

August 8, 2007

WINES OF THE TIMES

## Raise a Glass for the Taste, Not the Toast

LET'S begin with a couple of questions. Forgive me if I offer some answers as well.

First, who likes Champagne?

Just about anybody who likes wine, is my impression. Sure, some people may complain about the bubbles or insist that Champagne gives them headaches, but on the whole the popping of the cork provokes Pavlovian tingles of pleasure.

So, given its popularity, people must be knocking back Champagne fairly often, right?

Wrong. Paradoxically, people don't seem to drink much Champagne at all. Even though sales of Champagne have risen in the United States since the millennium, most people still think of Champagne as something to be reserved for special occasions. Unless there's a wedding or a birthday, or a ship to be christened, the corks tend to stay unpoped. The great exception, of course, is New Year's, when more Champagne is consumed, or sprayed, then at any other time of the year.

That's fine. But given the intrinsic pleasure of Champagne, wouldn't it make sense to treat ourselves to a few bottles every now and then for no other reasons than that it's good, that it's good with food and that we don't require a celebration to open a bottle of good still wine?

With a firm belief that the answer to all of the above is a resounding yes, the wine panel recently tasted 25 bottles of Champagne. It was not just any Champagne but blanc de blancs Champagne, made only of chardonnay, the lightest and most refreshing Champagnes of all, and just as right for an August afternoon as for a midnight in December.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Olivier Flosse, the wine director for the MARC U.S. restaurant group, which includes A Voce, near Madison Square Park; and Joshua Nadel, sommelier at Cru in Greenwich Village.

As much as I love Champagne, I would be the first to admit that it is sometimes not very good. Too often it is made industrially, as if it were slapped together without care or precision. Perhaps if you are opening a bottle ceremoniously it matters less. But when you sit down with a bottle for dinner, a Champagne that is oddly sweet, harsh, out of balance or just plain dull is a tremendous letdown, especially if it was expensive.

Yet, over all, we were all taken with the consistently high quality of the blanc de blancs we tasted. Some were sheer and delicate, as fine as lace. Others exhibited more power yet still showed finesse and elegance.

"I'm surprised to be surprised," Mr. Flosse said, capturing in a phrase both the expectations that Champagne creates and its occasional disappointments.

Champagne, of course, is not the only bubbly in the world. Almost every wine region in the Old World offers its own spumante, cava, sekt or crémant, while the New World produces Champagne-style sparklers of increasingly high quality.

But whatever its flaws, Champagne remains the standard by which other sparkling wines are judged. Its elegance and complexity and its ability to combine power and grace are simply unmatched.

The vast majority of Champagnes are made with three grapes: pinot noir, pinot meunier and chardonnay. Pinot noir contributes a robust body, complexity and a berryish quality to the blend. Pinot meunier offers fruity and floral aromas, while chardonnay offers elegance, lightness and citrus and floral flavors.

It's a winning combination, but broken down into its constituents Champagne can offer new and varied characteristics.

Champagne made solely of pinot noir can be more robust and taste distinctly of raspberries and strawberries. It's rare to find a Champagne made solely of pinot meunier, but one I've had, Egly-Ouriet's perfumed and substantial Vignes de Vrigny, is superb.

Blanc de blancs are far easier to find than the other two. They tend to be the lightest and driest of Champagnes. Delicate blanc de blancs make delicious aperitifs, though it's a shame to restrict them to that role since blanc de blancs go so well with light seafood preparations and sushi. The more robust versions would go well with poultry and pork as well as seafood.

Champagne is not cheap. For the tasting, we restricted ourselves to bottles under \$100, which ruled out well-known luxury cuvées like Krug's Clos du Mesnil, Salon and Taittinger's Comtes de Champagne.

Nonetheless, we still had plenty of good values in the \$30 to \$40 range, and our best value, the ripe yet dry and elegant Drappier Signature, is a great buy at \$27.

Of the 25 Champagnes, seven were vintage bottles. Four of these made our top 10, which makes sense in that Champagne producers declare vintages in what they consider to be their best years.

Our No. 1 bottle, the 1995 Blanc des Millénaires from Charles Heidsieck, was the oldest bottle we tasted. Not surprisingly, it had taken on a complexity that many of the younger vintage Champagnes had yet to achieve.

Blanc de blancs age very well, a surprising notion since many people assume that wines made of red grapes age better than whites. I've always felt that white Burgundies, made of chardonnay, age as well if not better than red Burgundies, made of pinot noir, so why shouldn't the same be true of Champagne?

While the Heidsieck was on the robust side of the blanc de blancs spectrum, our No. 2 wine, the 2002 Vieilles Vignes from José Dhondt, was notable for its sheer delicacy as well as for its succulent freshness. The Dhondt was also noteworthy because it comes from a grower-producer, a small, independent vigneron who makes Champagne from grapes he grows himself.

The Champagne trade is dominated by the big houses, which purchase most of their grapes and sometimes even buy already-produced wines.

But the grower-producers are a rising category whose Champagnes tend to be more distinctive if perhaps less consistent than those from the big houses.

Of the 25 bottles we tasted, 15 were from grower-producers, a remarkable number given that 15 or 20 years ago that category was virtually nonexistent in the United States. Six of our top 10 wines came from grower-producers, including the subtle Guy Charlemagne, our No. 3 wine, and the lively Jean Milan, our No. 4, as well as the Gaston Chiquet, the Pascal Doquet and the Pierre Peters.

Not that the bigger houses are not capable of making great Champagnes. The 1998 Pol Roger Extra Cuvée de Réserve, our most expensive bottle at \$95, was richly satisfying, while the lighter, more elegant Billecart-Salmon was bright and refreshing.

It's a shame we can list only 10 Champagnes. Among those that didn't make the list but are nonetheless quite good, let me mention the minerally, tangy Henriot Blanc Souverain and the balanced and elegant Pierre Moncuit Cuvée Delos. And let me not forget Ruinart, which makes one of the most delicate and lacy blanc de blancs. (Our bottle, unfortunately, was flawed.) Or Delamotte, a sibling of the great Salon, which we couldn't find for our tasting. All of these are worthy wines.

Are you surprised when I call Champagnes wines? I know you're thinking, There he goes with the questions again. But this one is important.

Many people distinguish between Champagne and wine, the difference apparently being that wine is something that you drink all the time while Champagne is for celebrations. But Champagne, of course, is a wine, and you might be even more surprised at how happy you'll be when you start treating it like one.

#### Tasting Report: Power, Grace and Bubbles

Charles Heidsieck \$90 \*\*\*

Blanc des Millénaires Brut 1995

Elegant and balanced with complex flavors of flowers, brioche and minerals. (Importer: Rémy Amérique, New York)

José Dhondt Mes Vieilles Vignes \$70 \*\*\*

Grand Cru Brut 2002

Sheer, delicate and fresh with flavors of lemon, flowers and minerals. (Becky Wasserman Selections/USA Wine Imports, New York)

Guy Charlemagne Brut Réserve NV \$70 \*\* 1/2

Magnum

Light, delicate and subtle; almost like a white Burgundy. (Fruit of the Vines, New York)

Jean Milan Carte Blanche Brut NV \$35\*\* 1/2

Lively and refreshing with floral, citrus and brioche flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selection, Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Pol Roger Brut Chardonnay \$95 \*\* 1/2

Extra Cuvée de Réserve 1998

Fuller bodied with a rich, chalky texture and flavors of brioche and citrus. (Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

BEST VALUE

Drappier Signature Brut NV \$27\*\* 1/2

>Elegant and balanced with citrus and mineral flavors.(I&B Imports, Chicago)

Gaston Chiquet Champagne d'Ay \$36 \*\* 1/2

Brut Grand Cru

Dry, tangy and fresh with lingering floral and earthy flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selection, Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Billecart-Salmon Grand Cru Brut NV \$65 \*\*

Racy and bright with aromas of apple, flowers, mint and anise. (Robert Chadderdon Selections, New York)

Pascal Doquet Grand Cru Brut 1997 \$56\*\*

Fuller bodied with flavors of lemon, flowers and vanilla. (Robert Kacher Selections, Washington)

Pierre Peters Grand Cru Brut NV \$35 \*\*

Balanced and refreshing with floral and apple aromas. (Terry Theise Estate Selection, Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)