1988/1989 we tasted last year was impeccable and perfect, a young adult wine entering its prime.

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 Peters and Larmandier-Bernier, but the fruit is unique. The wines are fastidious and etched; even his Rosé.



Denis Varnier

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,500 cases**
- **Soil type: Chalk**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Chardonnay**

I should point out that although the domain is in Avize and all its vineyards are Grand Cru, they are not all themselves in Avize.

I had a colleague with me this 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 domain 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.

- KVF-1 **Varnier-Fannière “Grand Cru” Brut, N.V.**
70% 2005 and 30% 2004—this will change in October ('08) to a 50-50 blend of 2006-2005; the current cuvée was disgorged 12/07; it's the best yet of this sometimes-immature wine, which may have to do with the graciousness of 2005 fruit; in any case it's rounder and fruitier than usual but still incisive and very long, with a thick graphite finish and ultra-fine apple. The 10 g.l. of RS is absolutely necessary.
- KVF-2 **Varnier-Fannière “Cuvée Saint-Denis” Brut, N.V.** +
65% 2003 & 35% 2002, disgorged 11/07; as always a single-site wine from the 69-year old “Clos du Grand Pere” in Avize, whose character just saturates this terroir-lover's wine; this bottling is of course informed by the 2003; it's suave, creamy and articulate; the '03 doesn't seem spurious or overripe but instead conveys a solid old-vines palpable concentration; seductive and scary-easy to drink.
- KVF-4 **Varnier-Fannière Rosé Brut, N.V.**
It's the same base-wine as the regular N.V. with 15% still red from Aÿ; disgorged 1/08; an ultra-refined dewy strawberry fragrance, though still struggling to emerge from its disgorgement tantrum, but the fragrance and finish are pure and ladylike, cool and kind. It's one of the sheer rosés of spring, not one of the fruity ones of summer.
- KVF-5 **Varnier-Fannière “Cuvée de Jean Fannière Origine” Brut, N.V.** (++)
This is an *homage* to Denis' forbears, which will be released in the summer of this year ('08); it's a selection of old-vines from Oger, about half-half 2002-2003, and I only hedge the plusses because I tasted pre-disgorged wines with various dosage levels. With zero dosage it was quite good, oyster and full of snap and fruit. With two grams it's more mineral (yes, sweetness acts upon minerality and often causes it to become more articulate) and more silvery—slightly better. With four grams it becomes seriously refined and complex, which is how I hope he'll bottle it! How wonderful to be able to taste this alongside the Cuvée Saint-Denis, both old vines, almost the same assemblage, one Avize and the other Oger. But of course we know there's no such thing as terroir.
- KVF-303 **Varnier-Fannière “Grand Vintage” Brut, 2003** +
I wondered when (or even *whether*) we'd see '03-vintage wines, especially from the Côte des Blancs, where the Chardonnay was 60% reduced by a killer April frost. And I wondered how they could possibly be. Just the other night I dined with a wine-buddy who said he doubted he'd ever taste an '03 he liked. I thought of this wine while refuting him. It's of course a ripe-vintage wine that smells as much of Chablis as Champagne, but the fruit is exotic and wonderful, full of wet hay and mollusks and with a chalky graphite finish; like a liquefied heirloom-chicken roasted with truffles. It isn't “classical” but it's a classical variant.



jean milan

oger

My wife had taken an overnight trip to Paris (where she successfully ate great meals and bought killer shoes) and my traveling colleague had his credit-card eaten by the toll machine on the *Autoroute* and was thus detained, so I arrived alone. Caroline was ill with a sinus infection, as she told me after the greeting kisses (French women have their priorities in order!) and though I was sorry to see her uncomfortable, I liked that she was just quietly herself. Milan is a family operation, with father and brother involved in the vineyards and cellar, mom in the office, and Caroline doing sales and marketing, which she handles with aplomb. Her elegant good looks don't hurt—and she was sporting a devastating new short haircut—but we've known each other

a while now, and she is someone of rare substance and thoughtfulness and conscience, and Milans are a family in which such gifts are inculcated. And so we started the loveliest "tasting" I've had here, with easy companionable chat mixed through the wines. I myself had had a blissfully calm day, alone, meandering through the Marne Valley and it was a happy me who arrived to see my friend Caroline.

Milans would prefer to de-emphasize the "Carte Blanche" (which in a sense is custom-produced for us) and place the "Brut Spécial" as the bread and butter of the range. Caroline and I emailed back and forth about



Caroline Milan

this matter, and at one point I had a typo and wrote "bed and butter" which she thought was the phrase. "I like that bed and butter saying!" she responded. Um, sure, yes, but the crumbs? At any rate the family would like its calling card to be the older drier wine instead of the younger sweeter one. So we will phase in the Brut Spécial over a several-year period but don't worry; if Carte Blanche is important for you it will continue to exist for awhile longer. This was a compromise between Caroline and me, because I was in no great hurry to usher the Carte Blanche off the stage. She in turn was mindful of her family's legacy. Milan should mean something that starts with this quality. "We have to live our lives properly and not focus too much on marketing," she said.

One of the writers describes Oger's wines as "deli-

cate" but I don't see this at all. Oger sits in a bowl between the hillocks of Mesnil and Cramant, and the Chardonnay basks in the extra warmth. The wines have less blossom and more iron than other Côte des Blancs Champagne. They are lead-pencilily, penetrating and (relatively) powerful. It's also something of an insider's tip, as at least one proprietor with vines in more "famous" land confided his secret favorite terroir in the Côtes de Blancs was in fact Oger.

- **Vineyard area: 5.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,100 cases**
- **Soil types: 27 inches of vegetative earth with a chalky subsoil**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Chardonnay**

Milan's is a small domaine, 5 hectares spread out among 42 parcels. The average age of the vineyards is 32 years. Caroline shows the estate with expertise; they're quite conservative viticulteurs, Coquard press, hand-disgorgement, old casks in the cellar. All reassuring.

You might notice, if you are a fizz-geek, that Milan has become an "N.M." (gasp! a négociant) and I'd like you to know why. French law stipulates you may purchase up to 5% grapes and still be a "récoltant," but any additional quantity, from 5.1% to 100% and you are a négociant. Milan cannot grow their business with just 5 hectares. There is no Grand Cru land to be had. Thus the choices are: (1) buy 1er Cru property and dilute the quality of the wines or, (2) purchase Grand Cru grapes from friends and neighbors in the village. "And not just anyone," says Caroline, "but vigneron my father knows and trusts a long time." She asked me did I mind? And I searched my very soul. And said NO. I am less concerned with niggly details of French wine laws and nomenclature than I am with the essential spirit of artisanality.

Milan remains a small family business rooted to the soil. That's good enough for my purist fetishes!

I understand Caroline's brother is gradually being handed the reins by their father. We'd like to see Caroline

over in the States again, but the kids need to get a little older. Still, if you've met her you'll be glad to know I personally guaranteed all the hotel pools would stay open all night for her.

Milan at a glance:

Wonderful discovery in the heart of the Côtes 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 domain.

KML-1

Jean Milan "Carte Blanche" Brut, N.V.

KML-2

Jean Milan Brut "Spéciale," N.V.

I am noting these together because for the first time *they are the same wine*, differing only by their dosage, 6 grams versus 10. Carte Blanche is no longer a year younger than its sibling. **This, like all the wines I tasted, was disgorged 1/08.** It's half-half '04-'05, and as we did last year, we tasted it with three different sweetness levels starting at zero. The wine is a classic *cool* Milan; fine Oger-apple and graphite and just a hint of 2004's grassiness; silvery and impeccable, with a mineral finish. The Carte Blanche shows more fruit per se.

KML-10

Milan "Millénaire" Brut, N.V. +

THIS now is the "superior" N.V., a blend of '04 and '03, and this is by any reckoning *exceptional* Champagne; wonderfully creamy and ripe, almost as doughy and lush as a *Terres de Noël*, yet with an incisive angle that melts into a wheat-toasty finish. A pretty nice argument for 2003!

KML-7

Jean Milan "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut, N.V.

This is done in old barriques they buy from Meursault; a blend of '03-'02; as you know I need an oaky wine to overcome my innate resistance, as this one does. The woodiness here almost registers as a Meunier-pumpernickel, and there's a strangely intriguing alliance of '03's wet-hay ripeness with 2002's birchy silvery green mineral profile; it's not as *tight* and seamless as last year's, and the front palate is as luxurious as foie gras, but the oak retreats from sip to sip, and this will make superb drinking with 3-5 years laying-down. It, not you.

KML-502

Jean Milan "Symphorine" Brut, 2002 ++

A cuvée from peak sites (named Zailleux, Beaudure, Barbettes and Chênets, if you must know, and no, these are not the names of the woman in an all-girl rock group) which gets its name from a combination of "symphony" and "Caroline"; It also demonstrates why I believe in 2002 even when the wines are tight in their youth, because *what* a difference a year has made to this beauty. Exquisite '02 aromas, and the fizz has a fine ripe floweriness—you know, basically this is just insanely delicious, and every image I have for it is romantic and sexual, so I shall demur. It's one of those *life-can-really-be-this-good* wines.

- KML-302 **Jean Milan “Sélection Terres de Noël” Brut, 2002** **++**
 KML-303 **Jean Milan “Sélection Terres de Noël” Brut, 2003** **(+)**

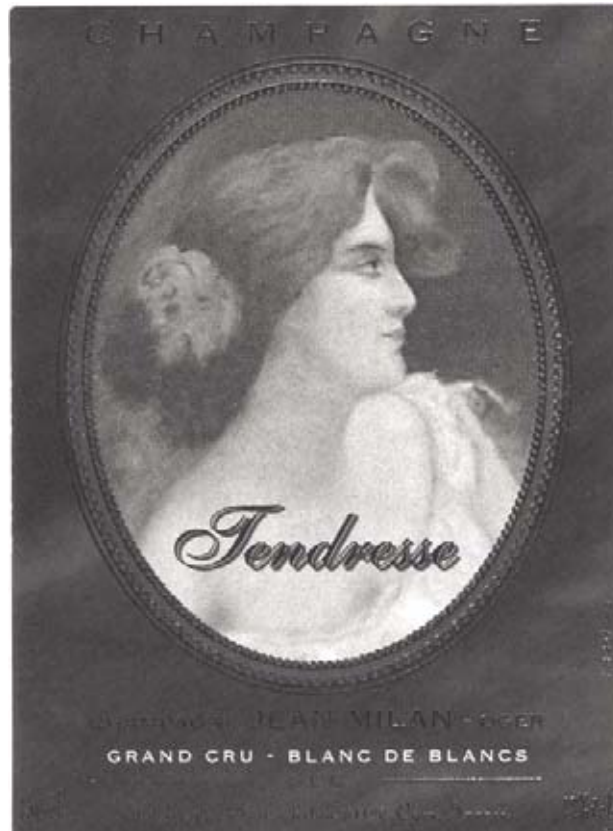
The 2003 will be available to us in the summer ('08) and the non-dosage sample I tasted, and which was good without sweetness, tasted like sparkling old-vines Pouilly Fuissé. The 2002, though, is a not-to-be-missed masterpiece that's still finding its true voice. It's as coiled as a reactor, but what a white-hot mass of terroir this is, almost overcome with articulation; the fragrance as it (slow-w-wly) unfolds is almost unbearably lovely, like the mineral face of Puligny (when white Burgundy had mineral . . .) with an almost apricot note, like jam spread on rustic wheat-sourdough toast.

- KML-4 **Jean Milan “Cuvée Tendresse” Sec, N.V.**

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.

This is a fascinating bottling of this wine; the dosage seems to elevate the 2004 grassiness, and the wine is surprisingly dry-tasting and Riesling-like. I suspect its fruit was tamped down by disgorgement, and it is dry at 24 g.l. RS (which would fall into *feinherb* at many German estates) and would be a killer pour for your cheese course, somms.

And it's delicious, especially if you like Nahe Spätlese or demi-sec Vouvray. 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 hive-buzz. Where else can you get a “sweet” Champagne that's 100% Grand Cru, apart from Selse? I will be drinking lots of this and I have more testosterone than the entire World Wrestling Federation, so there.



pierre peters

le-mesnil-sur-ogers

We were done working and just hanging out drinking an extraordinary 1989 when the police walked in. Well, one policeman walked in, but he was in uniform and looked quite officious, though really kind of young. Of course he was proffered a glass and of course, this being France, he accepted. My colleagues and I were introduced and I tried to make myself look extremely sober. It was our final stop in a long day and um, I wasn't spitting. Though I started, with great ostentation, to spit again. So there we sat, Peters and my motley gang and this sweet-looking gendarme who seemed to know his stuff where Champagne was concerned. I asked Peters "Is it true, as I have heard, that in Champagne all the policeman are also sommeliers?" "Oui," he said, as if it were self-evident.

François Peters is just as cheerful as he looks in his picture. He oozes continental charm and bonhomie, and when he suggested one year that we all have dinner I readily agreed. Then it occurred to me that neither of us spoke enough of the other's language to perhaps sustain an entire evening at table. So I asked my hotel to find a translator.

This they did, in the form of a little praying-mantis of a woman who, it turned out *worked for* Peters, who has an alternate-identity as poobah of the Chamber of Commerce. So Peters and the translator had what sounded like a most urbane and gleeful chat, only about 5% of which was vouchsafed to us, the guys who'd hired her.



Rudolf and François Peters

Yet a lovely time was had by all, such is the enveloping charm of this man.

At first I had another vigneron in Le Mesnil in view, and I was shooting the breeze with the sommelier in the restaurant where I'd been dining. Had he heard of so-and-so? Yes, but he didn't know the wines, but had I heard of Pierre Peters? Yes, but only heard of, never tasted. Hmmmm, he mulled; based on what he'd seen of my taste, this could be someone I should see. It turned out he was visiting the following afternoon, and kindly offered

- Vineyard area: 17.5 hectares
- Annual production: 13,300 cases
- Soil type: Chalk
- Grape varieties: 100% Chardonnay

to cancel his appointment so that I could go. Nothing of the kind, my good man, could we both go?

So it was that your intrepid wine-hound found himself with a sweet little group in Le Mesnil late one afternoon. I don't know about you, but the very whisper of the word "Mesnil" makes my mouth water and dilates my bill-fold. The great bottling from Krug remains a sine qua non not merely for Champagne, but perhaps for Chardonnay.

Peters' wines, of all the Mesnil growers whose wines I tasted, were the most impeccable and gleamingly firm, like diamonds. I tasted them softer and sweeter, and I tasted some that were more superficially pretty at other houses. But these were eye-poppingly vivid and distinct, with flavors that defined the genre of white-grape Champagne.



Peters owns 17.5 hectares, 10 of them in Mesnil. Richard Juhlin, whose book [4000 Champagnes](#) is *hors classe* in this subject, ranks Peters second only to Salon among Mesnil growers. “Champagne from Peters offers from the start an accessible fruitiness that resembles tangerine and a large portion of butterscotch and nut aromas. With age they become majestic and deep as a water well, full of coffee and walnut aromas and a fleeting, vibrant exotic fruitiness. Pierre Peters is a hidden treasure of Champagne . . . which makes the prices laughable

considering the quality of the wines.” My only “problem” with this domain is a somewhat too hasty release of many wines. These need and reward your patience, but all you sybarites just suck ‘em down.

Wouldn’t it be nice to just once compare apples to apples? Each time I drink the ‘89 “Cuvée Speciale” (the monocru from Chétilons) I swear I have never had better Chardonnay Champagne: not Salon, not Clos de Mesnil, not *nuthin*.

Pierre Peters at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

Let’s put it this way: if Blanc de Blancs Champagne has something in common with Mosel wine in general, then these are like Saar wines, a concentration of the mineral 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.

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

Disgorged 10/07, as is apparent from the almost invisible lot # on the front label. This cuvée is perhaps more vintage-sensitive than many others in this book, but Rudolph Peters explained to me they have been running a kind of modified “solera” since 1999—this is 65% 2005 and 35% last-year’s cuvée; it shows the classic white-flower flavor along with generous chalkiness and orange-blossom; palate is fluffy and extroverted, with the 2005-class apparent; salty and doughy, with a precise jasmine and chalk finish. It’s also much drier than this wine used to be; there were years it had 12 g.l. RS and this one has *half* that. As always, two-thirds Mesnil and one-third Cramant-Avize-Oger-Chouilly.

- KPP-203 **Pierre Peters Millésime Brut, 2003**

This is sensibly released before the 2002; disgorged 1/08, and you know, I LIKE these extroverted ‘03s! This one is hale and full of *confiture* and wheat toast; it’s scrutable and surprisingly mineral but with a tertiary leathery note as if there were Pinot Gris in it; a mouthfilling, almost lusty fizz. “We were also surprised how mineral this ‘03 was,” said Rudolph. *The 2002, tasted w/o dosage, is a year away, and will be superb.*

- KPP-301 **Pierre Peters Cuvée Spéciale “Les Chétilons” Brut, 2001** **+**

The vineyard was 74 when this was harvested, and this is constantly in the pantheon of the greatest Blanc de Blancs. Again, this is being sold before the monumental 2000 (a “++” and maybe even “+++” wine . . .) because it is lighter and will mature faster; it reminds me of the ‘91 I sold at the beginning; pointed, with deep-mineral as opposed to blatant chalk; it’s sharply focused and an utter terroir Champagne, with the green high-toned notes of a less-ripe vintage; this is a *good* thing if you like a silvery-mercury ultra-violet sort of wine. As I do. Disgorged 9/07.

TWO CLOSING NOTES: if you own any of the 1996 Cuvée Speciale, it’s safe to taste it. Not to drink it all, but to approach it, as it’s on the way to showing how astonishing it will eventually become.

Also, there is a *Rosé* in the offing . . . a first for this domain!

marc hébrart

mareuil-sur-aj

Jean-Paul Hébrart was philosophical this year. The 2007 vintage wasn't especially kind to him, between hail and middling quality (he may have been too exacting, as several of the *vins claires* were very good), but he was very happy to report about his two new parcels, one a very steep slope in Dizy, fallow at the moment, where he'll plant Chardonnay, and the other in Ajÿ, to be planted with Pinot Noir.

I don't believe in "perfect" wines but I was tempted to question that belief when I drank the astonishing 1982 Special Club Jean-Paul Hébrart opened for my colleagues and me last year. Verbatim from the notebook:

"This is powerful and complicated. The Mareuil Pinot Noir is reluctant to rise. The finish is like old Pommard. As it emerges it smells like ancient and great red Burgundy, a positive oxidation, and as smoky as Auvergne hams – like the Autumn-smoke of the quiet old hills. And like great dark chocolate. This is becoming noble and vigorous, still even silvery; it passes through a sort of ecstasy, grief and peace as the finish glides away slowly. But the next sip is a bright volley of kites into the air – oh this wine is complicated all right: one lifetime is too brief to apprehend its complexity and gleam and tenderness. If eternity turns out to be sublime, and not just chilling and incomprehensible, then this is a wine of eternity, deep and mysterious enough to contain a parade of births, weddings and burials, stretching as far as we can see."

Other than the beauty of the wine, I was touched by the beauty of the gesture. A threshold was crossed. Sharing old wines formalizes a kind of kinship. I don't know what I did to earn it, but I'll accept it. Great wine, that is, wholly great and not only sensually great, is a transforming moment, and a lingering one. Reading the notes I am carried right back. It rearranges you somehow. It's also a little unquiet. How much more don't I know about myself?



Jean-Paul Hébrart & Isabelle Diebolt

- Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5800 cases
- Soil typ: Cretaceous Chalk, Limestone
- Grape varieties: 75% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay

In more prosaic terms, Jean-Paul was quite eager to show us his new Boucher press, by which he aims to make even more polished wines than he already does. I must admit Hebrart has become a grab-for wine at our place. I'm starting to understand why.

Jean-Paul Hébrart remembered we wanted to taste Vins Claires, and bless him, he had some. The Chardonnay from Chouilly smelled like Riesling, tasted mineral and hard as jewels, with a redcurranty tartness. I do wonder if this is really a stand-alone Cru. Next up was a Pinot Noir from Mareuil, and this in fact surprised me; it had a fetching enough nose but the fruit was more discreet than I expected; it was more a matter of muscle and sneaky length. Pinot Noir from Bisseuil had the Hebrart "taste," far more fruity but one sees how Mareuil's substance underscores it. We saw an assemblage intended for the eventual 2005 Club, plus a couple oak-aged wines including a lovely Pinot Noir from a 40-year-old parcel alongside the Clos de Goisses, which I discerned was the guiding flavor behind the '99 Club.

Mareuil is the highest-classified of all the 1er Crus (at 99%) and several observers wonder whether it shouldn't just be elevated to Grand Cru. It's along the Marne just east of Ajÿ, and among Champagnes, perhaps the magisterial Clos de Goisses is its most renowned citizen.

Hébrart's a Club member, and the wines first came to my attention when a former colleague went to a tasting of 2003-vintage Vin Claires and shared his notes with me. So I paid a stealthy little incognito visit disguised as a normal tourist (perhaps a normal person period . . .) and bought a mixed case of wine. I like this modus operandi. I can actually drink the wines like a civilian,

deliberately, over time, entire bottles—because surely the true test of a wine isn't how good the first sip tastes, but rather the last.

I loved the wines. 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.

But Hébrart is about more than Pinot Noir, for he also owns parcels in GRAND CRU Chardonnay vineyards in Chouilly and Oiry amongst his 13 hectares. Interesting ingredients in the pantry!

His wife took time from her day to join our initial meeting, as her English is nearly fluent. I showed her my catalog to establish my bona fides. Where, she asked, was anyone from Cramant? "Well you see," I replied, "I have two vintners with land in Cramant (Gimmonnet and Larmandier, at the time) and also the best estate in Cramant is already taken."

"And who might that be?" she inquired.

"Diebolt-Vallois, I think," I answered.

"Well!" she said, "I am Isabelle Diebolt!" And for once, Terry says the right thing.

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 30 years old. The wines undergo malo.

What I liked in all these wines was a quality of charm. Many of my other producers have mineral front-and-center, but here it is woven into a basket of juice and friendliness, yet with no sacrifice of class or precision. Which, of course, constitutes charm! It isn't charming if its specious or plausible; there has to be finesse, wit and class. These Champagnes will wiggle the knob on your yum-o-meter.

When I first selected Hébrart, I was consciously aware of looking for Champagnes with plenty of *fruit*. I already had all the rock-head fizz a guy could want, and I wanted something a little more kissy-face. Then subsequently I started up with Goutorbe, whose Champagne is gushing and sumptuous, and now I "see" Hébrart rather differently. In fact I'd liken his wines most to **Billiot's**, as each seems to show a great volume of fruit that's been pulled as taut as a shoelace. Billiot's Ambonnay fruit is more extravagant, but neither does he make anything as saffron-y as Hébrart's "Sélection."

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.

- KMH-1 **Marc Hébrart "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut, N.V.** (+)
- KMH-1H **Marc Hébrart "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut, N.V., 12/375ml**
 Disgorged 12/07. As always 80% Pinot Noir (of which 70% is from 2005 and 30% from 2004) and 20% Chardonnay (all '05); I hedge the plus because the wine was showing a hint of disgorgement sharpness, but it's a very plummy wine with delightful PN fragrances; chewy but not chunky, with chalk and straw emerging. Silky and classy, and likely to be sensational when it has all its mojo working.
- KMH-2 **Marc Hébrart "Sélection" Brut, N.V.** +
 65% Pinot Noir (and again 70-30 between '05-'04) and 35% Chardonnay (again all '05),

and this was more graceful and unified despite even more recent disgorgement—1/08, so go figure. It's considerably *chalkier* than usual, high-toned lemon and mirabelle; wonderful length and shimmer; I don't recall a better bottling of this lovely Champagne.

KMH-6 **Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.**

At last, at last—I've joned for this wine for years, and now there's enough to spare us a bit. Disgorged 6/07, the cuvée is 85% 2004 and 15% 2005, made from Oiry, Chouilly and Mareuil (7%, "for body" he said, though it cost him *Grand Cru* status); a silvery, mussely Chardonnay nose, with hawthorn and fresh baguette; the palate is mineral, minty and zippy in the 2004 way; a starched style of Champagne.

KMH-302 **Marc Hébrart "Special Club," 2002, 6/750ml**

++

60% Pinot Noir (Mareuil only), 40% Chardonnay (Oiry and Chouilly including the Mont Aigu we also see from Gimmonnet); vines average 40 years old; disgorged 12/06 – and this will be great Champagne when it emerges from disgorgement; it's the most powerful and backward of the '02s I've had, but as it grows in the glass its umami deepens and a profundity emerges.

KMH-4 **Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V.**

+

Disgorged 12/07; it's all 2005, with the still Mareuil red (10%) coming from '04; the base is half-half Chard and PN, and all the Chard is Grand Cru. 2005 is one loveable vintage! And this is one of those both-solid-and-ethereal wines, with great clinging fruit and a silvery aurora of chalk that almost sizzles on the brilliant finish.



henri goutorbe

ay

This completes a circle. When I first ventured into Champagne I was just a wine guy who wanted to fill his cellar with grower-wines, and I went to Goutorbe as a source for old vintages. It was only later I was cajoled by my spouse into doing Champagne professionally.

It went something like this:

HER: Do you believe in the wines?

ME: Yes of course.

HER: Do you think they can succeed in the American market?

ME: I do, though it will take some time.

HER: Do you think whoever decides to do it will ultimately be successful?

ME: Um, yes.

HER: And how will you feel if that person isn't you?

ME: Um, I dunno —

HER: — when you have the idea right here and now? Huh? How will you feel?

ME: Um, like I didn't have the cojones?

HER: You're damn right. So what are you going to do?

ME: Oh OK, we'll start a grower-Champagne operation.

HER: What an excellent idea.

So I went back to a lot of the people I'd first visited, and started seriously researching. I wanted to represent



A bunch of ripe Pinot Noir grapes covered in dew.

- **Vineyard area: 22 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Soil type: Cretaceous Chalk, Limestone**
- **Grape Varieties: 70% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay, 5% Meunier**

Goutorbe, but at the time they were skittish about export — as a lot of them were. Meanwhile I drank the wines at home and loved them.

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 Ay, 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. Some time in the last year word reached me they would indeed be interested in export, and I was delighted that no one had grabbed them.

In fact there's so much ballast under the farmer-fizz category that most of the good growers have come to American artisan-importers' attention. I could afford to be deliberate at first, but no more. Thus I have to consider Goutorbe something of a coup.

The estate is sizeable by grower standards; 22 hectares, with 10 hectares in Ay, and the rest divided among Mareuil, Mutigny, Bisseul and parcels in the Sezannais and the Aube. All wines undergo malo, and all the wines I'm offering are 100% cuvée (free-run juice). Dosage is must-concentrate.

Though I've been drinking the wines at home — the best way to suss the true quality of a domain — I also asked to taste them alongside a bunch of other samples we'd lined up from potential newbies. The wines showed excellently, and what was striking was their old-fashioned generosity. These are not ultra-modern Champagnes; they are sumptuous and full of fruit. And they seem never to have had an off-vintage.

I'm also really pleased to find a supplier for Ay Pinot at last. There's a consensus among fizz-heads that the "top-5" Grand Crus are Ay, Ambonnay, Verzenay, Cramant and Mesnil, and for me Ay 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 Ay is Vosne-Romanée.

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 domain 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.

- KGO-1 **Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” Brut, N.V.** **+**
 Mostly ‘03 with some reserve wines, disgorged 11/07, all 1er Cru; this again is an impeccable old-style ripe-vintage Champagne; 2003’s toast and burning hay and sweet corn; the wine’s a little softer than last year’s, less *confiture* and more meaty, pheasanty and truffley, but seductive stuff that’s all too easy to drink.
- KGO-202 **Henri Goutorbe “Special Club” Brut, 2002, 6/750ml** **++**
 This is class among 2002s, which is already class among vintages, and I can barely remember offering any Champagne more stunning than this; all the malt and blueberry of Aÿ (the Club is always 100% Aÿ) atop the amazing chalky flower of 2002; at once precise and almost voluptuous, spicy and buttery, like tasting an entire *Boulangerie* where the croissants are really good.
- KGO-200 **Henri Goutorbe “Special Club” Brut, 2000, 6/750ml** **++**
 Immediately more malic and sorrelly aromas; more muscle than the ‘02 but also in the gray-silvery-green side of the spectrum, more grip, less *sunny* than ‘02 but even more power, and its limbs seem almost too long for it—it isn’t as seamless and graceful as 2002 but it’s more coiled with just crazy length and solidity.
- KGO-3 **Henri Goutorbe Rosé**
 Pure Aÿ; 13% Chardonnay and the rest Pinot Noir including the still red; it’s dry and firm after a lavishly fruity nose; solid and pulpy rather than vaporous and sheer; seriously long, with the effortless grace and stature of this Grand Cru.



gaston chiquet

dizy

My colleague Jonathan Schwartz is born in 1981, and doesn't get to taste many of his birth-year wines, but Nicolas Chiquet has everything in his cellar and so the boys went off to scrounge around underground. I sat alone in the tasting room, in a state of advanced bliss. I hadn't expected it. I'd been around people—congenial, even beloved people, but still—every day for the past two-plus weeks, and the sudden solitude was a balm I didn't know I needed. The blackbirds kept me such company as I required with their noisy melodies. It was just after dark, and they sang as if they'd been caught unaware by the twilight. I had three of my favorite things at hand, solitude, songbirds and Champagne.

Nicolas returned with the 1981 in tow, along with two vintages of Club, 1988 and 1985. We started with the '88, which was the available vintage when I first visited this estate twelve years ago. Alas, like a fool I drank all my own bottles before they were really ready—1988 took its time, you may remember. This '88 Club was disgorged in 2007, and man it was surreal, with haunting fruit and texture and a vein of chalk to balance; fennely and mentholated and long; not powerful but incisive and remarkable; one of those *well this comes from somewhere* wines. Not a wave crashing on the rocks, but a full moon rising over the fields.

The '85 started out reduced, but luckily one of us had an old penny. Nicolas said: "You know, for years in Champagne we were frightened of oxidation and did everything we could to prevent it, but now I think we've gone too far, and too many Champagnes are reduced." He's right. Once this '85 cleared up, is superbly firm without an ounce of evident flesh; when 1985 is great, it is great like this.



Nicolas Chiquet in the vineyard

- Vineyard area: 22 hectares
- Annual production: 16,700 cases
- Soil type: Chalk
- Grape varieties: 20% Pinot Noir, 40% Pinot Meunier, 40% Chardonnay

The 1981, the regular N.V. Brut, with a lot of Meunier, was earthy, lovely, pipe-smoky, and urgently drinkable.

Nicolas' is not a passionate mien but his moderate exterior hides an exceptionally caring spirit.

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.

I think if you asked me to sum up Chiquet's wines in one pithy phrase, I'd have to say either "delicious and articulate" or "articulate and delicious" depending on which you preferred. (Maybe "salacious and ticklish," in a pinch . . .). They taste effortless, tactful, yet attractive.

What I'm tasting are wines of pure terroir. They are, in effect, anti-varietal. Even the celebrated Aÿ Chardonnay isn't so much a variant on Chardonnay as it is another dialect of Aÿ.

This is a large estate as Récoltantes go, with 22 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.

It does bear mentioning: good Champagne ages wonderfully. And I don't just mean five years, or even ten. Antique Champagne, such as 34-year-old Blanc de

Blancs from a middling vintage can be as lovely and mystic as wine ever is. The capacity to age for decades and to develop spellbinding complexity is common to most northern European whites. Champagne is no different.

Even Champagne with *Meunier* can age beautifully, as Nicolas once demonstrated by opening a bottle of Carte Verte (45% Meunier, his basic N.V.) of the vintage 1958— which had the color of an '89! Lick-your-chops satisfying old wine nose; the palate is quite sweet and smoky-plummy and actually very delicious, this wee lad of 46-years-old.

One year we were honored with *two* older vintages, the first of them another bottle of the “basic” non-vintage

based on 1982, rendered extra-Brut, and it was wonderful: burning leaves, campfire, forest-floor at first; then with 5 minutes in the glass it was as if the sun came up over the hill and all the flowers opened: lemon, apple, vanilla, ripe and smoky and “sweet”; it was a *mature* wine—almost “old”—and great fun to drink; long, enoki-earthly with a smoky atmosphere, not at all charming but delightfully gnarly and evocative.

He then contrasted it with a bottle of '82 Special Club, which was masterly; a superb, serenely intense fizz in the middle of its grown-up life; the *cork* had the most amazing fragrance, as if it had been dipped in a syrup of star-fruit.

Gaston Chiquet at a glance:

22 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!

KCQ-1

KCQ-1H

KCQ-1M

Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V.

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

Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L

This is a later disgorgement (12/07) of the second cuvée we shipped last year. “Our Champagnes have been sold too young,” said Nicolas, “and we wanted to start offering something more mature.” This is 78% 2004, 6% '02, 13% '01 and 3% '98, and as always 45% Meunier, 35% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir. It's just lovely, maybe a little more *rôti* than usual, more of the barley-cracker, quite streamlined, and drier-seeming than is typical for this cuvée.

The next one's been disgorged already (2/08) and is based on 2005. It will be available this summer but we'll introduce it as late as possible, and Nicolas, this sweet man, is holding it back for us. The fragrance was fetchingly serene, as 2005 seems to be.

KCQ-2

KCQ-2M

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

Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L

This is one of only two all-Chardonnay Champagnes made from Aÿ vineyards. The vines were planted in 1935 by Nicolas' grandfather, who may have been the first to plant Chardonnay in this bastion of Pinot Noir. The first time I tasted it I got a lesson in terroir I haven't forgotten. There was an aroma I'd come to associate with other Aÿ influenced Champagnes, Gosset, Bollinger, a couple of small growers I know, an Aÿ aroma that actually overcame the Chardonnay aroma. Fruit runs to quince rather than Chardonnay-apple.

The wine nearly always hails from a single crop, though Nicolas prefers to leave the vintage off the label in case he needs to blend. (He bottles a super-cuvée in Mags that's *millésime*). The '98 was a masterpiece, yet it's telling that Nicolas preferred the '99; he likes volume and body and I like mystery and exquisiteness, though of course we both like both and these are minute tics of preference.

This was disgorged 7/07, and it's still the 2004 I wrote about in last year's catalogue. Most of you know Nicolas has been using these corks with the notch in the bottom, inside which a little silicone disc sits, so that the wine is never in contact with the cork. Theoretically. The first bottle we opened here was corked, the first corked bottle of Chiquet I'd had in 3-4 years. “Oh, it's not unheard-of,” he said, “but it's a bottle every couple months instead of several per week. Actually Terry, I think this is because you're here. . . .” That's right, blame it on the luckless American with the crappy currency. Still, someone should go check the dog's still alive.

The wine has shade-grown green tea and *Pouchong* aromas, herbs and narcissus, like a Lishan spring oolong; and *what* focus! So clean it seems to squeak across the palate; it's as snappy as some Grüner Veltliners, and digitally etched. Detailed, smoky finish.

- KCQ-5 **Gaston Chiquet “Cuvée de Réserve,” N.V.**
 Nicolas seeks to make something old-school. It’s 60% 2000 and 40% 1999, disgorged 2/08; it seems to unify the best of the two vintages; a mirabelle grappa aroma, green apples and sweated leeks; in effect this is what N.V. used to be before we entered our manic modern age—7 years on the lees, anti-varietal—and the exotic earthiness is mind-expanding if you wish to *know* Champagne. Available summer 2008.
- KCQ-300 **Gaston Chiquet Vintage Brut, 2000** +
 As always 60% PN (from Mareuil and Aÿ) and 40% Chardonnay (Dizy this year); disgorged 10/07; this is very deep cool blue, but also plump and plummy; sorrel and unripe banana; it seems at first dour and pouty but then there’s a slow unfolding of *mass*, not exactly “power,” that sits weightily on the finish. It’s the earthy side of Pinot Noir, not the sweet one.
- KCQ-499 **Gaston Chiquet “Special Club,” 1999, 6/750ml** +
 Disgorged 10/07, majority Chardonnay (from Aÿ), with PN from Hautvillers (two-thirds) and Mareuil. Often this wine strikes me as comparable to Clos de Goisses, though not as resplendent; it’s pure terroir, and this is quite the marching-band of flavor after all these cool 21st-century wines, but bless Nicolas: the *chalk* here is wonderful, and despite the extravagant fruit this is firmly outlined and spicy; assertive but not brusque.



A FINAL NOTE

To quote from Chiquet’s fact-sheet: “In 1919, two brothers, Fernand and Gaston Chiquet—winemakers born and bred—came together to create their house, CHIQUET Brothers. They were ‘pioneers’ in Champagne, *the very first winemakers to take the initiative, bold at the time, to keep their grapes, turn them into Champagne and sell their own wine.*” Yes, gang; this is the big-bang of farmer-fizz, and I’d wager that all eight generations of Chiquet all the way back to 1746 are proud of what Nicolas is accomplishing here.

The old vintage arrives at the end, as always, but this year it enjoyed the company of several small beings, one of them extremely young and four-legged. Geoffroys have daughters, a bunch of them, and the girls all had baby rabbits. The old wine is dreamy and gentle, and all the sublime old-Champagne flavors are there—scallops, white chocolate, truffle, orange jam—it is certainly what used to be called “Cuvée Sélectionnée” —the Pinot Noir one. But Sasha comes in to show us the little rabbit, who is two weeks old and named *Noisette*. This girl was herself a baby when we drank the 1966 a few years ago. But what is this? The rabbit snuffles and probes curiously, sniffing at notebooks and bottles and pens . . . hard to concentrate. The wine’s really tender and caressing yet also smoky and long, lobster stock-y and apricot; melting, delicate, a

deliberate russet evening with a silvery little moon, a kindly night coming, a lobster casserole in the oven, but you stay outside longer—the dinner will keep—and the twilight and the wine are haunting and resonant, and all your soul is out there with you. The wine, it turns out, is a ‘76, incredibly, with so much finesse and sweetness. I’d guessed ‘73. Disgorged in 1979! Jean-Baptiste’s father asks if we’d like some foie gras; they have two, each from a friend; a local one and another from near Bordeaux. So we had them both, and tried to

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,800 cases**
- **Soil types: Limestone, clay-limestone, clay-flint**
- **Grape varieties: 42% Pinot Noir, 39% Pinot Meunier, 19% Chardonnay**

Wonderful as Geoffroy’s wines are, it borders on miraculous considering the logistical challenges of making them. The estate is currently divided among three houses and their cellars in Cumières, and Jean-Baptiste is always trotting off down the street to grab some bottle he wants. But he just bought a house in Aÿ large enough for the family and a cellar where he can do everything under one roof.

Something’s always up at Geoffroy. One year he had soil analyses done to determine where to plant Pinot Noir (where there’s more *argille* and less chalk), and 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. Marcel Deiss seems to have stirred things up. Good for him!

He’s joined a group called “Ampelos” which practice the so-called “Lutte Raisonné” (or “reasoned 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. And then there’s the small matter of his changing the names of all the wines (!) which I’ll detail below, not to mention an ongoing attention to dosage, which gets ever-lower and uses must-concentrate.

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 usual-



keep them away from Noisette the rabbit. Life is hard you know.

Odd, how each echo of the sublime seems to make us smaller and sweeter. *This is there too. Ah, I forgot.* I was going about my life as if the world was merely the world. I was indifferent. I didn’t know.

“When I visited Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy in Cumières, I had just come from a large négociant who shall remain nameless and who had given me an extended lecture on the buying habits of the young consumer of luxury goods. It was a contrast and relief in equal measure to dive into Geoffroy’s small cellar for a sniff of yeast and the sight of dusty bottles and bare light bulbs.”

(Dr. Phillip Blom, *Decanter*, 12/00)

ly 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 13 hectares in Cumières, Hautvillers, Damery and Fleury-la-Rivière, 42% Pinot Noir, 39% Meunier, 19% Chardonnay.

Most of the practices here will be familiar to you; fruit-thinning in July, only manual harvesting, environmentally gentle handling of the vineyards. Once the grapes are harvested, Geoffroys press in a traditional Coquard press, slow and gentle, but rarely seen any more because of its low productivity and the physically taxing work it entails.

You know, you read the same stuff everywhere. What does a phrase like "selective harvesting" mean to us anymore? Doesn't anyone who's any good pick by hand? The answer, actually, is no. Consider; it's just before the harvest and the weather's a little humid. There could be some rot in the vineyards. One could go through and remove the dubious grapes. Ouch! Expensive. Someone has to actually do that work, and there'll be less fruit as a result, and anyway you can filter or fine or clarify the must and remove any oogy flavors. So chill, man; there's good stuff on TV tonight! The Geoffroys employ up to eight people to cut away any rot-affected grapes during harvest. This is what selective harvesting signifies: a no-holds-barred commitment to quality as an absolute.

"We could run the risk of producing a good quality wine, but nonetheless a 'neutral' wine," says Jean-Baptiste. To strive toward perfection but still make wines of soul requires both "passion and a willingness to take risks," he says. "We are against 'technological' taste-trends which jeopardize the original characteristics of our location and the climate. The terroir (the unique characteristics of our location and climate) has pride of place in the policy of our house, and it is the soul of this terroir which we strive to put in our bottles."

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.

They're one of the few small growers to have their own in-house lab to perform all the necessary analyses, and when they finally bottle the finished Champagne it's done by hand. Apart from all that, Jean-Baptiste and Karine are dear folks and I have especially warm 'n fuzzy feelings about showing you their wines.

"This year I'd like us to taste something in honor of

my grandfather" said Jean-Baptiste a few years ago. "Hmmm," I thought as he disappeared into the cellar, returning with a wormy old bottle of what he said was *Cuvée Sélectionnée* from his grandfather's time. The cork sighs out. The wine is poured. The color is a serene deep straw. Oh it's a perfect old-wine nose; mocha, carob; could easily be red Burgundy. Spellbinding loveliness. A deep, tender old friendliness, sweet with history. The palate is dry, still petillante. Almost impossible to assimilate; berserk with intricacy. Jean-Baptiste's father comes in and joins us; he'd been disgorging.

The wine's a 1966. So juicy, burning leaf, black truffle; what a vintage this is. A slightly scorched note comes in as the fruit-burst fades. Now Karine comes in with the new baby and their oldest daughter, who seems to be perhaps six. She holds her tiny sister. The baby looks around, coos. Old wine and new life. What can you do; *it all floods in*. How many "points" is this worth? Lives lived in wine; three generations sit with us. "When I taste a wine like this, and think of my grandfather's method, I think; why change them?" says Jean-Baptiste.

In old wine, life is given back with all the bad stuff removed; no fights, no illnesses, no misery. Only the stately passings of seasons, again and again. Only the love, the strange indifferent love without *affection*, the love you hear between the notes and see in the air between the leaves.

Twenty minutes go by, and now the wine smells like celestial Puligny; scallops drizzled with butter with nutmeg, macadamias, spices, star-fruit. The six-year old is offered a taste. She tastes like a pro; sniffs, swirls, draws air into her little mouth. Does she like it? her mother asks. "*Il est bon*," she answers with a shy smile.

I don't know whether you like reading my notes on old Champagne. I try to tell the stories they evoke, but there's something more. I want you to know that Champagne ages into something sensually and spiritually fabulous. And that Champagne is prized as all of the great classic wines are prized, for its ability to age. And that one sometimes experiences these lovely old things in the region. It's both a celebration and a reminder; below all the activity and the static and the thrum of routine, there is this. Here is the taproot. Here is how you know that wine *matters*, apart from the pleasure you take in it. There is a *reason* to care about wine. Each of the many times I've shared an old vintage with Geoffroys there have been three generations present, and we taste without ceremony at the old table, and I watch as this particular form of beauty gestates within a family and a culture and an understanding that this is worth doing, that people can live good lives doing this.

Geoffroy at a glance:

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

KRG-11 René Geoffroy “Cuvée Expression” Brut, N.V.

Disgorged 12/07, and half-half '05-'04, and this cuvée continues to change, to become more studiously serious. It's down to 39% Meunier and up to 37% PN and 24% Chardonnay, with 12% vinified in seasoned wood; it's cool and a little grassy in the '04 style; drier (8 grams RS) and less effusive than before, but the length is substantial; there'll be more straw and hay when it fills out, but this departs from the easy succulent style of old. I still like it!

KRG-12 René Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, N.V. +**KRG-12H René Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, N.V., 12/375ml**

All 2004, 82% PN, 5% Meunier and 13% Chardonnay, 50% vinified in seasoned wood, disgorged 12/07. One of the best 2004s I've tasted; meaty Pinot Noir aromas mingle (or, ahem, *commingle*, as we now have a much more pretentious word available, though it means nothing different than plain-old “mingle,” and anyone who uses it can *co-eat* my shorts) with mirabelle, apple and saffron; the palate is soft and sheer, spicy and elegant, with long tertiary cling; there's an embedded robustness of Pinot Noir in a matrix of grace and transparency. Sophisticated stuff.

KRG-8 René Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut, N.V. +

Year-in year-out this is the best value in this offering, and one of the best values in all of Champagne. Again all 2004, and for the first time this is 100% Chardonnay (though the label won't say “Blanc de Blancs”); this is marvelous and unexpectedly so; it's a little like Billiot's *Cuvée Laetitia* without quite the power, but hay and mineral and grip and transparent intricacy. It comes from three *climats*, “*Les Chenes*” and “*La Montagne*” (26%) and “*Tourn-Midi*” (74%), the latter a “bitch of steepness” on pure cretaceous chalk with almost no topsoil. The wine is also cousin to Chiquet's Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ, though with less green-tea and more succulence.

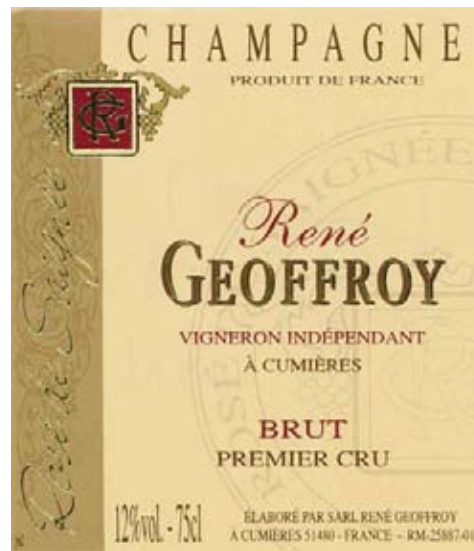
KRG-600 René Geoffroy Millésime Brut, 2000 +

This will be available in this summer of 2008; to be disgorged 04/08; it has 30% PN and 70% Chardonnay, all done in cask, no malo, no cold-stabilizing, no filtration, one fining. His intention is to do it without dosage, and I have to say this is the best bone-dry Champagne I've tasted; it has a tremendous swell of inside-sweetness; it's an overall crescendo in fact, of authority and delineation, of solid yet slippery length; very sweet brioche, and San Daniele prosciutto over a silvery gurgle of spring-water freshness.

It was equally and differently good with ten grams of RS; you taste the wood more, and it's a wee bit less fresh overall, but still wonderful. Then going back to zero (which usually puts the hurt on your palate) and zero still works.

- KRG-9 **René Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.**
KRG-9H **René Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V., 12/375ml**
KRG-9M **René Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V., 6/1.5L**

Such is the feverish demand for this it is always selling out just as it's starting to be really good. I tasted the 2005, and <whew>, that's some aroma, like strawberries would smell if they had orgasms, but the palate shows some grassiness I associate with disgorgement, and judgment needs to be reserved. The 2006, available from the estate in June, is more overtly juicy and chunky.



henri billiot

ambonnay

It was Laetitia Billiot who met us this year. Serge, her father, was seeing family in Belgium, but I got to meet Laetitia's most agreeable husband plus made goo-goo eyes at the baby. She tells me they will take over the winery in the near future, though these things are gradual in the old world, and I'm sure Serge will keep his hand in.

Billiot is the only grower I know who isn't into full-disclosure. He tells you a lot, but probe too deep and he smiles coquettishly and says *Ah, some things must remain a mystery*. I asked Laetitia if they were looking forward to being in charge. "Yes, very much," she answered, "Because I'll finally get to learn exactly what it is my father does!"

Whatever he does, the results comprise some of the most exciting Champagnes a guy can score. Billiot is a jewel in the crown in this portfolio. But wait . . . what about Vilmart, or

Lallement, or Peters . . . hmmm, you need multiple heads on which to wear all the crowns these guys are the jewels in.

So we find ourselves in Ambonnay. As you drive in you see growers signs everywhere, but only five are full-time wine estates, living entirely off sales of their own

- Vineyard area: 5 hectares
- Annual production: 3,750 cases
- Soil type: Limestone
- Grape varieties: 75% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay



wines in bottle. Among them Billiot.

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 berryed fruit). The Ambonnay signature might be strawberry, forest-floor, sweet-100s. All of which are certainly present in Billiot's wines.

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:

Considering Billiot uses virtually no dosage (claiming his wines are ripe enough to do without) they do not taste significantly dry. In fact many of you seem to guess them fairly high in sweetness. Billiot does not filter his wines, 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!

- KBA-1 **Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V.** ++
- KBA-1M **Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V., 6/1.5L**
 I've said it before, but this is the best N.V. Brut Champagne I have ever tasted, and this is the best bottling I've tasted yet. It's always about 80% Pinot Noir but no one ever guesses, the wine is so animate, kinetic and hyper. It's 50% 2005 and 25% each '04-'03, disgorged 1/08, but this is explosive even by Billiot standards, just crammed with manic fruit yet with this melting creaminess.
- KBA-4 **Henri Billiot Brut Rosé, N.V.** ++
 This has finally caught up with the N.V. (until last year the Rosé was a year younger); it is now *the same cuvée*, with the still red coming from "either 2002 or 1999, I'm not sure," according to Laetitia. Disgorged 12/07, and I promise you, no finer fruit is possible from pink Champagne; lacy length, sheer loveliness but anchored by superb grip and solidity.
- KBA-202 **Henri Billiot Brut, 2002** +
 There's always a more fleshy Pinot Noir feel to the vintage wines here, but this is an exception; sleeker and higher-toned than the N.V.—but what fruit! It's the best since the 1996; cool, contained, spicy and chalky, almost minty and flowery. I love this vintage.
- KBA-3 **Henri Billiot "Cuvée Laetitia," M.V. (Tête de Cuvée)** ++
 It tells you something when you consider that a 3,750-case estate produces two Têtes de Cuvée; says there's a wine-freak at the helm who never had a marketing-thought in his life. Though it has always been majority-Chardonnay, Billiot has increased the proportions lately. Old bottlings of Laetitia (which I dearly wish I'd kept, damn it) were fathomless and sometimes inscrutable. Leviathans of vinosity, but you had to tuck in and live with a bottle for an hour or so. Not any more. What I tasted was entirely open and forthright, with clear intensity and more Chardonnay hawthorne. It's nowhere near "modern" but it is more *up-to-date*; there's more greengage and spiciness, more scallop and saffron, and less of the funky temperament we knew (and yes, loved). This stacks up against any Champagne you'll ever find; a true Tête de Cuvée.
- In principle this is a solera freshened whenever fruit of sufficient quality comes along. Laetitia herself told me this was 20 vintages from 1983 to 2003, which suggests Serge puts *something* into it each year; this one was disgorged 2/08 (about a month before I tasted it) and was thus a little spiky, but power and a lash of intensity are here; spicy and lusty yet precise; rural but not rustic.
- KBA-6 **Henri Billiot "Cuvée Julie," N.V. (Tête de Cuvée)**
 This is all 2005, and very recently disgorged. It's intent is to be the "yang" to the "yin" of the other Tête-d-C, with more Pinot Noir and more influence of wood. This one was done half in new barrique and half in old; this is more new wood than before but this decision was logistical, not philosophical—he had to discontinue two old casks. Therefore he left it a shorter time in cask (8 months rather than 12) but at the moment this is oaky wine, good oaky wine, but less to my own taste than previous bottlings. They'd like to age it longer in bottle, but don't have the space!

jean lallement et fils

verzenay

It will always be small, but it won't always be so small. The contract with the big *negoçe* expires in 2009, whereupon there will be another 800 cases of the most original and amazing wine in Champagne. Wow, 2500 whole cases, roughly what the aforementioned *negoçe* has bottled by 2pm on January 2nd.

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 three wines – though a vintage-2006 is planned – 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 won't be filtered or cold-stabilized, and they are fermented with ambient yeasts. This tiny little winery, producing all of 1700



The Lallements

cases, is showing how things should be done.

Let's talk about this Grand Cru Verzenay. A cool thing happened on a sales call north of Chicago. The buyer in the wine bar had a Champagne he wanted my opinion on; "Not one of yours!" he assured me. I was to taste it blind, it seemed. Sniffed the wine and immediately said "I don't know what it is but it's from Verzenay." He looked at the bottle. Sure enough! It was a lovely bottle of N.V. from Arnould, in Verzenay. You should have seen what happened. Music started play-

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,700 cases**
- **Soil type: Limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay**

ing, fountains started splishing, a liveried valet began to polish my shoes and six big guys, all named "Brutus" started rubbin' me down. All because Jean Lallement has shown me what Verzenay terroir tastes like! Wow. Now I have to figure how to use this trick to get girls.

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 30 years. Yes to malolactic. These are magnificent, original Champagnes.

Lallement at a glance:

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

- KLT-1 **Jean Lallement Brut, N.V.** **++**

First take a Champagne of exceptional polish and detail. Then take a Champagne of amazingly distinctive terroir, redolent and atmospheric. Then drink, and understand why it's my personal favorite Champagne in my own portfolio, and a poster child for farmer-fizz.

The current bottling is 80% 2005 and 20% 2004, and as always 80/20 PN/CH. It's the wine we know and love, with the fine-fruited creaminess of '05, and maybe even greater length. The (very low) dosage also seems to register more this time; the focus and silken precision have never been finer, and the length never more impressive. People use terms like "heirloom apple, barley, brown-butter, mead, hops" to depict this wine, and I'm sure there's as many more associations as there are imaginative tasters.
- KLT-2 **Jean Lallement "Réserve" Brut, N.V.** **++**

Often this yields just slightly to its ostensibly lighter sibling in my estimation, but not this time. This is the best Réserve I've tasted here, and sensational Champagne. All 2004, same proportions of varieties. It is characteristically riper and more vinous, more masculine; quince and spice-box, mesquite and redcurrant; the spiciness is penetrating and the finish is barely credible, it's so focused and long and it just doesn't let up.
- KLT-3 **Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.V.** **+**

All 2005, all Verzenay, and wonderfully creamy and dear, though dry and blackberried as always, though 2005 is a strawberry strumpet if ever there was one.



pehu-simonet

verzenay

Basically David Pehu is a friend of a friend, whereby samples came to me and I found myself tasting. Bettane tasted them too, which made me a little nervous since I'm sure he's eager to have the scoop, at which time tout le monde will descend upon Pehu's tiny winery. He'll need more chairs for the tasting room.

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 corre-

spondingly less sleek and filigree. He has 7.5 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!

Pehu's a true dark horse, at least until Bettane breaks the story; he seems to have prevailed in a war of wills against his father, and is finally able to make the wines he's dreamed of making. After seeing the samples I went to make a visit, to meet him and taste the wines in greater depth. He does no malo at all, and has the same 8 g.l. RS in all his wines.

I'll be candid; I wasn't sure I "needed" to add another grower, nor that I needed another from Verzenay, but the wines were so good I was scared someone else would

- Vineyard area: 8 hectares
- Annual production: 3,750 cases
- Soil typ: Cretaceous Chalk, Limestone
- Grape varieties: 78% Pinot Noir, 22% Chardonnay

get them! So instead I was a greedy bastard. You're gonna love these regal glowing Champagnes. You may or may not love the label, which is, let's say, striking. Gaudy would work. "Perhaps a jot *undignified*" would also be apropos. Yet as always seems to be the case, some of you love it, so what do I know?

KPS-1 **Pehu-Simonet "Selection" Brut, N.V.** +
This is considerably better than the (very good) one offered last year. Lotsa data: 70% Verzenay, 10% Verzy and 20% Sillery. 70% 2005, 30% reserve-wines. 70% PN, 30% Chard, and all the Chardonnay is Verzenay. About 10% vinified in wood, averaging 4-5 years old. Disgorged 10/07.

The wine's the way Goutorbe might have made it, generous and polished, shiny but not iridescent, generous but not fulsome; a PN-Champagne that seems to glide, mid-weight, substantial but not at all heavy.

KPS-2 **Pehu-Simonet Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V.** +
Also a 10/07 disgorgement. 80% 2005, the rest reserve-wine. It is 100% *Mesnil*, from a hillside parcel toward Vertus—in fact it's the only all-Mesnil wine I offer at the N.V.-level, the first crop from a newly obtained parcel. A little dysphasic, sitting in Verzenay drinking Mesnil, but the wine is superb, with all that 2005 creaminess and the Mesnil jasmine and chalk; long, classy Grand Cru stuff here.

KPS-3 **Pehu-Simonet Rosé Brut, N.V.**
I'm not quite clear how much Chard is in this, but not much. The still red comes from a parcel called "*Le Poule*" in (Grand Cru) Mailly; it's all 2005, also disgorged 10/07. The point is to express Verzenay Pinot Noir, yet this is a light-footed gravity-defying and fruit-forward Rosé, tasty, balanced and polished.

KPS-402 **Pehu-Simonet "Cuvée Junior" Millésime Brut, 2002** ++
Half/half Pinot Noir (from Verzy and Verzenay) and Chardonnay (from Verzenay and Mesnil) with the Pinot Noir vinified in wood. A slight reduction aroma fades with 30-seconds' swirling. The wine is ripe, round and complete, with lots of mineral bite; long and spicy and multi-faceted. We also tasted 2000 and 1999, both excellent and quite different as he had no Mesnil at the time. This fine grower is really on to something. Like many 2002s, this keeps unfolding and improving. We also tasted a preview of the 2004, which has great cut and promise, and slightly more wood. You'll see it in the Fall of 2008.

a. margaine

villers-marmery

We went through a different door this time, into a side-wing of the house, and into a brand spankin' new (and très modern) tasting room, which Arnaud's wife designed and of which the family is justifiably proud. It does bring them into the modern stream, but at a cost, for a holistic soulful guy like, um, me. I used to like the unity of Margaine's flowery wines with their 19th-century label with the old opulently wallpapered room we tasted them in. The new space also conveys a unity, as Margaine has "updated" his label and the aesthetics again congrue. I'm sure if I lived in an old place I'd be eager for some modernization, but in fact I live in Silver Spring, MD and I'm eager for some antiquity. Thus my little kvetch.

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 Cliquot 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?

Arnaud Margaine is as sincere as they come, a studious young man who cares and cares, and attends to details as do few others. He was the first of whom I was aware who lowered dosage with successive disgorgements of the same wine, for instance. He never spent a day on cruise control.

When I first put my nose in a glass of Margaine's Champagne I recall thinking "My god, this is as beautiful as Champagne can ever smell!" I've found very little reason to change my mind in the interim.

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



Arnaud Margaine

- Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares
- Annual production: 4,600 cases
- Soil type: Clay-limestone
- Grape varieties: 10% Pinot Noir, 90% Chardonnay

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.

Again we tasted an old Champagne and again I want to share how it was with you. These wines tell such stories; this one began with me thinking it was over-the-hill until it viscerally awakened in the glass and lived a second life.

"A slightly-too-old 1982 Special Club is exhaling the final volley of complexity, and is a somewhat triste poem of morels. Zero dosage has hastened its senescence. Though this old fellow has more to say than he has time to say it — there's the triste, and the infinitely forgiving tenderness that rides along with decay — if you can forgive your own body you can surely forgive everyone or everything you think has wronged you. And of course having written that, the wine goes crazy in the glass, with a clamor of coffee, chocolate, mussels, all just swirling and billowing. What sublime wine! It seems to sweep away everything trivial. In the finish is all the gravity and glory of the world."

Margaine at a glance:

An island of Chardonnay in a sea of Pinot Noir create near Blanc de Blancs giving the most simply delicious Champagnes in this portfolio. Very reasonable prices! Very pretty packaging!

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.

KAM-1 **A. Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Brut, N.V.** (+)

KAM-1H **A. Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Brut, N.V., 12/375ml**

The last disgorgement was one of the loveliest wines I'd ever tasted from Margaine. It's still on the market as I write (in April '08) and is so pretty you feel your palate stand up so that it can swoon back down. This one's a 1/08 disgorgement, and all it needs is time. It's 60% 2005 and all the Pinot Noir (all 10% of it) is 2005; the reserve wines (all Chardonnay) hail from '04-'03-'99-'96; it's a creamy elegant wine, more like a mini-Club than the Riesling-like fizz it's sometimes been; again this striking clinging length. High hopes here, and I like the stylistic shift into a more classical idiom.

KAM-2 **A. Margaine Brut Rosé, N.V.**

80% Chard (2006) and 20% PN of which 11% is still red from 2005; disgorged 1/08 and unfortunately for me this wine had the very miseries and I can't describe it to you; it will be available early Fall '08, and it seems to have thicker fruit than usual. He makes barely 600 cases of his Rosé and gives more than half to us.

KAM-400 **A. Margaine "Special Club" Brut, 2000, 6/750ml** ++

80% "Alouette" (34 years old) and 20% "Levoies," dosage 8.5, and this one did malo (most of his wines don't, or only partly do); it was disgorged 2/08 but just came screaming out of the gate; fabulously salty and long; lemon, mirabelle and sorrel, all the silvery green lushness of 2000; white tea, jasmine and plum-blossom, kumamotos and apples—a lotta *stuff* here. The next disgorgement will be 9/08 and will be drier.

KAM-5 **A. Margaine Traditionelle Demi-Sec, N.V.**

KAM-5H **A. Margaine Traditionelle Demi-Sec, N.V., 12/375ml**

Same cuvee as the Brut N.V. only with more sweetness (28 g.l. this year, drier than last year); you feel flowers spring up on your palate. Lots of canteloupe, and paradoxically it seems even more refreshing than the dry N.V. I mean, the fizz is delicious. Foie ter-rines yes we all know, but I rather envision this for *unagi*, for pan-Asian preps involving mango and other exotic fruits, for salads with lots of fruit and salt, maybe canteloupe and lardons — even slaw. So get out on your deck with Margaine Demi-Sec!



I just think I'll permit myself to quote Richard Juhlin's new book *4000 Champagnes* on the subject of Vilmart & Cie.

"Vilmart has quickly established cult status . . . since young Laurent [Champs] took over from his father in 1991, the company has become one of the true gems with the perfect wine, Coeur de Cuvée, as its most brilliant star. This wine was the best made in Champagne during the "off" years of '91, '92, '93 and '97. Hunt like a demon for the scarce 5000 bottles that were made of this gem!"

We'd sell even more wine from this astonishing producer if we had his entry-level N.V. (at its entry-level price), but this is an instance when spending 25% more gets you 75% more quality, and so we anchor the selections with what's actually the least of the Tête de Cuvées—the Grand Cellier.

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.

I'm instinctively wary when oak's in the neighborhood. Few vintners have the poise, restraint and *palate* to know when enough's enough. Oak may be a good servant but it is always a bad master, and often I get the feeling the vintner thinks "What's the point of buying these expensive toys if I don't get to play with them?" But Laurent has become so deft with his oak-tinged



Laurent Champs

Champagnes that I suggested to Alexander Chartogne that he try for a stage at Vilmart, whose raw material is in any case closer to Chartogne's than that of Selse.

I think my enormous regard for these wines has run together with my respect and great affection for Laurent Champs himself. The longer I know this man the more he amazes me and warms my heart. He is doing something both tender and extraordinary with the domain he inherited. And the wine-world is taking notice and then some.

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. Their extra flavors, and their relatively pronounced dosage, make them glide gracefully at table.

There's a sense of things shifting at Vilmart. Until

- Vineyard area: 11 hectares
- Annual production: 8,750 cases
- Soil types: Clay-limestone
- Grape varieties: 60% Chardonnay, 36% Pinot Noir, 4% Pinot Meunier

recently the top of their line was the vintage cuvée Grand Cellier d'Or, but Champs seems to have wanted to push the envelope, and has extended the range. Therefore, I clarify it here:

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, I will confess, perplexes me somewhat. Not the wines themselves, but rather their very existence, i.e., why would an 11-hectare estate need to produce a second Tête-de-Cuvée. I should probably ask Billiot the same question; he's even smaller. I think the mundane but true answer is That's just what wine freaks do. This cuvée is from 40-year vines in two parcels: Chardonnay (typically around 70%) from Blanc Voie and Pinot Noir from Basses Greves, and whereas previously this wine had the most new wood in the range, it now is done in 2-3 year old barriques.

Champs will have the last laugh, I think. The series he showed me the past three years was nothing short of staggering, and included several Champagnes as majestic as any I have ever had. Whatever disagreements I had or will yet have with Laurent, they're insignificant beside my admiration of his integrity of vision. He is simply committed to excellence at all costs. Even his RATAFIA is exceptional; 100% Pinot Noir, 100% barrique, aged eight

years before release. We have a little. Taste it. It could just knock Banyuls off your dessert-pour list.

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 on fruit, and the deliberate patient pursuit of a vision of perfection make Laurent Champs' estate a gemstone gleaming among the chalk.

Vilmart 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."

- KVM-1 **Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier," N.V.** +
KVM-1J **Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier," N.V., 1/3.0L**
50% 2005 and 25% each of '04-'03. 70/30 blend of Chard/PN, aged 10 months in *Foudres* and disgorged 10/07. This wine continues getting better, amazingly. Maybe it's the creamy 2005, but the grace and stylishness here are unprecedented, and there's a seamlessness that used to take years to show. At this point it's in the family of the vintage-wines, though still with its signature flavors of saffron, brioche and lobster stock. *This cuvée will sell out at the winery in Summer '08, after which there will be a gap in supply until October.*
- KVM-3 **Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Rubis," N.V.**
Disgorged 10/07 but will *not be available until the end of 2008*; it's '05-'04, and to the extent it can be judged (in March '08) it's cherry tobacco and BLTs on toasted dark bread; there's some of the '04 grassiness but as always this is a meaty Rosé with chewy length.
- KVM-302 **Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier Cuvée Rubis," 2002** +
60/40 PN/Chard, disgorged 9/07, and this is really carnal Champagne, full of duck and plum sauce and crispy skin (I love having sex in Chinese restaurants . . .); the palate is markedly firmer and cooler than the aromas suggest, but with a cherry-tomato sweetness; this is still not quite ready even as we near the end of it, but it remains among the most solid of Champagnes. *VERY low availability; blink and you'll miss it.*
- KVM-601 **Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or," 2001**
80-20 Chard/PN, disgorged 6/07, 10 months in barriques. Laurent is one of the few Champenoise with the temerity to bottle a vintage wine from 2001, but this wine works *because* of its lightness, though oak shows more prominently; still, it's a sweet oak mixed with buttered walnuts, indeed it's a fetching aroma; the palate shows the silvery verdant Zen side of lightness, not the malnourished nasty one; it's like a toothsome puff-pastry; piquant play of sharp focus and doughiness, with a gauzy ripe greenness.
- KVM-602 **Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or," 2002** +(+)
Available late Fall 2008; disgorged 2/08; same vinification and assemblage as the '01; but this will be deeper and rounder and entirely more buttery and *confiture*; it has a sweet ripe interplay of ground and fruit; corn fritters, polenta, white chocolate, wisteria—god I love 2002.
- KVM-499 **Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Création," 1999** +
KVM-498 **Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Création," 1998** +
First a small announcement: *the last vintage of Cuvée Création will be 2000*. I think Laurent realized he'd be able to improve his other cuvées if this fruit were available, and it was often awkward having to explain the existence of two peak-cuvées.
- The 1999 *will be available in the Fall of 2008*, disgorged 2/08; it's wide open in the '99 way; langoustine and mirabelle; chrome-glean and race-car sleekness; quite mineral and shade-ripe for a 1999, yet with very long tertiary fruit.

The 1998, in contrast, has many more *antique* aromas; a solid mine-pit of big mineral; toasted or grilled brioche; the wine is starched, almost formal, a military man at a party with civilians; there's even an heirloom-tomato fragrance, and baked Smithfield ham; the fizz is spit-shined and standing at attention at dawn, and behind it the morning clouds are resplendent with color.

KVM-500 **Vilmart & Cie “Coeur de Cuvée” Brut, 2000** **++**

From the heart of the free-run juice, from whose 2000 liters the first and last couple hundred are removed. This is regularly one of Champagne's great wines, though a certain patience is asked for; disgorged 11/07 and *available late Summer 2008*, there's a burning-leaves aroma at first, and then a massive and esoteric concatenation of green and mineral fragrances so bound together you can hardly extricate them; it's still secretive (Laurent says “hermetic”) but it has moves you ain't seen, my friend, and you want to be there when it chooses its moment.

THE MAGNUMS

KVM-593M **Vilmart & Cie “Coeur de Cuvée,” 1993, 6/1.5L** **+++**

When I offered this astonishing wine in bottle I wrote it was “the best Champagne I've ever bought and sold”, and so I approached the release of the Magnum with trepidation: would it justify my hyperbole?

Oh man, *does* it.

I drank my one and only bottle on New Years Day and was almost tempted to go into my office and write Laurent begging him to hold onto some Mags for me. But it seems there is a decent supply of this amazing wine, not only the greatest of the 1993 vintage, but one of the greatest in the house's history.

Let's say the wine doesn't get any worse(!). It's the most overtly Krug-like of all Laurent's wines; it's both sea-deep in its esoteric salinity yet also enveloping in its overt power and intricacy. The wine gets you lost in deep woods, with strange sweet smells and eerie critter noises, but you know you'll find your way to the shoreline – you can smell the sea. The wine's internal compass points both to the sweet-salty deep and outward to the interstellar dust. And the finish traces a map to both. A wine to drink of an evening, in a cozy warm room, naked.

KVM-600M **Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier d'Or” Brut, 2000, 3/1.5L** **++**

Disgorged two days before my visit (!), and it's a wine for laying down at least five years; it's sharply creased and silvery with almost brash minerality, but embryonic at the moment.

KVM-597M **Vilmart & Cie “Coeur de Cuvée” Brut, 1997, 6/1.5L** **+(+)**

So, how does Juhlin's “best wine made in Champagne; hunt like a demon for the scarce 5000 bottles of this gem” fare in Mags? Um, gotta get back to you on that, squire; the bottle was disgorged *the day before* my visit. I know this wine so well in bottle, its almost martial power, and now? Burning-leaf, lemon confit, tingles like washing your hands in ice-cold water; all the power is here but the massive succulence is subsumed into an *incipient* succulence that will always be more contained, will seem to parcel out its power on half-throttle, but we all know what eventually happens with Mags; the engine finally roars and the wine defies gravity.



1. aubry fils

jouy-les-reims

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 two 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, whom I can never tell apart. They should wear name tags. *Hi! My name is Phillippe.* 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?

Yet original as they and their wines are, here's an interesting story. The zany-brilliant Robert Houde thought to put a blind flight at the end of a big fizz-orama one November—6 growers, 6 Big Brands, in random order, all N.V. Bruts, just to see if A) anyone could discern them as growers or négociants on taste alone, and B) to see where the favorites landed.

Of course it was fascinating. I correctly identified three of my guys, and thought one of the négociés was a grower (Roederer; it's very good these days) and one grower was a négocié: Aubry, with their down-the-middle N.V. Which goes to show the impression of *context*, because Aubry's N.V. tastes a lot like farmer-fizz to me and to y'all, from what you tell me.

My wife Odessa Piper has become uncannily accurate at spotting Grand Marque Champagne (which we open occasionally just because we're total degenerates).



Monsieur Aubry

"This isn't a grower," she'll say to my utmost amazement. "How did you know," I ask? And she will describe a certain blandness, lack of feature, like a finger without a print, or a face from a police composite drawing. I like good Champagne wherever it comes from, but I am start-

- Vineyard area: 17 hectares
- Annual production: 11,700 cases
- Soil types: Clay-limestone
- Grape varieties: 30% Pinot Noir, 40% Pinot Meunier, 30% Chardonnay

ing to feel the "blender's art" can create wines where the whole is LESS than the sum of its parts.

No danger of that at this address! 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 varietals like Arbanne, Petit Meslier and Fromenteau (Pinot Gris), still on the books as "approved."

This all creates some chatter, of course, as everyone glances over their shoulders at Aubry to see if they're on to something. "If the varieties were planted in the first place, our forbears must have had reasons," they say. Moutard in the Aube has a 100% Arbanne Champagne; *Vieille Vignes* too; who knew there were any old Arbanne vines? Others demur; If they were pulled *out* at some point it must have been for a reason!" they claim. Aubrys aren't so sure. 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 Petite Meslier, but all I can say is that's as may be; what I taste at Aubry is entirely convincing.

Last year 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*. Who'd a thunk it!

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

In the sweet-spot of summer I like to go to my farmers market and buy every kind of tomato I see. Bless the heirloom varieties! Sure, maybe a couple of them don't even taste as good as the Pink Ladies or Beefsteaks but I like having a whole mess of different ones. I make sauce to put by for the Winter and BLTs with whatever's left. Karen Odessa likes to layer slices of all the different `maters on top of one another, greens, yellows, reds, oranges, stripes; it's such a cheerful sight. I mean, sure I love Golden Retrievers but I'd never want all dogs to be Golden Retrievers. I'm heartened by the fact of diversity, and 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. They used to sell a third of their grapes to a big house which I won't name (but which rhymes with “Groove Pekoe”), but happily 2001 was the last year. The brothers Aubry look like they'd be good rugby players but in fact they're as sharp as two tacks. I received from them the wickedest answer to my query about the Billecarte quote.

Here it is verbatim: “I have two things to say about this remark. When Château Margaux said to Emile Peynaud, ‘make us the best wine in the world,’ Peynaud replied: ‘Bring me the best grapes in the world and I'll make you the best wine in the world.’ That is the first point. Second, the technology employed by the big houses is exclusively to save them money, not to improve the wines.” Sly and incisive, like their wines!

Aubry at a glance:

expanded!

Great find offering unique Champagnes. Among the best pink-fizz in the entire region. Be ready to have your mind

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. As Aubrys use concentrated must instead of sugar for their dosage, the palate “reads” the sweetness differently. There's more of a fructose texture, a clotted-cream kind of grip. I find these Champagnes alternately lovable and impressive, and occasionally both.

KAB-1

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

Though you see this first we taste it last, because it's the sweetest wine in the range, with all of 6 g.l. RS. The blend is changing, and improving; down to 40% Meunier, 20% PN and 40% Chard (though this includes a small but “present” quantity of Arbanne, Fromenteau and Meslier), disgorged 12/07 and consisting of 60% '05 and 40% '04; it'll be available by the time you read this; it picks up the singular success of last year's N.V. and extends it even further; a snappy, incisive but charming and flowery open-armed fizz, with sneaky length and an oyster tertiary finish.

KAB-804

L. Aubry Fils “La Nombre d'Or Sablé Blanc des Blancs,” 2004

“Sablé” is the term Aubrys use for Champagne with lower-than-normal pressure, but pay heed to the “des” in Blanc des Blancs because this wine has 40% Chard, 30% Petit Meslier and 30% Arbanne, and it is *extremely* dry with 2 g.l. RS. The Arbanne seems prominent here, all that green-meadowy stuff; oyster and precise and long with *bouquet garni*; it's a pre-disgorged sample of a wine *available in late 2008*, and it's a powerful individual wine for all of you with eclectic tastes.

KAB-702

L. Aubry Fils “Ivoire et Ebène” Brut, 2002

70% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir, now from two parcels in Jouy (L'Auditeur for Chard and Les Bonnes Fontaines for PN), done in 200-liter casks of various ages for nine months, and not only do I not mind the wood, THIS is how to integrate woodiness with chalk and chestnut and sandalwood. And what fruit in this 2002! Quince and mirabelle and mutsu-apple, and this is a refined but rural fellow with a lot of breed but mud on his boots.

+

- KAB-302 **L. Aubry Fils “Aubry de Humbert,” 2002** +
 This is Aubry’s Tête de Cuvée in their “classic” series, named after the Archbishop of Reims who laid the cornerstone of the cathedral, depicted on the label. It’s a selection of the best of each of the three varieties, and is also a cœur du cuvée. It was also the first wine we tasted to have a classic and *typical* fragrance of Champagne; brioche, *confiture*, with the lovely wisteria and chalk of ‘02; it has a silvery oyster length, and again very low dosage (3 grams) for those of you with a sugar pathology.
- KAB-402 **L. Aubry Fils “La Nombre d’Or Campanae Veteres Vites” Brut, 2002** +
 This is one of two cuvées from the arcane varieties; Arbanne, (20%; it gives the “herbs and honey” flavors), Petit Meslier (20%; it gives the “orange and lemon” flavors), Fromenteau! (25%; it gives the Pinot Gris flavors, I guess!), plus 5% Meunier, 15% Chardonnay and 15% Pinot Noir! It means “the old vines of the countryside.” (thanks Pierre!) What I love about this wine is the effortless way it melds the *recherché* with the classic; it is clearly both exotic and yet irreducibly also Champagne; at first the fragrance is almost overwhelmed with Meslier passion-fruit, but then the Pinot Gris leather comes on, and litchi and pink grapefruit, wood smoke and *pain grille*; bright, dense and long and with Aubry’s uncompromising clarity and dryness; rain-soaked forest and orange-blossom are two facets you wouldn’t expect in one wine!
- KAB-2 **L. Aubry Fils Rosé, N.V.**
 All 2006, available late 2008; this is explosively fruity, with peach, raspberry and grapefruit; incredibly round and ready, the most generous and sensual bottling yet, 60% Chard and 40% “Pinots;” 15% still red is part of the 40%, from very old Meunier vines.



chartogne-taillet

merfy

A lot of changes in Merfy, and good ones. First though, I need to acknowledge Elisabeth Chartogne, without whom this portfolio would not exist. Her help in the early days was decisive, and her friendship in the present is sustaining and delightful. Philippe, her husband, is among the most angelic men you could ever meet, and the kindness they both have shown me is unforgettable. They are fortunate to have a son who wanted to inherit the estate, and even more fortunate in this young man in particular, whose words formed the inscription to this year's offering, and who guarantees a glowing future for this domain.

But the elders must have felt the house was too confining for all three of them to live in, or they may have wished to make a symbolic gesture, but in any case the house in Merfy is Alexander's, and his folks split their time between a Reims apartment and a home in Provence.

Alexander will make changes, most of which will be favorable, and a few he'll regret having made; this is inevitable. You have to try it all, to see what will take and what won't. But 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. There is an example of just how wonderful wines can be simply because of how talented and conscientious they are. Their land, while good (Merfy is "84%" on the Echelle de Crus) is not aristocratic, and I'm certain if we could transplant them to, say, Aÿ or Mesnil they'd promptly take their place among the elite. As it is, we have overachievers making some silky, swank fizz articulated with careful diction, "easy" drinking and forthright.



Elisabeth Chartogne

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, and a corresponding yielding

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Soil types: Chalk with sandstone
- Grape varieties: 50% Pinot Noir, 10% Pinot Meunier, 40% Chardonnay

grace about the wines.

Something else that gets into Chartogne's Champagne is *older* base-wine. You both taste and infer it immediately; flavors are more integrated and texture is more satiny. This calls for quite an investment from someone in an "unknown" village far from the tourist circuit. But caring lives wherever it pleases.

The winemaking is conscientious in the modern idiom; pneumatic press, temperature controlled stainless steel fermentation vats. Philippe Chartogne has recently been doing much less malo, which could account for the striking leap forward in quality the past few years—or maybe not! There's really good juice in the blends these days too. Perhaps there's, dare I say it, more than one reason. There, I said it. I have always liked these Champagnes but in the past two years I've started getting way excited about them.

Only good things will come from son Alexander's involvement in the winery, and not only because he's a Selosse acolyte. I rather think it's because he's a Chartogne, an innately sweet fellow, and when parent-and-child work together as I think these generations will, each spurs the other on.

It bears mentioning that the current collection of Champagnes were made by Philippe and Elisabeth, though I'm sure Alexander's influence began being felt. His wines are *en tirage* and his first wines since becoming the *Patron* of the house on Grand Rue are still *vins claires*. That said, this was the finest lineup of wines I'd yet tasted at Chartogne.



Philippe Chartogne

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. For some reason, a consistent standout in blind tastings!

how the wines taste:

The basic wine is keen and racy, and the upper-end wines are virtually luscious, they are so brioche-y and creamy. Lovers of old-style Champagnes are encouraged to look closely at these. More recent cuvées have shown a silken complexity that's consistent enough to infer the design of a knowing hand.

- KCT-1 **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Ste.-Anne" Brut, N.V.**
- KCT-1H **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Ste.-Anne" Brut, 12/375ml**
- KCT-1M **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Ste.-Anne" Brut, 6/1.5L**
- KCT-1J **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Ste.-Anne" Brut, 1/3.0L**
80% '04, 20% '02, pretty much 50-50 Chard/PN (though there's often a little Meunier depending on the details of each particular *assemblage*), disgorged 11/07; this is an excellent bottling of this most tasty and reliable Champagne; it's the silkiest and finest yet; indeed really swank fizz, with its customary blend of leather and butter-sautéed apples.
- KCT-4 **Chartogne-Taillet Blanc de Blancs, N.V.**
All 2004, 7 g.l. RS, disgorged 11/07; high-toned peony and jasmine aromas; the wine is sleeker, cooler and drier than the "fruitier" predecessors, though this could just be 2004; silvery green-tea aromas alongside an oyster minerality; grows more assertive as it warms in the glass, and its angularity grows positive, its coolness becomes piquant. Very fine fizz, classy not flashy.
- KCT-6 **Chartogne-Taillet Rosé, N.V.**
All 2005, 60/40 PN/Chard, disgorged 2/08; silvery strawberry aromas, and *trusting*, creamy fruit, like a child who isn't shy and takes your hand; there's amazingly pure fruit and stylish flowery spice: a lovely Rosé.
- KCT-300 **Chartogne-Taillet Millésime, 2000** +
60/40 PN/Chard; also 7 grams and also disgorged 11/07; again this impresses by its cool class; this is partly the nature of 2000 and partly the new orientation here, but it's racy and sinewy, less 4-square than the pre-1999 vintages could be—and it's less "sweet" than the lovely '99—but it's even longer and more ultraviolet.
- KCT-202 **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Fiacre" Brut, 2002** ++
This is glorious Champagne by any standards: a *coeur de cuvée* from old vines. That indicates free-run juice, from which the first and last few hundred liters are removed. 60% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir. Wonderful flower and vanilla-pudding aromas; this is iridescently alive and almost brashly vital, a super-reality of flavor, crackling and mineral and snappy, coiled and starched—for now. Disgorged 2/08 and certainly not showing all its cards.



CHAMPAGNE VINTAGES

Most fizz cognoscenti are hip to the fact the most interesting Champagnes are the vintages. Yet none of them has been talked up in the press since the atypical 1990. I'll share what I know with you here.

1996 will, I believe, prove to have been the vintage of its era. Yet it arrived (and in many cases has departed) with little fanfare, which is a melancholy statement of how little we attend to Champagne as we do to other European wines. '96 is a vintage as significant as 2000 is to Bordeaux or 2001 to Germany, and in this portfolio at least, it is all but gone. This is a classic Vins du Garde year; better than 1990 (because more typically Champagne-like), better than my huge-favorite 1985 (because even more focus and clarity), better than '82 and '79 and . . . you see what I mean. But, it isn't an "easy" or seductive vintage, and in most cases it needs patience.



Great '96s are incomparable. The essential flavors of Champagne have never been—could never be—so clearly rendered. They

are ripe but galvanically urgent and sizzling. They have gloriously steely cut, ringent solidity, endless depth, total terroir saturation, yet all with this silvery, unearthly clarity, as though the grapes ripened under moonlight.

Laurent Champs (of Vilmart) said it best: "1996 is not a Champagne for pleasure; it is a Champagne for desire."

It seems a shame to drink them, yet I can hardly keep my hands off the ones I laid down. Let me repeat; these aren't "intellectual" wines, though they are electrically appealing to the ol' cerebellum. They taste just out-of-this-world.

The best '96s will age gracefully for at least two generations. I don't want to see this incredible vintage slip through the system unheralded. But neither do I want you hurrying to open bottles, for the vintage is often past its youthful fruit-phase and either in hibernation or, in a couple instances, showing certain steely-flinty flavors as the acidity oxidizes. I'm starting to suspect all the '96 whites from northern Europe will go in and out of the shadows, but among all that I've tasted, Champagnes gives me the most confidence.

1997 is the very opposite, a forward, big-boned vintage offering forthright magilla flavory wines. When they're focused and clear I like them very much, and often they give wonderful sensual delight. They "show" well. On the Côte des Blancs they are often splendidly mineral. In rare instances they can seem cloddish.

I'm perplexed by certain commentary to the effect this is a "light" vintage; I don't see that at all. I think it is a *direct* and scrutable vintage, which at best gives gregarious joyful wines. Given the extent to which the German '97s seemed ennobled by age, I'm not ready to write these Champagnes off just yet. They could surprise us.

1998 was two surprises. At first I had never seen such gorgeous fruit from Chardonnay in Champagne. I didn't expect it, but there it was. Then the wines seized up at about six years old and now I don't know what they're about. The same thing happened in Germany with the '98s, which entered and then (mostly) emerged from a cave, and are showing keen and vibrant again. So I'm cautiously optimistic the '98 Champagnes aren't as light and aloof as they seem.

I have every sense this will age into a wonderful vintage which twenty years from now we'll ruefully admit to having underrated. Remember, often the *fine* vintages age as well as the "great" ones.

1999 is now beginning to show its cards. At first it seemed washed out by an eagerness to please, but there was quite some power lying beneath. Sometimes too much so. The vintage really is just a higher octave of the '99 Burgundies. Don't look for delicacy! Rather expect an adamant statement; the '99s I tasted are declamatory wines, packed with material, and when they're good they're the kinds of wines that impress; they have force-majeure power. But they seem to NEED dosage, without which they often seem brutish and brusque. In fact they need more dosage than many growers want to give them, such is the mood of the time. I do NOT believe the dry ones will age, as they are graceless and belliscose to start with. When sufficiently "sweet" the vintage shows lavish flavors of tangerine, malt, white chocolate and saffron. There's a superficial resemblance to '90, though not as firmly structured. Truly an interesting vintage to watch!



CHAMPAGNE VINTAGES

CONTINUED

2000 This vintage was the revelation in my tastings last year. At first I couldn't guess why the growers liked it so; it seemed *correct* enough, but light and inexpressive. Then I tasted at least eight bona-fide masterpieces from this vintage, wines I confess I never imagined could exist. When 2000 is good it is a vintage of wonderful dialectic between *silvery-green* elements (forest-herbs, sorrel, wintergreen, well-water) and *yellow-ripe* elements (the usual brioche and saffron along with honeysuckle) and this is tactile and explicit on the palate. Then there's the marvelous density in the wines, whose mid-palates seem to go on for days, and finally there's a sense of effortless balance and grace — in contrast to the sometimes-brusque '99s. I'll be paying very close attention to 2000s; they provide a rare, keen pleasure.

2002 This superb classic vintage is the most compelling year since '96. YOU SHOULD TAKE THIS VINTAGE VERY SERIOUSLY, AND BUY AND MARKET IT AS A GREAT VINTAGE. Let's don't repeat the mistake we made with the '96s, which slipped through our hands before we noticed how stellar they were, and let's don't wait for the press to notice the '02s. If past is prologue, they won't. Until they're gone!

2002 takes its place as a Grand vintage because it is scrupulously inside-the-lines; not as powerful as 1990, not as otherworldly as 1996. The growers liken it to great years like '82, '79 and even '66. At the moment it is ablaze in flowers, white and purple lilacs, white irises, but with splendid underlying chalkiness and a measured power that doesn't really show as "strength" or "intensity" but

rather as expressiveness. It should age wonderfully.

2003 is less of a freak than you might imagine. It's certainly ripe and gushing but so was 1990, though '03 has nothing of the backbone and stamina of 1990, even if it shows similar fruit. There will be few vintage-wines, as the crop size was so decimated by April frost, but these can be compelling Champagnes, almost like serious Chablis with bubbles.

NOTES ON DISGORGEMENTS

I've asked all the growers to give us disgorgement dates for all their N.V. wines, on the back-labels. I think we need to know. Most of them said they would, and a few are already doing it.

The domestic French market, from what they tell me, likes the wines immediately after disgorgement, when they're jumpy and untamed. The British market likes them more settled. Many of the growers assumed I'd want the wines very fresh, and some disgorged-to-order. But I strongly prefer Champagne with at least 4-6 months on the cork, depending on the wine. Earlier than that and they often taste like an orchestra tuning up, cacophonous and disorganized.

Plus you need to have this information for inventory control. Careful wine writers need it to ensure their readers can actually buy the very wines they tasted and reviewed. And if I'm working in the trade with you, I want to know if you're showing recent goods.



This is the image of Champagne that the Big Houses Promote



This is the reality of the industrialized Big House Champagne

