

SAVEUR

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White Star

Blanc de blancs champagne is elegant and varied

BY MICHAEL STEINBERGER

CHAMPAGNES labeled blanc de blancs—literally, “white of whites”—are made exclusively from chardonnay grapes. Most champagne is blended from three varieties—chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier (the latter two red)—and the Champenois have long claimed that the singular greatness of their sparkling wines may be attributed in no small part to the use of all three. For that reason, some locals take a dim view of blanc de blancs as a genre, considering it a betrayal of their winemaking heritage.

How these complex, slow-aging but long-lasting wines could offend anyone’s sensibilities, though, is a mystery to me. Blanc de blancs champagne is often described as white burgundy with bubbles. In particular, many blanc de blancs show the same hazelnut aroma that is a dead giveaway of a good meursault. But the burgundy analogy tends to be used a little too liberally; some blanc de blancs are more suggestive of Mosel rieslings—and others are simply sui generis.

The best blanc de blancs is produced from grapes grown in the Côte des Blancs, south of Épernay, and specifically in vineyards between the villages of Cramant and Le Mesnil-sur-Oger. The latter town is home to Clos du Mesnil, Champagne’s most celebrated vineyard and one of the most

renowned in France; it is owned by the house of Krug, which uses its grapes to produce perhaps the most coveted (and expensive) blanc de blancs of all.

Because chardonnay accounts for only about a quarter of the grapes grown in Champagne (and because much of that chardonnay goes into blended champagnes), blanc de blancs is made in limited quantities. That’s the bad news. The good news is that the quality of blanc de blancs is generally excellent and that fine examples can be found at a variety of prices. Some are dazzlingly expensive, but some grower blanc de blancs—wines made by individual farmers who prefer to bottle their own bubbly rather than sell their grapes to the big houses—offer excellent value.



Tasting Notes

These are some of our favorites among the many blanc de blancs champagnes now available. (See THE PANTRY, page 103, for sources.)

DIEBOLT-VALLOIS FLEUR DE PASSION 1999 (\$84). An interesting if slightly muted nose, with candied pineapple, butter, and smoke. Grapefruit and brioche flavors on the palate, with a fairly pronounced sweetness.

PASCAL DOQUET 1997 (\$60). A powerful nose redolent of lemon curd, quince, walnuts, chalk, and stone. Full-bodied and muscular but nicely balanced. Gently spicy across the palate, with lingering nut and lemon flavors.

★ **PIERRE GIMONNET SPECIAL CLUB BRUT 98 PREMIER CRU CHARDONNAY (\$62).** A subtle nose of lime, chalk, hazelnuts, and butter, with a mineral edge. White and citrus fruit flavors dominate on the palate.

KPG-498 92pts WS

★ **CHARLES HEIDSIECK BLANC DES MILLÉNAIRES 1995 (\$90).** Like a young Mosel riesling pumped full of bubbles. Lemon, baked apple, and salty minerals on the nose; a mosel-like sweet-and-sour aspect on the palate.

★ **KRUG CLOS DU MESNIL 1992 (\$586).** A gorgeous, kaleidoscopic nose, offering notes of buttered toast, hazelnuts, mango, coffee, coconut, and honey. Lush and creamy in the mouth, with green apple and mango flavors. Distinctly nutty on the finish. A great champagne.

★ **LARMANDIER-BERNIER 1998 (\$63).** A very fine mousse and a bouquet to match, with aromas of ginger, strawberry, lemon cream, and chamomile. Quite burly in the mouth, with flavors of green apple and nuts.

KLR-798 91pts WS

★ **A. MARGAINE SPECIAL CLUB BRUT 1998 (\$63).** A quiet, thoroughly charming champagne. Pineapple, lemon, nutmeg, and biscuit aromas, with an oyster shell note. Medium-bodied, warm, ripe, and elegant in the mouth.

KAM-498 91pts IWC

★ **JEAN MILAN SPÉCIALE NV (\$47).** An attractive bouquet redolent of nutmeg, lime, flowers, stones, and chalk. Crisp and fresh on the palate, with a vigor bordering on exuberance. A strong pineapple note at the end.

KML-2 90pts WS

★ **PIERRE MONCUIT GRAND CRU 1996 (\$56).** Inviting aromas of grapefruit, baked apple, and nutmeg. Powerful but refined on the palate. Terrific depth and acidity and a long, pleasingly citric finish. Excellent.

★ **PHILIPPONNAT GRAND BLANC 1996 (\$65).** Lemon cream, peach, fresh honey, and floral aromas, along with a distinct woody-mushroom note. Creamy, slightly spicy fruit in the mouth. Quite nice.

★ **SALON LE MESNIL 1995 (\$242).** Brioche, hazelnuts, mineral, and a come-hither apricot note on the nose. Full-bodied and mouth-filling, with citrus and mineral flavors coating the palate. Rich and a little rough-hewn, but chalk that up to youth. Slightly honeyed at the end.

★ **TAITTINGER COMTES DE CHAMPAGNE 1996 (\$140).** An ethereal bouquet of lime, peach, flowers, hazelnuts, and a hint of oil—the Exxon kind. Liquid cashmere in the mouth—seamless and wondrously elegant wine yet not lacking in heft. Spectacular. —M.S.



MICHAEL SKURNIK WINES 575 UNDERHILL BLVD. SUITE 216 SYOSSET, NY 11791
561.677.9300 WWW.SKURNIKWINES.COM