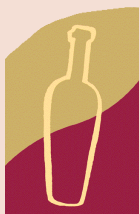


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CHAMPAGNE 2003



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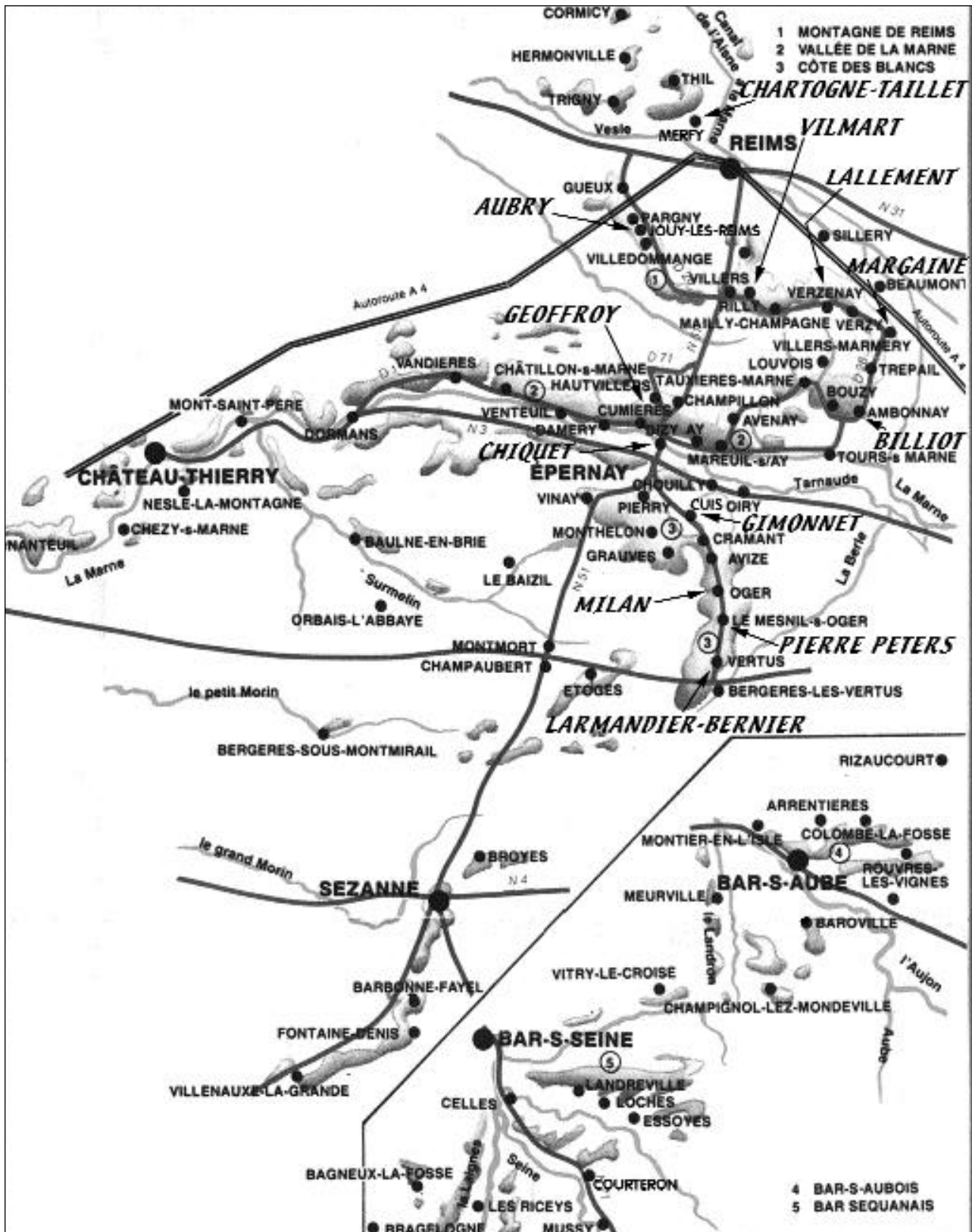


"Typical trust-fund red from a vanity vintner."

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MAP of Champagne



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the happy world of family-fizz.

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 this 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 Gimonet to the groaning shelves of Negotiants.

Our own American business rose exponentially in 2002; y'all bought more microbrew Champagne from us than you did in the ga-ga days of 1999.

And 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 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 *components* 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 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.

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.

I told the story to Laurent Champs a week ago. I wanted him to know. It isn’t merely aesthetic, what he does, or what we all do when we evaluate his Champagne. It is sometimes a solace for people in need. And it cannot console if it is itself meaningless. That’s why Champagne matters, and why you should care.

In Champagne there are more than two thousand vintners who live solely from the wine they grow, produce and bottle. They do not belong to co-ops, nor sell any por-



tion of their fruit to the Grandes Marques. There is an artisanal culture **ALREADY IN PLACE** in Champagne, and when you investigate their wines you learn something I found revelatory and valuable; **Champagne, like any other wine, is fascinating to the extent it is distinctive.**

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, Wehlener, Graachers and Bernkasteler 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**.

The Champagne Houses, the big commercial ones and the small “boutique” ones, are not the whole story of Champagne. The growers have something to tell us also, and if we are already attuned to small-batch thinking, their message will expand our fields of beauty and pleasure. Here’s a quote I like: “Make an effort to get to know [the growers]. You’ll find them warm and hospitable, keen to show you around their cellars and to invite you to taste their wines and share their common passion. Through them you will gain a different perspective on the wines of Champagne, one based on the land and the vines that they know better than anyone else, as well as on wine production, to which they devote all their talent and so much of themselves. Their wines have character and they describe them beautifully, evoking the distinction of each Cru and year with the assurance of those who for generations have lived by their vines and their wines.”

It was Eric Glatre who wrote those quite amazingly long sentences, from his new book *Champagne Guide*.

Now let us contrast those sentiments with rather different opinions. 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’s “Flying Circus,” 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.

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.

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

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-The New France

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 *VOW-ELS*, 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. I made appreciative noises about the beauty of the blender’s art. If only one *experienced* that beauty as often as the Houses would have you believe. It’s hard to maintain the



exquisitely crafted blend when you’re buying tens-of-thousands of bottles *sur-latte* from the co-op and slapping your label on them. All possible respects to the good guys among the houses—we know who they are, and we love their wines—but I have begun to wonder if much that glitters in Reims and Épernay isn’t in fact dross.

A few weeks ago Champagne experienced a disastrous frost, cold rain followed by freezing on the young buds. As I write in early June it looks like vintage ’03 will be 50-60% diminished in red grapes, and up to 80% diminished in Chardonnay. What will the “master blenders” do when they’re assembling their blends? I suspect their PR machines are already cranking out drafts of press releases. *Our market research indicates the modern consumer of luxury-goods is looking for a fuller-bodied product from Champagne, and our esoteric wizard-genius blenders will respond accordingly!*

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 Red Sox last won a World Series." Sure, Bub. Is that why you want me to pay \$130 for your single-vineyard release?

At least the *Mise en Cave* idea of Charles Heidsieck is some sort of guide to how fresh the stuff is, though that whole concept was more striking for what it didn't tell you than for what little it did.

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 distributor 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 IMPEC-CABLE 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 Rheinessen Kabinett with 30 g.l. residual sugar.

And both of them called "Brut"!

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 vignerons with dirt under their fingernails. . .

And I think we've solved the marketing problem for these Champagnes. I was visiting one of the major retailers in New England one day, and he was lamenting the difficulty of selling the fantastic wines of Alain Robert, a vigneron in Mesnil-sur-Oger. They were priced aggressively; what was the matter? The matter, I pointed out, was the alphabetical shelf-arrangement of the wines, which put Robert alongside Roederer and Ruinart. Two "names" and one "no-name." My suggestion was to segregate all the grower-Champagne under a separate heading "ESTATE BOTTLED CHAMPAGNES." Long-story-short; it was done and sales in the category increased dramatically. It begs a question we dearly want asked: "Aren't *all* Champagnes estate-bottled?" Um, no.

It works on retail shelves, *and it works on wine-lists.* If

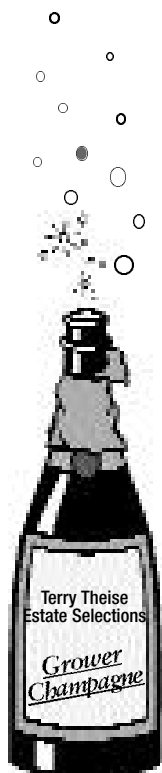
we want people to know that the category has value, we have to begin by creating it as a category. Call it what you will; artisanal Champagnes, domain-bottled, estate-bottled, grower-Champagnes, family-fizz, small-batch, microbrew, Podunk east B.F. Champagnes, whatever you think is the sexiest term. Then watch it take off!

CHAMPAGNE AT 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. And of course you get, for the most part, a blended wine. There are few true monocrus. With growers' wines, the parameters of the blend are narrower and simpler; the "cuisine" of the wine is purer.

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 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 *crème de tête*, 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 likes. There's more than one way to make great wine, remember. One man likes high-strung, nifty 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.

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 2002 the top-3 Champagne Brands accounted for nearly exactly **two-thirds** of all the Champagne sold in America. Y'all like monopolies? I don't. And their market-share has grown the past couple years.

The 18 Brands in total—including the top-3—have the market in an 85% death-grip.

Grower-Champagnes occupy **1.9%** of the market. This is actually good news because when I started in 1997, this figure was a piddling 0.62%. And there are now 131 grower-Champagnes available in the U.S., which is a happily robust number. Thus since I began five years ago the market-share of family-fizz has tripled, but I'm not going to make much more than a minor nuisance of myself to the overlords at LVMH. 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 MICROBREW REBELLION among our Champagne customers!



POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. “Why isn’t it enough,” I asked, “to simply have groups, fair—good—very good—excellent—superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?” “Good question,” answered Pierre. “So what you’re proposing is a 5-point scale.” Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that’s all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that’s where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score’s the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this *Weltanschauung*, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It’s all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn’t so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn’t matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many “points” to “give” it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don’t, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the *writer* may have to use points but the *reader* doesn’t? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that “scoring” wines is the *sine qua non* of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What’s the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here’s a quote I like:

“*The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe.*” (John Berger, from “The White Bird”)

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn’t even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be *available* for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many *points* we’re going to “give” or “award” the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: “We *awarded* Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale.” That’s nice. How many points did the wine give *you*, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat’s ass how many “points” you gave a wine? That wine was a *gift* to you. And all you can do is “evaluate” it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentlemen with whom I debated this topic wrote (I’m paraphrasing) that he grew *into* using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he’s right. After all, I’ve been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom’s soliliquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin’s confession (95), Levin’s day with the threshers (97), Gerald’s walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn’t used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I’m constantly thinking “how many points is this scene worth?” I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drippage gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

“Was it good for you, baby . . . ?” *Oh, 89 maybe 90.*”

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their *extent* on an absolute scale? What’s 100-point joy all about? “I cannot possibly feel happier than this!” Really? *How do you know?*

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine’s “stature,” but I deliberately leave it loose because I don’t want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of *ignition*: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to *deepen* our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he’ll peer through Bob’s valise, pull out the folder marked “The 100-point Scale” and say; “*I’ll just hold on to this; you won’t be needing it here.*”

pierre gimonnet

cuis

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.

Yet Gimmonnet is also unusual in their emphasis on vintage wines. This has something to do with all the fine warm years they've had (in which a larger-than-usual proportion of juice was dedicated to vintage bottlings) but the net result for us—and you—is a stunning array of vintage wines at amazing prices. He wants us to sell less N.V. Brut and more vintage, and he's making it possible with highly attractive pricing. *Take heed!*

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 Gimmonnet for carrying the Récoltante torch.

I think of all my growers on the Côte des Blancs, Gimmonnet'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 honeyed savor about the wines which gives them a silken finesse that defines the Champagne experience for many people. Didier very cheerfully granted my request to taste the 1999 still wines pre-assemblage (I wonder how many people ask?) and the result was one of the enlightening experiences of my wine life. There were perhaps twelve different



Didier Gimmonnet

cuvées, and we began with Cuis, different parcels and different ages of vine. Cuis, I learned, gives fruit qua fruit to these wines, and it's a complex fruit, malic but sometimes almost waxy and wicky like Chenin. The wines were tasty in a candid way, with polish and suavity. Oddly, Cuis seems to be officially

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

despised by the denizens of Grand Crus in the Cote des Blancs, yet Didier insists in using it to bouy up his cuvées. "Don't forget," he reminds us, "Bollinger has 25 hectares in Cuis. When you taste Bollinger you taste Cuis!"

I half-expected to see little or no leap ahead to the Grand Cru Chouilly, but damn it, the bastards who classified these vineyards seemed to have known their terroirs; the two Chouilly wines were dramatically more solid and powerful and minerally, with a red-currant nuance I suspect might be their signature. Then came Cramant, including the legendary segment of 80+ year-old vines. Cramant was nothing short of thrilling; powerful, dense, mineral, almost like young Clos Ste.-Hune! This was, I hope, lesson One in a long series of lessons, at the end of which I may begin to know the Côte des Blancs.

Didier Gimmonnet 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.

He only makes Blanc de Blancs, and it's really good Blanc de Blancs. With a somewhat larger estate there's certain capacities allowed by size: 150,000 bottles of reserve wine, for instance, kept in bottle and separated by cru.

Poor Didier had his hands full with us as we tried to get his American distribution straightened out. The wines have been in Europvin's book for many years now, but

sales were tepid. I broached the subject with Didier when I first visited, and we agreed to create a system of regional exclusivities so that nobody's toes would be stepped on. I fully respect Christopher Cannan's prescience in spotting the splendid quality of this grower. He got there first. I

don't poach agencies.

Therefore, Gimonnet Champagnes are available exclusively from Europvin in Washington, Illinois and California. The rest of you can call me!

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 80. 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. "Last year 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 Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V.**
 KPG-1H **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 12/375ml**

Disgorged 1/03; mostly Cuis, but more Grand Cru than usual to ameliorate the 70% 2001 (of which only *cuvée*, or free-run juice was used); 5% 2000, 15% 1999 and 10% 1998. Dosage 8g.l. "This should be the archetype of our style," says Didier. A "cool" nose, chalk, jasmine and lotus. The palate is tight and spicy, a summertime Champagne; some curranty notes on the finish, and very dry.

KPG-299 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Cuvée Gastronome," 1999** +

It's 42% Cuis, 37% Chouilly and 21% Cramant, majority old vines. It has a ravishingly pretty fragrance—Gastronome often does—spicy, ripe palate with a chalky backdrop emerging on the finish; the front is all saffron, plantains and butter. So pretty now, this will gain complexity for 3-4 years. Intricacy and terroir, but beamingly friendly and utterly transparent. To date the best '99 I've tasted.

KPG-796 **Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Fleuron," 1996** +

"Fleuron" is the vintage-wine. There's a stunningly fine nose here, but that's '96 for you. A lot of ripeness and *confiture* along with all that silvery clarity. Disgorged 1/03, so six years on the lees with the complex smoothness that implies; wonderful finish of quince and chalk. 28% Cramant, 22% Chouilly (over 50-year vines) and 50% Cuis. Dosage only 5 g.l. He describes it as "rectilinear" and I describe it as *gimnee!*

KPG-696M **Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils “Vintage Collection” 1996, 1/1.5L, [Wood Case] ++(+)**

This is the very same wine as the supernal '96 Special Club, but I warn you, it is far less evolved in Magnum. The bottles are brash but still approachable, but this tastes as if it were *months*, not years old. I'll show you my note on the wine from bottle, with the proviso you really have to lay the Mag away for at least 10 years, ideally even longer.

This is 45% Cramant (40 to 80 year-old vines), 25% Chouilly and 30% Cuis. “Pitiless selection.” It's wines like these that will establish the great reputation that the 1996s will earn. This fragrance is hypnotic. Endlessly suggestive, complex and mystic. This is a regal, queenly Champagne at once enveloping and stern, beneficent and rigid, filigree and mighty. The wine creates electro-magnetic activity on your palate; it could interfere with airport security devices!

KPG-395 **Pierre Gimmonnet et Fils “Cuvée Oenophile Maxi-Brut,” 1995**

Dosage ZERO. Like 'em toasty? O.K.! Great length and roundness; a kind of Champagne-essence. Fine classy nose, caramel and nutmeg; round and lush on the palate. Amazingly, this isn't even barely austere, but unique and extraordinary. He always gives it to you at the end, after all the peak-cuvees, and it never fails to impress. Now all 1995, disgorged November '01; 40% Cramant, 18% Chouilly and 40% Cuis; most of the vines are over 50 years old. '95 is a perfect vintage for this style; saffron and wheat toast; palate is quite round and luscious—you simply don't register its absolute-dryness, even on the crackery finish.



varnier-fannièrè

avize

CÔTES DES BLANCS

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 de 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

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



make them twice as good. A Cuvée-Ste.-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 (not enough to export) is lissome and ethereal.

Varnier-Fannièrè at a glance:

Tiny, 4 hectare domaine with exclusively Grand Cru land. Young vigneron making feline-snappy

ultra-clear wines.

KVF-1

Varnier-Fannièrè Brut, N.V.

50% 2001, 50% a melange of 2000 and 1999, from Avize, Cramant, Oiry and Oger (all Grand Cru); 10 g.l. RS, disgorged 2/03. All the graphite and wisteria one expects plus an empire apple and hyssop note. Quite the most focused and sleek N.V. I sell—one likes it as one does German wine. Of course, one *likes* German wine . . .

KVF-2

Varnier-Fannièrè "Cuvée Ste.-Denis" Brut, N.V.

One-third each `00, `99 and `98, disgorged 2/03; a single-site 60-year-old-vines wine (from "Clos de Grand Père" in fact); this is *absolute Avize*. Nearly ore-like obsidian char notes over the new pencil and white iris; capacious and smoky, burning-leaf; this is fizz with a fingerprint. Taste this and you'll wonder if you can ever again settle for the bland pap emerging from the Big Brands.

KVF-397

Varnier-Fannièrè "Grand Vintage" 1997

Love that `97 violet and lavender! Contained crisp fragrances, this is ultra-stylish, suave and diligent; dry and loaded with mineral; if a wine could be called "clever" it would be this one. Open enough now but will reward 5-10 years keeping.

+

jean milan

oger

One of the writers describes Oger's wines as "delicate" 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 Côtes de Blancs Champagne. They are lead-pencil, 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 Cote de Blancs was in fact *Oger*.

I introduced these wines to clamorous success. They're oh-so-tasty and priced most sensibly! Then there's the "Caroline factor." Ms. Milan, who twinkle-toed her way through the U.S. leaving a scorched-earth of broken male hearts in her wake, is a wonderful person of rich and substantive

temperament and a superb ambassador for her family's wines. Perhaps you met her.

Milan's is a small domaine, 5 hectares spread out among 42 parcels. The average age of the vineyards is 28 years. Caroline shows the estate with aplomb and expertise; they're quite conservative viticulteurs, Coquard press, hand-disgorgement, old casks in the cellar. All reassuring.

We had seen the wines at the first pre-screening tasting. They showed consistently superbly, with that graphite flavor of the Avize-Oger corner, and it's the specificity of that character which compelled me to add these to my other Côte des Blancs offerings. There's nothing else like them!



Caroline Milan

When we were finished tasting and visiting, M. Milan appeared and we were introduced. He is a remarkably beautiful man; a sensitive, open and inquisitive face, and craftsmen's hands. "I'm going to be very glad to know these people," I thought to myself. I'm already delighted to know their wines!

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

- 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

up to 5% grapes and still be a "récoltante," 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!



Milan at a glance:

Wonderful discovery in the heart of the Côte de 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.**
I do so love this Champagne. The new cuvée is half-half `00-`99, dosage 10 g.l. and I swear to you it smells like a Nahe wine; even more, a *Dönnhoff* wine; even more, a *Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg* Dönnhoff wine. there's all kinds of ripe, rich aromas and a lavishly charming palate with juicy body. This is the best face of commercialism, to be highly agreeable yet not compromise.
- KML-2 **Jean Milan Brut "Speciale," N.V.**
This is always a year older (`99 and `98 now) and a year longer on the lees, and much drier. Often this is everything I want Blanc de Blancs to be; the loveliest possible synergy between fruit and leesiness, and full of cool Chardonnay mineral. Fine jasminey aromas, even sweet corn or peekytoe crab; it's zippy and perfect, firm and genial. It's that wonderful roasted-corn 1999.
- KML-398 **Jean Milan "Selection Terres De Noël" Brut, 1998** ++
Every single time I have drunk this I've felt it was about as good as white grape Champagne ever gets, and this is a pinnacle of the great `98 Chardonnay vintage. It's from 45 year-old vines in a single parcel in Oger. Sensational nose, full of complexity and mirabelle; have I ever tasted a Blanc de Blancs with more pure *fruit*? It's like a confiture or a liqueur, with a striking conciliation of chalk and honey. There's *VERY* little of it: **don't miss it.**
- KML-5 **Jean Milan "Symphorine," 1998**
New item. A cuvee 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 may not be repeated—`98 was a splendid and generous vintage—and it's in essence a mini-version of Terres de Noël, not as explosively ripe, but all those scallopy white-Burgundy aromas (or even Styrian Pinot Blanc); hints of malt and a sweet old-casky flavor; the wine is like yellow-plum juice strained through chalk. These `98s are amazing.
- 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.

And it's delicious, especially if you like Nahe Spätlese! All brioche and acacia-honey, with a suave sweet lick of hive-buzz on the finish. This is the Carte Blanche with more dosage, now up to 25 grams per liter. Sure it's beyond the pale, but that's only if you insist the "thing" you call Champagne jump through just one particular hoop. This has wonderful food applications and a wildflowerly mineral lushness that would be churlish to resist. Besides, where else can you get a "sweet" Champagne that's 100% Grand Cru, apart from Selosse? I will be drinking lots of this and I have more testosterone than the entire World Wrestling Federation, so there.

pierre peters

le-mesnil-sur-oger

“Blown away again!” That’s what I found when I looked in my notebook. I am, rarely, articulate! 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 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 billfold. The great bottling from Krug remains a sine qua non not merely for Champagne, but perhaps for Chardonnay. And in the wines I’d tasted from several small growers in Mesnil there was a certain distilled exquisiteness, as if the prettiest and finest essence of Chardonnay had been skimmed like sweet cream. This was true even of the wines of relatively ordinary domaines.

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 *2000 Champagnes* is *hors classe* in this subject, ranks Peters second only to Salon among Mesnil growers. “Champagne from Peters offers



François Peters

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

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. I suspect François Peters would urbanely sympathize. He is an irresistibly charming gentleman, très continental, with even goofier taste in socks than my own. We compared. His were better. Next time I wear the Captain Haddock socks. I’ll show him who has goofier socks. . . .

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 minerally essence of the type, and straining at the leash as though the fruit wanted to burst free and run at full gallop. Lately I have described the wines as starched, for they have that crisp stiffness. Though not exceptionally high in acidity, they are exceptionally low in pH, which gives them their attack on the palate and their trilling high notes of aroma. My best German wine customers tend to prefer these to any Champagne I offer.

KPP-1A

Pierre Peters "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut, N.V.

KPP-1H

Pierre Peters "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut, N.V., 12/375ml

2000 and 1999. My best-selling fizz; it's as always very high-toned and needly but rich with substance below. It's the classic Peters fragrance, made more complex by the fruit of the 2000; you know, this is plain stylish wine, full and weighty but never heavy; sleek and precise but not arch, with certain tea-like notes, like those old-bush teas, or like wild-shot pheasant. Dosage is around 11 g.l. but it tastes much drier.

KPP-297

Pierre Peters Brut Millésime, 1997

+

Last week I broke down and opened a bottle of the '95. I adore Peters but am loath to drink them till they at least grow up a little. But my will-power faltered, and there was this zingy glass of fizz, and my Karen Odessa said WOW and let it be known *this* was something out-of-the-ordinary—"Did you do something bad Terry?" The best vintages of Peters are just animally satisfying Champagne; they're almost erotically delicious and fiendishly *interesting*; this '97 has a simply perfect Chardonnay aroma, and the palate is a dream of unearthly perfection; fruit, chalk, cool cool jasmine, mineral saturation, generous but crisply outlined and perfectly proportioned; it has that salty-herbal Japanese green tea thing again, plus I swear a caraway-seed note. I kept writing "perfect" this and "perfect" that, so just BUY the fizz, all right? It's a steal at its price and Champagne doesn't get any better. 35% Avize, 30% Oger and the balance Cramant and Mesnil, by the way.

KPP-397

Pierre Peters "Cuvée Speciale" Brut, 1997

++

This wine hails from a single parcel in Mesnil called Chetillons. 70 year-old vines. It is consistently in the pantheon of the greatest Blanc de Blancs. Side-by-side at the same age it's as good as Clos du Mesnil at about 25% of the price; the '97 has a stop-you-in-your-tracks fragrance; the palate shows staggering density without being at all thick; almost Corton Charlemagne power and torque; animated interplay considering its bigness; it's a regal wine with innate command.

The '98 vintage, for which I'm already salivatin' like a Pavlov's dawg, will be available Fall 2003.



larmandier-bernier

vertus

You gotta feel for anyone who's smarter than the average bear.

Pierre Larmandier bought 4 hectares in Vertus last year, a prime cut. Such land seldom comes up for sale. There were three final bidders, one Négociant and two individuals. The Négociant's bid was the lowest, and Pierre's bid prevailed because all things being equal, the nearest neighbor gets the land. When the Négociant learned their bid had failed, they called the woman who was selling and increased it. Nothing doing, she said; you had your chance. Everyone else played fair. Good for her!

So our hero was the new proprietor of 4 groovy hectares of Chardonnay, which promptly froze in the killer frosts of April '03.

Pierre Larmandier was trenchant on the subject of M. Billecart's unfortunate sentiment. "The problem is," he began, "when you're not sure of your grapes, you need technology. If we ever make a mistake, we'll know who to call to buy the grapes! We are free, our production is small; we make decisions based on what we want." This sentiment is frequently repeated. The prevailing view might be summed up thus: "When we taste our wines at assemblage, we have a triage; the best goes into vintage-wines, the acceptable goes into N.V. wines, and whatever we don't like. . . call the Négociant!" There's symbiosis for you.

About two-thirds of Larmandier's vineyards are in 1er Cru Vertus, one-third in Grand Cru Cramant. When we went into the cellar to taste the 1997 vintage still wines, I was surprised by the adamant fruit of the Vertus; this was the "Larmandier flavor" I'd come to identify. Vertus' fruit is like a plumper more forthright version of Cuis. To the north toward Mesnil it's more mineral. I eagerly held out my glass for the Cramant, but to my surprise the wine was steely and unyielding. Was this always the case? More or less! The north side of Cramant, facing Cuis, is less ripe; the south-facing slope brings the elegant perfume. Cramant seems more vegetal, like loess-grown Veltliner. Its grip and saltiness are profound. At least in those parcels Pierre happens to own! Cramant, it seems, brings the carpentry to the assemblage, the rigid spine of mineral power that gives the wines their cut. Vertus provides the fruit that gives their simple deliciousness.

Pierre Larmandier is someone I totally like and admire. His instincts are invariably sound, both as vintner and partner. He's also (the more I get to know him) quite the maverick. He's been working organically since he undertook the winery from his father, but "when you're organic, all the people in the village think you're crazy, so you keep it quiet. We're more organic in our

- Vineyard area: 15 hectares
- Annual production: 10,000 cases
- Soil type: Chalk
- Grape varieties: 90% Chardonnay, 10% Pinot Noir

vinification than many 'organic' vintners." His were the only vineyards in Vertus that looked alive, that had anything growing in them between the vines. But Pierre is still consolidating his regime. "It is difficult to find people who think in Champagne," he laments. This year again we tasted his wines after having tasted all our other Blanc de Blancs. It was instructive. The first thing I noticed was how streamlined, dry and clean Pierre's Champagne was. They are perfectly executed, firm and loaded with flavor. If Mesnil is Armani, Larmandier is Brooks Brothers!

Pierre can be dogged and that's almost always a good thing. These days I wonder if his sugar-pendulum has swung too far. "I hate dosage," he says, but I don't want these Champagnes to be confined to a narrow audience of sour-heads. Pierre is chasing his vision of a kind of apex of purity, which I admire and applaud him for. But a few cuvees flirted with austerity, and I had to be selective.

Pierre's a terroirist, as am I, so we're simpatico. Which is why my spirit leapt when Pierre told me: "I think terroir is more important than grape variety." If you only grow one grape you take its characteristics as a Given, and look, correctly, to soil as the rogue variable. And then you find so many of the things that make wine so fascinating and worthwhile. . .



“Larmandier-Bernier produces some of the most pure-flavored and stylish Blanc de Blancs. Exceptional Cramant Grand Cru.”

—Michael Edwards, *Champagne And Sparkling Wines*

“Some of the purest Chardonnay Champagnes around today.” —Richard Juhlin, *2000 Champagnes*

“One of the top six producers on the Côte des Blancs. Luscious, crisp, creamy fruit that is wonderfully fresh and pure when first released, but slowly builds a

creamy, walnutty richness and finesse.”

—Tom Stevenson, *Christie’s World Encyclopedia Of Champagne And Sparkling Wine*

“Few growers’ ranges in Champagne are as consistently outstanding as that of Larmandier-Bernier. (He) produces two of the greatest Champagne de terroir with his Né d’une Terre de Vertus and the vieilles vignes de Cramant: both are intensely mineral . . .”

—Andrew Jefford, *The New France*

Larmandier-Bernier at a glance:

11 hectare estate (about 7,000 cases) with vineyards in Vertus and Cramant. Classic, impeccable Chardonnay based Champagnes with incisive minerality and leesy fluffiness.

how the wines taste:

These Champagnes are both laser-focused, pinpoint-incisive and still generous and leesy. Have no worries people won’t “understand” these wines or that you need some sort of “expertise” to appreciate them. These are so forward and giving they’ll just cover you with Champagne kisses. But you can’t help but notice the great clarity and class behind all that personality.

KLR-1 Larmandier-Bernier Blanc de Blancs 1er Cru Brut, N.V.

60% 2000, 40% 1999. Disgorged 2/03. This is probably the most unchanging N.V. in this portfolio, and it is certainly the exemplar of Champagne’s uniqueness. The palate just crackles, all brightness and classy focused flavors. The PERFECT Blanc de Blancs fragrance; very dry (6 grams per liter) and impeccable. Scrupulous, and, in its way, gorgeous. Dosage is made from concentrated must, “because then I can use less of it!” says Pierre.

This isn’t in stock as of June 2003, but it’s the wine that will ship with our next order. That’s good, as it wants a few more months to recover from disgorgement. It always does, and it always does!

KLR-298 Larmandier-Bernier Cramant Grand Cru Vieilles Vignes Extra Brut, 1998 +

Vielle *Vigne* is not a typo. This is absolutely great 1898 Chardonnay, as important as any Grand Cru Chablis. And it’s the best vintage I’ve tasted of this always-fascinating wine; saturated with terroir, I mean *naked* chalk, along with the 1998 mirabelle and jasmine. The balance, focus and length are all exemplary and the finish is an exegesis of Chardonnay.

KLR-5 Larmandier-Bernier Terre de Vertus

The name has changed, and it’s all `99 now, but it’s still a lovely statement of a terroir which seems to make the most downright agreeable wine on the Côte de Blancs. This has no dosage and it could almost be confused for one of the less oaky tasting bottles of Seloisse. I’ll confess to hesitating over this: how many zero-dosage Champagnes do I need? But the sheer quality won me over. It’s snappy, firm and dee-lish, an impeccable and candid rendering of Chardeonnay; assertively dry but nowhere near austere.

We currently have the `98 in stock, while supplies last. It’s superb, with the vintage’s firmness, complexity of fruit and crystalline texture. The `99 is fluffier and plumper.

I understand we who love minerally wines are becoming known as “rockheads”, and so to all you ROCKHEADS out there I issue this alert: *check these wines out!* And, Long Live Rock!

KLR-397 Larmandier-Bernier Cuvée Special Club, 1997

Ay muyayo, this boy he has the big nose. Jasmine, pear, as fetching as it gets. The palate is at once stern and as fluffy as a summer cloud. Capacious and incisive. One-third each Vertus-Chouilly-Cramant. It isn’t “pretty”, this wine, but it is important. When you grow up you’ll understand. But even if you don’t grow up, this is one of the crispest and neatest wines of this sometimes blowsy vintage, and it’s lavishly generous with a fine inner sweetness starting to emerge.

gaston-chiquet

dizy

What on earth is happening at Chiquet? I mean, the wines have just been *screamin'* the past two years, so much so it was almost absurd. Part of it is the introduction of 1998 wine into the blends, so I asked Nicolas Chiquet “What happened to you in 1998?” He looked at me wanly. “We had good weather,” he said.

I insist there is an active relationship between drink and drinker. We don't just sit there lumpen, waiting for the wine to come to us. We *engage* it. We taste ourselves tasting. Thus I suspect there are wines for which we are either not yet ready, or perfectly ready, or past-ready. Nicolas doesn't believe his wines have changed or improved markedly. I think they have, but what do I know? Last year I opened my last bottle of the sensational 1990 Special Club, and found in it many of the same

flavors I've come to cherish in the younger wines. Nicolas might be right. Maybe it's me, and I'm finally ready.

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. Chiquets are both the chalkiest and most succulent of all my Champagnes.

This is a large estate as Récoltantes go, with 22 hectares. Quantities won't be quite so mingy here, so you can hog out if you like them. Which you will! Of all the Champagnes in this offering, Chiquet's are the “easiest” to like, the wines with the highest lip-smack quotient. And yet they sacrifice nothing of seriousness or dignity; they just taste so good.

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.



Nicolas Chiquet

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

Nicolas Chiquet is a genial but reserved young man, but the longer I know him, the more I like and respect him. In his modest way he is turning out Champagnes of great clarity and substance. It's a quiet revolution, you see.

I paid a between-visit in September 1999 just to hang out a little, and I had my colleague Theresa Ryder along. She and Nicolas share a birth year, and so a liquid citizen of that year was ushered from the cellar to our table, and I have rarely had a more emotional experience with a bottle of wine. If you'll indulge me, I'll share my notes with you (or just skip it!).

“1965 Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ: a wonderfully nutty-birchy bouquet; fantastically bright, still has fruit and even sweetness. Saffron, sweet corn, mimosa; this is a vigorous, mature wine; I'm veering between the thrall of its intricacies and the sensual grin of its deliciousness. Jambon and fraise de bois. Almost meaty, like veal demi-glace with a drop of meyer-lemon concentrate. Spicy, sweet; very long tertiary finish. Like the BEST green Oolong. Wine doesn't get any more fun than this; you want to kiss everyone in sight.”

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.

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:

How Gaston-Chiquet tastes is determined from year to year according to the wines in the cuvées. Nicolas Chiquet disagrees. And he's partly correct; after all, the vineyards are the same, the proportion of grapes in the cuvées is fairly constant, and the blending aims at consistency in the Non Vintage wines. I may detect minute variations because I wish to; it's what I like about wine, and how my palate was formed. Basically Chiquet's wines are juicy and caramelly, but in some years they have a certain chiseledness and filigree detail that makes them more than mere lip-smackers.

KCQ-1

Gaston-Chiquet "Carte Verte" Brut Tradition, N.V.

KCQ-1H

Gaston-Chiquet "Carte Verte" Brut Tradition, N.V., 12/375ml

45% Meunier, 35% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir. Dosage is 9.5 grams per liter. The current cuvée is 80% '99 and 20% '98. The vines average 25 years old. This is everything that N.V. Brut should be. Let me repeat that: THIS IS EVERYTHING THAT NV BRUT SHOULD BE. With one, maybe two exceptions, this would wipe the floor with anything from any négociant. It's so silken and fine, full of oleander, pumpernickel and mimosa, and the palate has exceptional grace and detail. It's 95% *cuvée* (the free-run juice) and 5% *Aÿ Chardonnay taille* (1st press) to impart structure. The current bottling (disgorged 2/03) has exceptionally limpid aromas even for this wonderful wine; crystalline, classic, down-the-middle fizz; as it ages on the cork there's more mead and confiture and pumpernickel. Sometimes I think Nicolas should put this in LITER bottles, as I'm always down to the last drop WAY too soon.

KCQ-2

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

(for the '98 bottling) ++

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*). Last year's '98 was a masterpiece, yet it's telling that Nicolas prefers 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. The '98 has a fabulous nose; pure crabapple-blossom, the kind of fragrance you know will evolve into the haunting, mysterious perfume of great mature Champagne. Cool, blonde, all mist and gossamer, feminine and mysterious; this is insanely good Champagne, the kind that melts your heart, silvery and lunar.

The '99 was disgorged 12/02, and I love it; there's a lot of green-tea, specifically Taiwan Jade Oolong, and an incipient mid-palate richness. It's a mannerly, apple-blossomy Chardonnay, very *brioche*, typical for '99.

KCQ-396 **Gaston-Chiquet Brut Millésime, 1996**

60% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay. The average age of the vines is twenty-seven years. Smoky, leather and sandalwood and balsam. Here the palate is stiffer and the wine wants 2-3 years before it's ready to par-tay. The ingredients are impressive and balanced, but inchoate, awaiting their true language. I recommend: buy, forget, open later, drink, marvel, kiss, make out, do it, cuddle, sleep. Repeat as needed.

KCQ-397 **Gaston-Chiquet Brut Millésime, 1997**

Or you can drink this while you wait for the '96! It's what I'd do. It has the typically generous, imposing nose of the '97s, dominated in this case by smoky Pinot Noir notes, more knit and *fondue* than the more silvery '96; more overt and obvious; drink it for its sensual generosity and then go neck with someone.

KCQ-496 **Gaston-Chiquet "Special Club," 1996, 6/750ml**

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Hey smart-guy; want to GUESS how freakin' great this wine is? As always 70-30 Chardonnay to Pinot Noir; this year it's mostly Aÿ Chardonnay so as to lower the acidity. It's more open than the '95 was at this stage. The '96 aromas really dilate your pupils; the wine is like goose-pimples; the palate vibrates to such a frequency I'm surprised the glass doesn't spontaneously shatter, yet it's entirely within my comfort-zone. Surreal intricacy and clarity. The first couple seconds of finish are a little spiky but the long drawn-out tertiary finish is a contrail of continuing evolution and loveliness. This is a great classic which you must have if you care about wine.



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.

A Primer on Terroir

Why on earth does this self-evident truth need to be defended?

First, a definition. “Terroir,” as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, *beginning with soil*, and then beginning with soil’s components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn’t come first. *What the soil consists of* comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they’d wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of terroir is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I’m calling “proof”? It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors *for which no other explanation is possible*.

Even those willing to consider the truth of terroir might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said “I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of *caillou* and cram it in my mouth, but I can’t taste that flavor in the wine.” But this is not what I argue. I don’t know of any place where you can literally “taste the soil” (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can *taste what the soil does*.

I’ve been challenged that soil’s expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine’s DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine’s identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was some-

times drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it’s safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

I’ve also heard it said the notion of terroir has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. “A great winemaker will make better wine from “ordinary” soil than a lazy winemaker makes from “great” soil.” Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that terroir was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn’t. For when Dönnhoff obtained the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggle of vines) it became clear *immediately* which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that terroir is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the first among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I’m alert, some days I’m dozy, sometimes I’m tender and sometimes I’m gruff, but I am always . . . fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the

January 2000 issue of *Science News*, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

“German researchers recently studied 165 wines from six grape-growing regions. *The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminum and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy* testing for just three elements—barium, silicon and vanadium—and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested.”

A little further down the page: “From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different *terroir*, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to *terroir*.”

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. “The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage”, the argument goes. “They have something we don’t have and can never get,” it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motiva-

tion to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of *terroir* is afraid he doesn’t have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound *terroir* do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of *terroir*, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. “If a crappy grower can waste a great *terroir*,” they say, “then what good is it to me?”

No good at all, if you’re looking to *terroir* as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won’t do that. Not because it doesn’t like you, or because it’s just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn’t understand our need to avoid disappointment. Wine, or the soil, or the earth, something somewhere has a thing it has to say, or else why would flavors arise so? Why else would nature have contrived this way for the earth to be tasted? We are meant to hear something, to know something. Wines of *terroir* may be portals into the mysteries of Place, its meaning and spirit. Even more inscrutable, wines of *terroir* are portals into the fundamental Mystery.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don’t buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn’t care. It just invites. And the soil remains.



Vineyards in Cramant

“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)

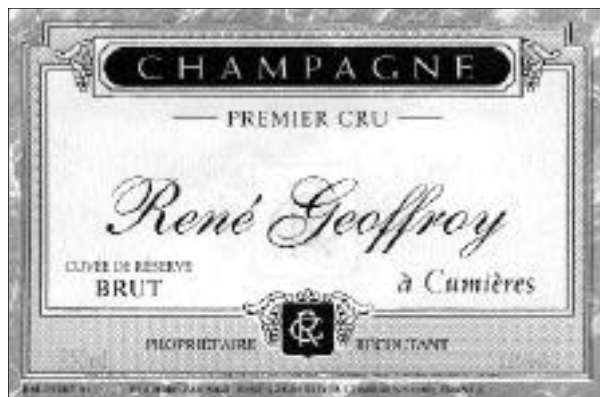
There’s an international fraternity of wine-nuts whose particular utopian fanaticism crosses all boundaries, regional, national, any. These people don’t have to wear name-tags to be recognized, but only if you are one of them. Within this freemasonry are many shades of philosophy and temperament, but we are united by a certain insistence that wine is important, wherever you are in the

process of its existence. How you grow grapes and make wine is important; how you select and sell wine is important; how you drink wine is important.

Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy is one of us, or as I’d prefer to put it, he kindly invited me to be one of “Them.” We recognized each other; we thought we were P.L.U., as my New York readers will understand.

This is a father-son domaine producing Champagnes of the utmost integrity, and they are full-tilt YUMMY at the same time they are taken absolutely seriously by their makers. I cannot offer you a wine better than the best of these; no one can.

To begin with, consider Cumières. This Marne-Valley village is one of the few in Champagne whose vineyards are all exposed to the southeast, and it’s usually among the first to start the harvest. It is red-grape land here; indeed, Geoffroy’s still red is celebrated throughout the region. The Geoffroy’s 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.

- **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**

You know, you read the same stuff everywhere. What does a phrase like “manual 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.

Fall 1999 inaugurated a series of experiments with canopy trimming. Theresa and I went into the vineyards with Jean-Baptiste to have a look-see. He’d trimmed some east-facing canopies and some west-facing canopies and was out with the refractometer seeing which rows were riper. The man will stop at nothing. But dogged meticulousness is only one part of the story. “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 *premiere taille* (first pressing) and the *deuxieme 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 *premier 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.

We usually drink—yes, drink—an old vintage after the “work” of tasting the current *cuvées*. “This year I'd like us to taste something in honor of my grandfather” said Jean-Baptiste. “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 his-

tory. 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 state-ly 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.

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-1

René Geoffroy “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V.

Now 70% 2000 and 30% 1999. 2000 is pretty here, especially the Meunier which informs this wine. It's a shade lighter than earlier versions (how *spoiled* we were with 95-'96-'97-'98-'99 all going into N.V.s), but a little twinkly lightness isn't a bad thing for a happy wine like this; the silky, comely charm is just as nice as the smoky shiitake meatiness of the past. Maybe nicer! As always, half Meunier and the balance is 40% Pinot Noir and 10% Chardonnay. The base-wine for the dosage is *Cuvée Sélectionnée*!

KRG-2

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

KRG-2H

René Geoffroy “Cuvée Sélectionnée” Brut, N.V., 12/375ml

We'll have two vintages of this which might overlap at some point in the year. Current stock (as of June '03) is all '99, very brioche and mimosa, round and refined; less body than the '97 or '95 but still *golden*.

The 2000 is more *silvery*. It will arrive in early Fall, and I tasted an unfinished pre-release sample. But it should be a calm, pretty Champagne when it reaches its suave maturity.

In essence this *cuvée*, 80% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay, has lots of wood-aging to encourage tertiary aromas. You really taste the Cumières smoke; if you wanted ONE Champagne to reassure anyone about farmer-fizz, show them this. Six months before releasing the wine they make six different blends of dosage, tasting all six blind before the final disgorgement to see which one works, not merely at the time, but after it's married into the blend. A caring vintner!

KRG-3 **René Geoffroy Brut Rosé, N.V.**

KRG-3H **René Geoffroy Brut Rosé, N.V., 12/375ml**

“I want explosive Rosé!” says Jean-Baptiste. Sure boss! Among other things, it tends to explode out the door; we are perennially short of this lovely wine. The incredible 2000, “As soon as the juice ran from the vats we knew we’d have great Rosé this year,” is all but gone (21 cases of half bottles remain for us). Sure, call it simple, as you pick yourself up off the floor! Geoffroys are among the last to make pink Champagne by saignée, leaching the color from the skins rather than simply blending a little red wine into the vat. “We want to be able to differentiate the Rosé from the white Champagnes tasting them blind,” says Jean-Baptiste.

The 2001 was too raw and screechy to judge. I’d rather not offer it until the first of 2004. It hurts me too! But better to have no wine than to have raw wine.

KRG-4 **René Geoffroy “Cuvée Prestige,” N.V.** **+**

One of the greatest mature Champagnes I have ever tasted (ever expect to taste) is the 1982 cuvée of this wine. This was a wine so superb and impeccable it even cut through my tendency to babble and enthuse at such times. “Has it all. Many thanks,” was all I could muster. If I’d worn a hat I’d have taken it off. But I don’t. I did try to pull out a clump of my hair, but was restrained by several waiters. There have also been several instances where I have felt the current release of this masterly wine was the single best value in this offering. Like now! This is all ’98; 75% Chardonnay 25% Pinot Noir. Ultra-fine complex nose; mirabelle, narcissus, jade oolong; endless, unfolding, silky, animated, deep and intricate; like butter with jasmine-essence and wild strawberry. Has one small pointed aside which is quickly engulfed by foamy waves of silky richness. Only the ’96 was greater. Look for “Cuvée 1998” on the back label.

There will be no Cuvée Prestige from the 2001 vintage and obviously none from 2003, as there’ll barely be any Chardonnay at all.

KRG-5M **René Geoffroy “Cuvée 1995 de René Geoffroy,” 1995, Magnum, 1/1.5L**

This Millennium cuvée is very pretty, with a silk-screened label by an Alsatian painter named Babinger. It’s an old-vines cuvée from a fine parcel facing due south, mid-slope. 70/30, Pinot Noir/Chardonnay. It was in small casks for eight months, which had been used once for sixteen months, in Meursault. They stirred the lees. The nose starts out a little reductively metallic, but the palate is smoky-mealy and quite vinous; the fragrances resolve into seaside-air, yeasty-mealy hedgflower; the palate has the 1995 spiciness, is intense and sumptuous—and just a little too young; there’s a knot of acidity on the finish and I wouldn’t broach this until 2005! It is slowly knitting together but needs 2-3 years yet. The carriage and the scope are there. And if you liked it then by all means buy it again.

KRG-696 **René Geoffroy Cuvée Autrefois Millésime, 1996** **++**

This was the single best (commercially available!) Champagne I tasted.

But first . . . it will be available in early Fall, and there’s very little of it. They’ll cut us a small *tranche* each year, but if I wuz you I’d order it the minute you read these words.

The wine was pampered like a first-born from harvest to bottle. We tasted three hypothetical versions; one without dosage, one with 9g.l. via concentrated must, and the last with 9.3g.l. with “regular” dosage. Zero-dosage was too savage. The must-dosage was weird. “Regular” was best. Then we tried another blend with 14g.l. dosage (“regular”) which was *even* better. I mean, this was old, old territory for me, tasting various sugar-levels for a high-acid young wine. It suggested, intriguingly, that some Champagnes might be improved—I know this is heresy—with a leecetle more sweetness, *if the base wine is serious*.

This ’96 is 60% Pinot Noir 40% Chardonnay, and it is quite superb. It typifies every quality of this supernal vintage.

henri billiot

ambonnay

Serge Billiot is a very shy fella, but he seems to think a lot, and if you get him going on something he's thought about, he unleashes a torrent of fascinating words. Champagne Billiot is a diamond in this portfolio, and many are the times I feel his N.V. is the equal—if not the better—of *any* non-vintage Champagne.

An interesting side-note. I assumed Champagne was like every place else; if you got off the beaten track you'd find overachievers and bargain-prices. Well you find overachievers aplenty but you rarely find bargains, and here's why. The Echelle des Crus, the system which calculates grape prices, only rewards the growers in higher-rated villages if they sell grapes. The higher the rating, the more they get for their grapes. As my growers almost never sell grapes, their production costs are THE SAME irrespective of the rating of their land. It costs a grower in a grand cru village no

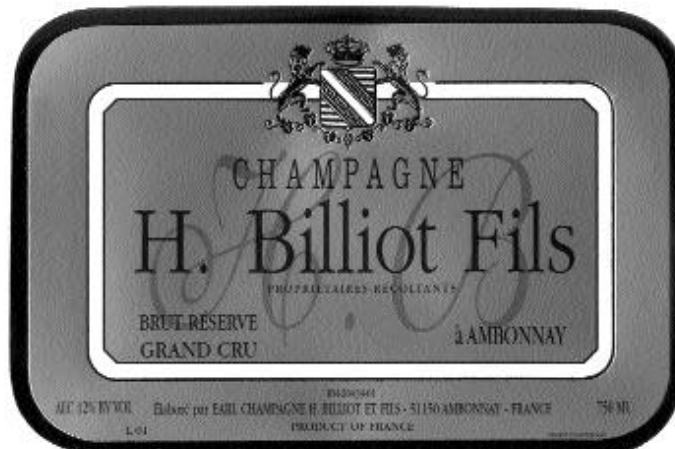
more (or not much more) to produce his wines than it costs a grower out in east b.f. somewhere. Thus my usual logic was stood on its head: the best bargains would actually come from the highest-rated communes. There is a small premium charged by most growers in Grand Cru villages, but it's hardly decisive.

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

In fact Billiot told me something scary; it is evidently possible for a grower to deliver his wine to a co-op, who will perform all the steps by which it becomes Champagne and eventually deliver it back to the grower with *his label*. According to Billiot, one must take care to distinguish those growers who actually do the work themselves. This is the first I've heard of such distressing news. I knew that not all growers performed their own disgorgements—though mine do—but the notion of their very identity being squandered to some technical megalith certainly gives one pause.

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

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 *Ây* is firmer with less overt berried fruit). The Ambonnay signature might be strawberry, forest-floor, sweet-100s. All of which are certainly present in Billiot's wines.



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 Reserve N.V.

One of several instances in this portfolio where you can obtain 100% Grand Cru fizz at an entry-level price. Compare to Taittinger Comtes du Champagne, if you care to! It's three years on the lees and it uses only Cuvée (free-run juice, the highest quality; it is entirely allowed to also use first-press juice in a N.V. Brut, but our hero doesn't). Serge Billiot operates on a solera-system whereby each N.V. blend contains 50% of the previous blend, thus ensuring continuity of character. Theoretically! This is 50% 1999 and 25% each of 1998 and 1997; about 80% Pinot Noir. This is just fantastic Champagne. It's above all the *length* that impresses; there's an extension of the mid-palate that seems to clamp a death-grip on the soft palate, increasing intensity as it goes. Cherry, mirabelle, puff-pastry, fraise de bois.

KBA-4

Henri Billiot Brut Rosé N.V.

In theory this is the same base wine as the Brut Reserve, but such is the demand for Rosé our hero has had to fast-forward a vintage; thus it's 50% 2000 and 25% each 1999 and 1998. He adds ten year old red wine to confer depth. I found the wine deceptively pretty; it smells like a June picnic basket, but on the palate it's silky, gauzy, detailed and sleek, with tertiary notes of leaf-smoke and lavender.

KBA-296

Henri Billiot Brut, 1996

+

What a *blessing* this is still available! It's coral-colored, almost shallot-skin; the nose is reticent at first, almost like ripe tomatoes warmed in the car, but it billows like crazy on the palate into a lurid dream of Pinot Noir; remarkable grip and corpulence, yet elegant. Endlessly rich umami sweetness. There's about 60 more cases available, after which we'll move to 1998.

KBA-3

Henri Billiot "Cuvée Laetitia" (Tête-de-Cuvée)

Billiot is one of the few small vintners to produce a true tête-de-cuvée. Laetitia is his fair daughter, and though he didn't say as much, my guess is he started the "solera" for this wine in 1967, the year she was born. He refreshes the blend each time a parcel of sufficient quality comes along. The wine is magnificent and very reasonably priced for its quality. 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.

jean lallement et fils

verzenay

This was the most exciting visit I made in Champagne. Just two wines, but what wines! Original, complex, distinctive and yummy, all from a young vigneron who's restlessly improving every year. His 2002s are still *en cuve*, as he wants to give them more time before assemblage; they won't be filtered or cold-stabilized, and they were fermented with ambient yeasts. This tiny little winery, producing all of 1700 cases, is showing how things *should be done*.

Let's talk about this Grand Cru Verzenay. 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 playing, 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

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



who wants to make gracious or delicate wines. If it were Burgundy it'd be Nuits-St.-Georges; animal and sauvage.

The 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. They'll be very scarce (150 cases or so, per year). Grab them!

Lallement at a glance:

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

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

This was the third and final visit late on a Sunday afternoon when no one should have been working anyway. It's only two wines, I figured; in and out and on our merry way. Nope.

75% 1999 and 25% 1998, 100% cuvée (no press-juice) and an instantly superb nose, a combination of their hoppy, cidery style and the violet and char of Verzenay—and the class of ultra-fine Champagne. I love the focus and length here; there's originality and class. This soars above the "N.V." echelon, with a sapidity and limpidness that are irresistible.

A final note; when I first imported Lallement four years ago his were among the driest N.V.s I offered, at 7 g.l. Turns out he was prescient, as many of the others have come down to exactly this field, 5-8 grams RS. So Lallement isn't markedly dry anymore.

KLT-2 **Jean Lallement "Réserve" Brut, N.V.** +

All 1998. 5 g.l. RS. There's more spice and mirabelle, more depth; still sleek and bouyant but a wonderful combination of cut, terroir and richness. So full of character—imagine obliterating this in a blend! Homicide. This is everything farmer-fizz can be. Distinctive isn't the half of it; this wine stands for something, in its pipe-smoky avuncular way.

It's clearly the "better" wine, yet when we were offered seconds after the "work" was done, I wanted the "regular" wine. I couldn't resist its sheer tastiness, and by then I was drinkin' for FUN. I didn't want to appraise or admire; I wanted to love.

a. margaine

villers-marmery

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.

The home is quite Belle-Époque, fancy and ornamented, with that colorful French wallpaper that makes you think of generations before you singing in those rooms. The wines, too, can have a frilly opulence, though this seems to be changing. Perhaps if you spend your life in spaces such as these, it becomes your aesthetic template, and your wines, too, take on all that filigree detail and vivid color. I'd like to think so, and not because it's a "pretty" or romantic notion. Perhaps I wish to believe that we are unified beings who integrate all our experiences of beauty so that each is

imbued with all the others.

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 Côtes de Blancs it's just 10 cm of topsoil). Yet Chardonnay evidently came to Villers by accident. Around the turn of the century one grower happened to try it and lo, it was good. Others followed. Now we have something unusual and actually gorgeous.

I tasted another grower's wine from Villers-Marmery and it had that flavor, though without the class of Margaine. The village expresses a new face of Chardonnay and expands the range of possibilities for Champagne.

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



Arnaud Margaine



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 de 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**

A complex assemblage: 55% `00, 14% `99, 15% `98, 6% `97 and 9% `94. (I wonder how many of the Big Brands actually have as intricate a melange of vintages in their non vintage cuvées?) It's 92% Chardonnay and 8% Pinot Noir, disgorged early January 2003, with 7 g.l. RS. It has his wonderful jasmine and honeysuckle fragrance that always makes me think of Nahe Riesling. It's calmer than last year's, and more accepting of the lower dosage; quite vinous and chalky and leaves a long finish of chalk and lemon-blossom; flavors seem as if arranged, as a florist composes a bouquet.

KAM-2 **A. Margaine Brut Rosé, N.V.**

This is 87% Chardonnay from 2000, and 13% Pinot Noir from 1999, with 10 grams per liter of residual sugar; disgorged 3/03. Charming nose, and a slim, curvaceous and lissome palate. It tastes as if you'd steeped a few wild strawberries in a glass of Blanc de Blancs. Transparent and bright; a Rosé for Chardonnay lovers.

KAM-497 **A. Margaine "Special Club," 1997, 6/750ml** +

We're nearing the end of this. Tasted alongside the `98 this shows more earth, wisteria; it's more leafy and has more body, but it's less exquisite. Still, it's awfully satisfying! It recalls the tender, winsome `92. He's pulled the `96 back, sensibly, and doesn't know quite when we'll see it. Meanwhile there's this refined jasminey thing, with an almost Cuis-like *cool*; mirabelle, charmingly delicious and complex, with grace and inner sweetness.

KAM-498 **A. Margaine "Special Club" 1998, 6/750ml** +

There's that fabulous `98 Chardonnay nose! Disgorged 3/03, dosage 8 g.l.; this is just superb Blanc de Blancs; cool, creamy, subtle vanilla, spicy finish. This wonderful Chardonnay will only get better, maturing into a buttery, narcissus-y richness.

KAM-5 **A. Margaine Demi-Sec**

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

This is the same cuvée as the Brut N.V. only with 30 g.l. RS, rather like a Rheingau Kabinett from, say, Erbach; indeed it smells like German wine; we tasted it cellar-cool, and I think it's a frivolity whose purpose is to delight (or to partner foie gras when you're feeling especially decadent); I also love the blossom and talc notes in the empty glass. So: are you **man** enough to like a wine because it's pretty?

why does place-specificity matter?

Once upon a time I sat on a panel discussing spirit-of-place, and a native-American woman to my left said something that lodged on my heart and has not moved since.

The salmon do not only return to the stream, she said, in order to spawn; they also return in order to respond to the prayers and hopes of the people who love them.

That assumption of a unity of living things underlies my own assumption that places have spirit, and wine is one of the ways places convey their spirits to us, and this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we claim that wine is an important part of life then wine must be bound into and among the filaments by which we are connected to all things. Wines which simply exist as products to be sold must take their places alongside all such commodities, soda, breakfast cereal, vacuum-cleaner bags. They can be enjoyable and useful, but they don't *matter*.

Spirit-of-place is a concept that's like really good soap; it's lovely, it feels good when it touches you, and it's slippery as hell.

Big chalk cliffs on a walk in Champagne. I'd been tasting five days and needed a walk to shake out the bubbles. I had one of those accumulated-finish tastes in my mouth that you get when you've been tasting one type of wine for many days. It was September, a week or so till harvest. A little fissure in the hills through which I walked revealed the cliffs, a chalk so white it shrank my retinas. I had a little walking-daydream in which I remembered a producer of California sparkling wine telling me years ago, "You know, we have the exact-same degree-days they have in Épernay," and he was very proud of this, as it showed he had studied the question, done his due diligence, and found the perfect spot to grow grapes for sparkling wine.

I had one of my Moments: in my fantasy I took the hapless chap by the face and pressed him right up against the chalk . . . "But ya don't have *this*, do ya buster!" I cried, mashing his pitiful face against the powdery rock. "It's the SOIL, stupid!" I added. "Now go clean yourself up."

Later, and calmer, I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the land-

scape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still wines are not vivid in the way that young Riesling or Muscat is. They are pastel, aquarelle, restrained, gauzy. Add bubbles and they get frisky. But they aren't born that way. Didier Gimonnet told me he'd been pestered by an English wine writer to produce a tiny amount of super-cuvee from an 80-year old vineyard he owns . . . "I'll never do it," he insisted, "because the wine would be too powerful." But isn't that the point, I thought? Isn't that what wine's supposed to do in our skewered age? Density, concentration, power, flavor that can break bricks with its head! "I think Champagne needs to have a certain transparency in order to be elegant," he continued. And then it came to me.

Here was the Aesthetic to correspond with the gentleness of the Champagne landscape. A *pays* of low hills, forested summits and plain sleepy villages isn't destined to produce powerful wines. We have become so besotted by our demand for **impact** that we've forgotten how to discern *beauty*. And who among us ever tilts a listening ear to hear the hum of the land.

One reason the old world calls to us is that these lands do hum, a low subterranean vibration you feel in your bones. It has existed for centuries before you were born. It isn't meant to be fathomed. It is mysterious, and you are temporary, but hearing it, you are connected to great currents of time. And you are tickled by a sense of significance you cannot quite touch. It cannot be the same here. Each of us Americans is the crown of creation. We invented humanity. Nothing happened before us, or in any case, nothing worth remembering. Memory is a burden in any case. We turn to the world like a playground bully looking to pick a fight. Waddaya got TODAY to amuse me, pal? How ya gonna IMPRESS me?" How many POINTS will this day be worth? Maybe our little slice of earth rumbles with its own hum, but if it does, not many Americans want to know how to hear it, and most are suspicious of the value of listening at all.

Does spirit-of-place reside integrally within the place, or do we read it in? The answer is: YES. We are a part of all we touch, see, taste, experience. If we glean the presence of spirit-of-place, then it's there because we glean it, because we are not separate from the things we experience.

How do we know when WINE is expressing

spirit-of-place? Romantic notions aside, we need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste “flourish” when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those who are persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can “exist” elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

But the same grape will be mute on “foreign” soil. Try planting Riesling where it’s too warm or the soil’s too rich, and it becomes a blatant, fruit-salady wine which most people correctly write off as dull and cloying. Has Chenin Blanc ever made great wine outside Anjou or Touraine? Nebbiolo doesn’t seem to flourish outside Piemonte. I’d even argue that Chardonnay is strictly at home in Chablis and Champagne, since these are the only places where its inherent flavors are complex and interesting; it does easily without the pancake-makeup of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We “hear” these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. Indeed Riesling seems to frolic when it’s at home, it is so playful and expressive. And so we see the lovely phenomenon of detailed and distinct flavors coming from contiguous plots of land. Vineyard flavors are consistent, specific, and repeated year after year, varied only by the weather in which that year’s grapes ripened. Graacher Himmelreich and Graacher Domprobst are useful cases in point. Domprobst lies right above the village, and is uniformly steep and very stony. Mosel slate can either be bluish-grey, battleship grey or rusty-grey according to other trace minerals which may be present. Some soils are more weathered than others. The harder the rock, the harder the wine. (The locals tell you the very best wines grow on *feinerd*, or fine-earth, a slate already pre-crumbled. But such soils often settle at the bottoms of hills, where sun-exposure can be less than optimal. The parameters are complex.) Domprobst always gives thrilling wines, with “signature” flavors of cassis, pecans and granny-apples. I get Domprobst from three different growers, and its particular fingerprint is absolutely consistent whichever the cellar.

Right next door to the southeast is Himmelreich. This is an undulating hillside with sec-

tions of varying steepness. In Domprobst you hit rock six inches below the surface; in Himmelreich it’s often a foot or more. This gives the wines more fruit, and makes them less adamantly fibrous and mineral, more forthcoming, and just a little less superb. If you’re a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don’t have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

You wouldn’t have to sermonize to *these* people about spirit-of-place. They are steeped within that spirit as a condition of life. Their inchoate assumption that Place contains Spirit is part of that spirit.

Let’s step back a little. The Mosel, that limpid little river, flows through a gorge it has created, amidst impossibly steep mountainsides. Its people are conservative and they approach the sweaty work on the steep slopes with humility and good cheer. They are people of the North, accustomed to a bracing and taut way of life. Is it an accident that their wines, too, are bracing and taut? Show me someone who is determined to prove otherwise, and I’ll show you someone who has never been there.

I’ll go further. I believe the Catholic culture of the Mosel produces wines themselves catholically mystic. You see it in the wines when they are mature; sublime, uncanny flavors which seem to arise from a source not-of-this-earth.

I need wines which tell me in no uncertain terms: “I hail from THIS place and this place alone, not from any other place, only here, where I am at home.” Because such wines take us to those places. If we are already there, they cement the reality of our being there. We need to know where we are. If we do not, we are: *lost*.

I don’t have the time to waste on processed wines that taste like they could have come from anywhere, because in fact they come from *nowhere* and have no place to take me. We crave spirit of place because we need to be reassured we belong in the universe. And we want our bearings. We want to know where home is. We can deny or ignore this longing, but we will grow old wondering at the ceaseless scraping nail of anxiety that never lets us feel whole. Or we can claim this world of places.

And when we do, we claim the love that lives in hills and vines, in trees and birds and smells, in buildings and ovens and human eyes, of everything in our world that makes itself at home and calls on us to do the same. The value of wine, beyond the sensual joy it gives us, lies in the things it tells us, not only its own hills and rivers, but the road home.

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.

“Nowhere else did I find such crystal-clear fruit, perfectly poised and with such great depth. The small house of Vilmart & Cie is one of the region’s best kept secrets.”

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

I recall the first time my California distributor held a tasting of my Champagnes. He phoned me immediately afterward to chat about the responses and about his own impressions. I eventually

asked about Vilmart.

“Very controversial,” was his reply. How so? I wanted to know. “Well, the tasters seem to have been split down the middle; half of them thought the Champagnes were magnificent, half thought they were a travesty.” I exulted to hear these words. Yes, I understand completely. Classics or travesties? Easy: they’re both right!

I’m no different from anyone else. There are the things I like and approve of myself for liking (such as poetry and Riesling), and then there are the things I like and disapprove of myself for liking (such as professional wrestling and dirty jokes). I actually kind of like living in the space between how things Should Be and how they Actually Are. I probably Shouldn’t like Vilmart’s Champagnes, since I’m so dubious about oaky wines. The only problem is, I do. A lot. Part of me knows I shouldn’t, but that part of me is a miserable snot, if you want to know the truth. If he were all of me, I’d never have any fun.



Laurent Champs

Oak. What happens is the Champagnes can taste oaky when they’re first disgorged and released. Can taste. Recent bottlings have shown less overt oak. When I ask Laurent if this is deliberate, he simply smiles beatifically at me. He is so urbanely full of aplomb I must remind myself how young he actually is. Whatever oak flavor resides in

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

the young wine does marry and the wines attain the seamless and lovely mealiness of perfect white Burgundy.

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.

It took me reading Tom Steveson’s *Champagne Encyclopedia* to learn that Vilmart farms bio-dynamically. They make no fuss whatsoever about it. Perhaps that is because Laurent Champs wears a tie with Winnie The Pooh on it. Whimsy wins over earnestness every time.

There’s a sense of things shifting at Vilmart. Until 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 NV or, seen from the other angle, the least among the luxury-cuvees.

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.

CUVÉE CRÉATION comes from 25-year vines, same blend as the Coeur de Cuvée but more new wood.

Stevenson is admirably judicious in his assessment of

this domaine. He is cautious in his regard of the new oaky cuvées, yet he lets himself declare “The 1990 Coeur de Cuvée is one of the three greatest Champagnes made in the last 25 years.” (The other two, by the way, are both Krugs.)

Champs will have the last laugh, I think. The series he showed me the past two years was nothing short of staggering, and included several Champagnes as majestic as any I have ever had. Only once did I wish for less oak. 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.

The founder of Vilmart & Cie was a cooper who married into wine. Primary fermentation here is done in large (5000 liter) oak casks. The exceptional cuvees are aged in

smaller casks. “We do wine first, then afterward we do Champagne,” said Laurent.

Do I take this “poor man’s Krug” stuff seriously? As a confirmed *Krugiste*, only a little. The resemblance is superficial, but it is interesting. These are more burnished and sumptuous than Krug, and correspondingly less mysterious and fathomless. I asked Laurent to show me a mature vintage with bottle-age as I needed to see if the sense of wood receded in time. And it certainly does! The wine (a stunningly fine ‘88) was beginning to show some of the sea-deep mysteriousness of Krug’s wines. Still, I don’t think Vilmart is imitating anyone, and it pays to be careful of direct claims to like-quality or style with any other house, let alone the Great One.

I am absolutely certain that you will freak over these Champagnes. Give them some bottle-age and you’ll freak, even more. Drink them when they’re really ready and great chambers won’t be able to contain your freaking.

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.

- KVM-1 **Vilmart & Cie “Cuvée Grand Cellier,” N.V.**
 One-third each ‘99-’98-’97, and as always two-thirds Chardonnay to one-third Pinot Noir (Vilmart uses a strikingly high proportion of Chardonnay for an estate in the Montagne de Reims), and most important, all cuvée; i.e., all free-run juice. Disgorged 11/02. This has what I’ve come to recognize as “the Grand Cellier fragrance” (lobster-stock, brioche and saffron), but the ‘98 Chardonnay makes itself happily felt; there’s a new note of orange-blossom and mimosa, and in all it’s a graceful, transparent and elegant Grand Cellier. Please bear in mind this is NOT the “N.V. Brut” of Vilmart. (There is one but I don’t select it.) This is in fact the first among the deluxe cuvées, and priced accordingly.

- KVM-3 **Vilmart & Cie “Cuvée Rubis,” N.V.**
 This is 90% Pinot Noir, by saignee, 10% Chardonnay. 60% 1998 and 40% 1997. A lovely pure Pinot Noir nose, true “bouquet” as in fresh flowers; the palate is surprisingly firm and spicy, with smoky, almost sexual notes; air-cured and sweet like prosciutto di San Daniele. VERY LIMITED!

- KVM-397 **Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier Rubis,” 1997** +
While it lasts! Folks, this is some serious pink. 60% Pinot Noir; it has lovely density and salty complexity; thick vinosity but not massive; it’s decked out and memorable. I’ll need a lot of convincing there’s better rosé on the market, *including* Krug and Bollinger and Gosset. It’s creamy yet crisp, with notes of prosciutto and violets.

KVM-697 **Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Grand Cellier d'Or," 1997**

80-20 Chardonnay-Pinot Noir; oh what a lovely nose, exotic, fine-fruited; oak is subtle; cantaloupe, Parma ham, scrambled eggs, saffron, peach confiture, violets and wisteria; complex and lively, concentrated yet light on its feet. This has filled out wonderfully in the past year.

KVM-698 **Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Grand Cellier d'Or," 1998** +

To be released later in 2003, and as you might expect it's a masterpiece. Peach and mirabelle confiture; charming and exquisite, lyric and wry. Jasmine, freesie, subtle oak. You'll want to get divorced and get married *again* just so you can serve this at your wedding.

KVM-496 **Vilmart & Cie "Cuvée Création," 1996** +

At last, the '96. Combines Vilmart's smoky woody notes with the lunar, silvery '96 character, and the firmness really makes it sing. It's long, and willful; please give it the many years it craves. Meursault mit mousse!

KVM-597 **Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée," 1997**

Available late in 2003, there's more middle depth, more power and torque than the Grand Cellier d'Or; it's full of a kind of sandalwood malty caramel note from the casks, but they alone cannot impart the power of *fruit* here, the intensity and drive. This '97 recalls the fine '92, but with less oak and more focus.

KVM-592M **Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée," 1992 Magnums, 6/1.5L**

If you remember this wine from bottles, one taste of this and you will grok the reason for Magnums! This is wonderful; porcini sauteed in bacon in a reduction with a tiny bit of chestnut liqueur and Calvados; amazing concentration for this vintage; getting scallopy (drenched in brown-butter!) and showing sensational length, saltiness; as gelatinous as a veal shank. All I can think of is food; it's a 3-course dinner in a glass.



1. aubry fils

jouy-les-reims

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 at Vin di Vino (who distribute my wines in IL) thought to put a *blind* flight at the end of a big fizz-o-rama last 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). "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 starting 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



The Brothers Aubry

Arbanne, Petit Meslier and Fromenteau, still on the books as "approved" but barely grown anywhere else. The Fromenteau is a synonym for Pinot Gris, but if any ampelographers out there want to clue me in to Arbanne and Meslier, I'm ready.

This all creates some chatter, of course, as everyone glances over their shoulders at Aubry to see if they're on

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

to something. "If the varieties were planted in the first place, our forbears must have had reasons," they say. 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.

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 (I'm never quite sure which of them is who) 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 new 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 Brut, N.V.

60% Pinot Meunier—"Don't call it Pinot Meunier," they say, "but simply Meunier;" this I henceforth do—and 20% each Chardonnay and Point Noir. It's 70% '00 with the balance '99 and '98. They give you this after the more powerful vintage wines; I imagine because it's less dry and/or it has a tonic effect on the taster. Disgorged 4/03, it smells like fine British oat crackers! Aubrys make a strong case for taking Meunier seriously, and this wine stands with the Non Vintage from Jose Michel, Gaston Chiquet and René Geoffroy as the finest "basic" Meunier Champagnes I know. Meunier is resistant to frost and thus it's often planted in marginal vineyards and therefore despised! Treat it well and it responds with all those pretty flavors of pumpernickel and sorghum this wine has. It's playful and lithe, like a dancer. It flies on a giddy trapeze of fruit, at once both tingly and velouté, almost starchy. The dosage is 10 grams per liter.

KAB-397

L. Aubry "Aubry de Humbert," 1997

+

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 coeur du cuvee. An imposing, weighty, regal nose; this is a classic, swank Champagne, truly luxurious, and it tastes expensive (more expensive than it is, in fact!), all butter and mimosa, really in-your-face; sweet grain, malt, apple-butter; a Cadillac kinda fizz, all old money and custom-tailored suits. In contrast to the incredible '96 and its Hugo Boss insouciance . . .

Later this year we'll move into a hugely promising '98; no notes because I tasted it sur lattes without its final dosage.

KAB-698

L. Aubry "Cuvée Nicolas François Aubry" Sablé Rosé, 1998

"This draws its spirit from the characteristics of 18th century Champagne," say Aubrys. It is less than the usual pressure, i.e. what used to be called a "Cremant" (like Gimonet's "Gastronome"); there isn't another wine even faintly like this in all of Champagne. It has a stop-you-in-your-tracks fragrance: sea-air, shells, mussels, and again simply amazing fruit. This 1998 has wonderful oyster grip, and made me think of strawberries, pork jus, kumamotos, even tomatoes. There isn't much left, and the promising 2000 won't be released till January 2004. 80% Meunier, 20% Chardonnay.

KAB-798

L. Aubry "Tradition Ivoire et Ebene," 1998

As always 70% Chardonnay and 30% Meunier; this won't be released until Fall 2003, which is good as it's mighty tight and salty just now (May '03). The nose whipsaws between Meunier rye-toast and Chardonnay apple-butter, and there's lots of lovely fruit on the front-palate. Just needs time.

KAB-596 **L. Aubry Blanc de Blancs, 1996**

This is the final vintage of Aubry Blanc de Blancs; hereafter all their Chardonnay will be dispersed into other cuvées. Pierre Aubry was concerned this '96 is being released too soon; it has acids around 7g.l. (high for Champagne) and pH of 3.0, and I agreed its scalpel-cut and fluorescent brilliance would appeal hugely to the “ultra-violet” palate; the wine is indeed *marked* by acidity but not at all bitter, rather w bracing sharpness and saline brilliance.

KAB-898 **L. Aubry “La Nombre d’Or Sablet Blanc des Blancs,” 1998** +

Blanc *des* Blancs is not a typo: this is 22% Arbanne, 37% Petit Meslier and 41% Chardonnay, with 4 (rather than the usual 6) atmospheres of pressure. It is compelling wine, with an amazing non-vinous host of fragrances; potpourri, verdant; the sweet-herbal palate is creamy with a lovely mineral-salty wash leading to jasmine and peach-blossom and lavender. I had to swallow this critter just to get at its improbable complexities. If you could somehow scent a hotel room with this you’d never go out.

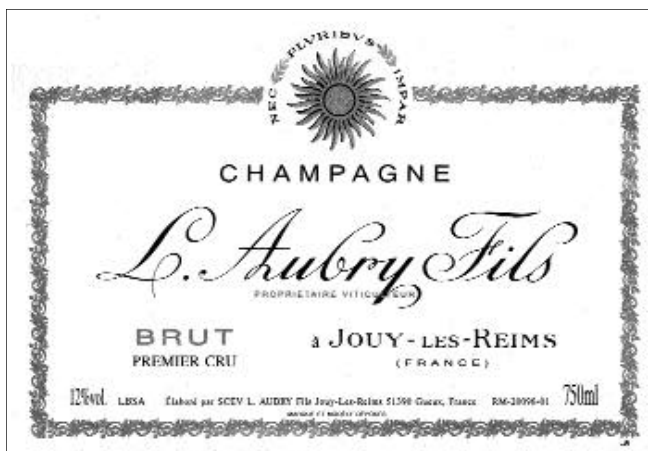
It’ll be available Fall 2003, and the *total* production is 310 cases, less the one or two I plan to buy . . .

KAB-498 **L. Aubry “La Nombre d’Or Campanae Veteres Vites,” 1998**

This is one of two cuvées from the arcane varieties; Arbanne, (10%; it gives the “herbs and honey” flavors), Petit Meslier (30%; it gives the “orange and lemon” flavors), Fromenteau! (30%; it gives the Pinot Gris flavors, I guess!), plus 15% Meunier, 10% Chardonnay and 5% Pinot Noir! It means “the old vines of the countryside” (thanks Pierre!) Aubrys are nearly the last to have them, or the first to reintroduce them. This is all Annick Goutal powder-puffy, or alternately a stroll through a flowering orchard on a damp evening. The Pinot Gris is prominent. The palate has the shy reserve of Aubry’s ‘98s—the wine needs a couple years, so drink the ‘97 in the meantime. All that’s so lavish on the nose here is still in bud on the palate, so be a grownup; buy it and *wait*. Anyone who loves Champagne-hell, anyone remotely curious about WINE—owes it to him/herself to slurp into this 1-of-a-kind wonder.

KAB-2 **L. Aubry Rosé**

I tasted a pre-release sample with no dosage, based on 2001, 2000 and 1999; it has good fruit and lots of potential. 60% red and 40% Chardonnay, by blending, not *saignee*, though the red wine used in the blend is mature and ages in used barriques. Available Fall 2003.



chartogne-taillet

merfy

MONTAGNE DE REIMS AREA

I think I should have made friends with Elisabeth and Phillip Chartogne years ago, because the wines seem to continually improve since I've known them. It must be some kind of osmosis. It certainly isn't any wisdom or skill I have imparted; in fact all we seem to do when we're together is eat, drink and discuss the merits of various snack-crackers. But I have become so beatific through years of drinking fine fizz that I must transmit a roseate glow. Whatever it is, man these are good Champagnes!

I once had a fax from a customer who teaches wine classes; he'd completed a class in sparkling wine concluding with a blind tasting. Four sparkling wines were poured, and the group was told that at least one was Champagne. Well, one wine was identified as the Champagne, and was described

as everything one could ever desire from Champagne. Very nice! It was Chartogne's Cuvée Sainte-Anne N.V. Brut. One of the other three wines was also Champagne, and not just any Champagne: Dom Perignon. Not only was it not recognized AS Champagne, it was deemed vastly inferior to the Chartogne.

Merfy is off the beaten track, away from the Montagne de Reims, the Marne Valley and the Côte des Blancs. yet it's virtually in the shadow of the city of Reims. Europe is so improbable to American eyes. From many

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



Elisabeth and Philippe Chartogne

lookout points on the north slope of the Montagne de Reims, you can see the city and its famous cathedral rising abruptly from the open plain. The line between country and city is defined in a way impossible here with our car-worship and uncontained sprawl. Chartogne's house is fifteen minutes from downtown Reims, yet it's in the middle of a small village that feels a hundred miles from nowhere. In countries with the population densities of northern Europe, agricultural land must be sacrosanct.

Elisabeth told me something of the tradition of wine growing in Merfy, but I'm matter-of-fact about such things. If vines grow there, then there must be a reason. I don't know where Merfy might be on the Echelle de Crus (the classification of each village by which the

prices for grapes are determined) but I do like this house. It's 12 ha. from which about 75,000 bottles of Champagne emerge each year, the majority of which is exported throughout Europe.

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.



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 cuvees have shown a silken complexity that's consistent enough to infer the design of a knowing hand.

- KCT-1 **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Sainte-Anne," N.V.**
- KCT-1H **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Sainte-Anne," N.V., 12/375ml**
- KCT-1M **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Sainte-Anne," N.V., 6/1.5L**
 90% '99, 10% '98. Disgorged 2/03, i.e. three years on the lees. 45% each Chardonnay and Pinot Noir; the balance Meunier. Remarkably fragrant; all the signature notes of sauteed apple, yellow beets and butter; sleek, long, focused, snappy and malic; cool, structured and *classy*, feline, effortless; the best Ste. Anne yet – and yes, I know I say that every year; the wine gets *better* every year. A big-city, cosmopolitan Champagne.

- KCT-4 **Chartogne-Taillet Blanc de Blancs**
 100% 1998; disgorged 2/03. Quince, mirabelle and tilleul on the nose; fine focus and minerality; it's 'cool' and a little aloof, but classy, with great finesse. 6-9 more months on the cork should fill it out.

- KCT-396 **Chartogne-Taillet Millésime Vieille Vignes, 1996** +
 Mostly Pinot Noir, and the first time I tasted it I swear it smelled like Pommard. A few months ago in Chicago after a DI tasting we all repaired to a bar and those who drink beer drank beer, and I drank Champagne. Someone brought me two glasses and asked me to appraise them. One I liked, very much, and the other I found coarse and fruitless. The coarse and fruitless one was 1993 Grande Dame; the likeable one was '96 Chartogne-Taillet. This splendid '96 also has a kind of Billiot-tone, as if there's too much flavor for the wine to *bear*. The pointillist sleekness is striking given the amplitude of fruit. And there's that shimmery juicy quicksilver wash on the finish, a kind of phosphorescent minerality that's the calling-card of great '96s.

 As always, a STANDOUT VALUE.

- KCT-2 **Chartogne-Taillet "Cuvée Fiacre Taillet," (1996)** ++
 This is about the swankest Champagne I offer. I loved a quote Chartognes gave to Tom Stevenson, who remarked upon the extraordinary polish of this wine: "If you keep good stocks of reserve wine, there's no reason why grower Champagne has to taste rustic." No reason indeed! Because 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. All 1996! 100% malolactic. Outstanding 1996 nose, metal, hawthorne, wet straw, apple-blossom; incredibly zingy and penetrating; flavors cut with a sushi-knife. Mass and length, but these 1996s are the opposite of "seductive." They are All Business. Lay this down for at least two years and you will discover you own a masterpiece. Indeed the latest disgorgement (2/03) tasted *younger* than I recall.

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.

1995 is a lavishly juicy rich vintage, excellent for Chardonnay, merely good for red grapes. The wines are satisfying and generous.

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 more than half-way 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: "'96 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.

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 Cote Des Blancs they are often splendidly mineral. In rare instances they can seem cloddish.

1998 was the great surprise of the past few weeks. Simply, I have never seen such gorgeous fruit from Chardonnay in Champagne. I strongly urge you to SNAP UP any and all Chardonnay-based Champagnes from this remarkable vintage. You will never taste anything like them.

The first inkling was Chiquet's supernal Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ, which I thought was something fabulous Nicolas Chiquet did (I asked him what it was and he replied "Nothing; we had good weather." Now I understand.). Larmandier's Cramant cuvée was another harbinger, and now Milan's Terres de Noël comes along and breaks my damn heart.

I have less of a sense about the red-grape-based Champagnes; no one's talking about the Pinot Noirs of '98. It's a cool style of vintage (in contrast to the warm style of '97) and I suspect many '98s will be underrated. But the sheer beauty of fruit of the Chardonnays is nearly beyond belief.

1999 is a vintage of ruddy good health without complications; it sleeps the sleep of the just and has exemplary digestion. It's agreeable and cooperative. These are early days yet for a full appraisal, but some 99s were just-plain-tasty and others were just plain. We'll see.

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.

