

2014 TERRY THEISE
ESTATE SELECTIONS
CHAMPAGNE





Theise Manifesto

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

The whole of any wine must always
be more than the sum of its parts.

Distinctiveness is more important
than conventional prettiness.

Soul is more important than anything,
and soul is expressed as a trinity of family,
soil and artisanality.

Lots of wines, many of them good wines,
let you taste the noise. But only the best let
you taste the silence.



Why Drink Grower Champagne?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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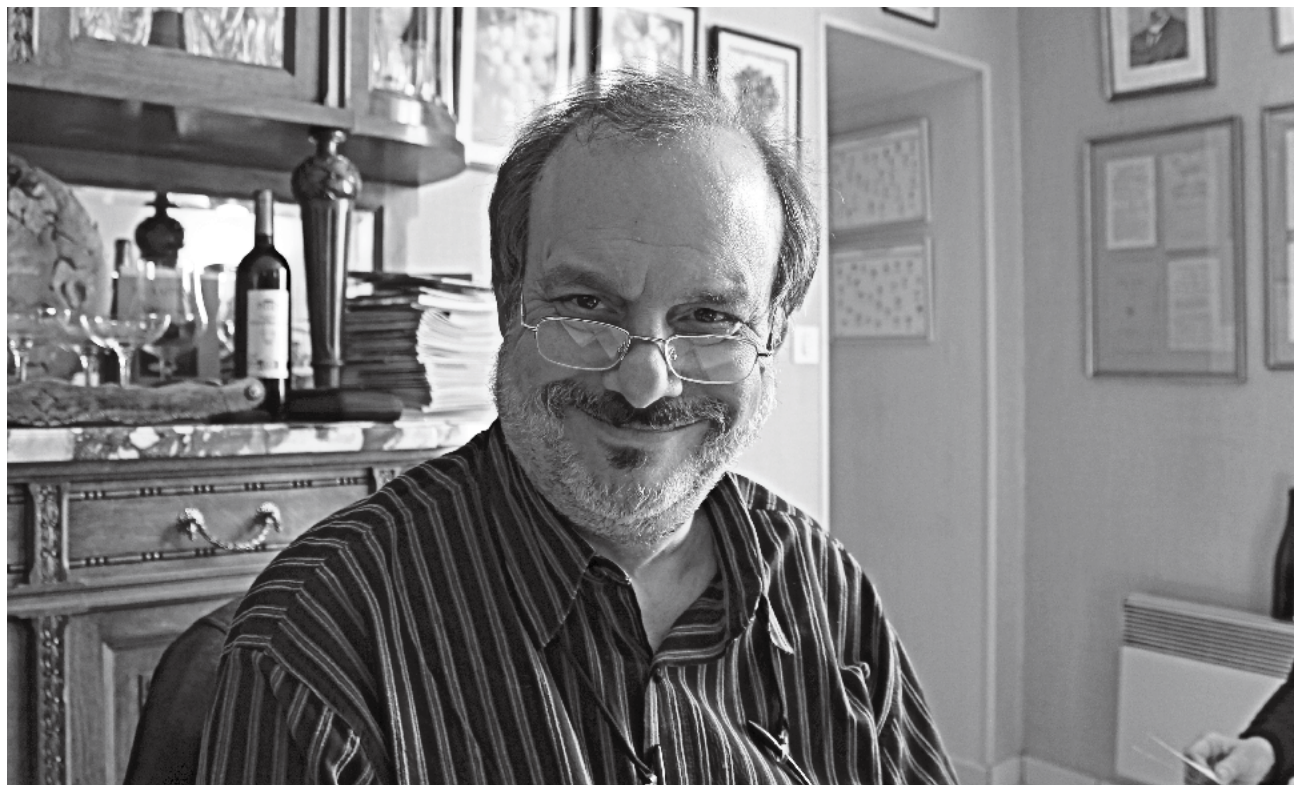
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Introduction

We're now entering year 17 in the farmer-fizz-biz, and the numbers tell an interesting story. When I began there were 33 RM Champagnes imported into the United States. In 2013 there were 231.



Way back at the inception, when everybody thought that “no-name” Champagnes would never sell, their market share was a piddling 0.62%. As good as zilch. In 2013 that share had grown to almost 5%, a number I have long held as a goal.

I'll preface it by saying that more and more good growers emerge all the time. The success of the early wave gave courage to those who came after, who might have gone on selling grapes to the *Negoçiants* or the co-ops, but who saw how hip it was to make your own terroir-imprinted Champagne. So, there are a lot of good growers. But, are there enough to sustain a market share of 5% or higher *without* diluting quality? Here I'm not so sure. You should feel free to run these numbers past any impartial observer you might wish (Liem and Baker spring to mind) if you suspect me of being self-serving, but I doubt very much there are more than around fifty growers whom one could credibly call superb. There are probably another hundred or so who are, let's say, very good. But beyond those, I think there's some middling RM Champagnes imported by merchants who wanted to

get in on the action, but all the best growers were spoken for. Taste honestly, gentle reader, and don't settle for third-best, because you don't have to.

In the top range you'll find a treasure of different styles and expressions. But again I'll caution you; some vendors will try to enlist you in a jihad over some item of controversy they've ginned up, and this is a waste of your time and a signal they can't sell their wine on its merits. (This is a pity, as the wines are usually excellent and don't need a layer of dogma to be sold.) For that matter you'll find an ecumenical range of styles within this portfolio, not because I'm a something-for-everyone kinda guy, but because I saw no point in redundancy. I've walked away from some very good growers because their wines were too similar to things I already had. So I urge you to be suspicious of *all* doctrine, because the only sensible doctrine is to avoid them altogether.

But why not aim for more than five percent? Why not indeed? I don't have any firm notion of what the upward limit could possibly be, but I have a concern I'll share with you.

Journalists are talking to every cool grower. The cool growers are talking to one another, which believe me wasn't always the case. The increased attention being paid to every aspect of Champagne has had a (mostly) favorable effect on the négociants also, who are less secretive and who even sometimes say things that aren't self-serving bullshit. If you look only at the leading American wine writers paying careful attention to Champagne, you have to agree the status of coverage has grown exponentially higher. Take a bow Josh, Brad, Antonio and Peter.

I've generally spent this intro text considering all the ways it's whimsical and wry to tweak the Big Houses for all their silly behaviors (and mediocre wines), but I think I'll ease off a little. I'm grateful that business is so good. My growers and I are making better friends with each passing year. Most of you have well understood why it's nicer to buy Champagne from families than from factories.

Just two little points to make, though. There's still a few stubborn holdouts who persist in repeating the argument that all Négociants are not evil and not all of their Champagnes are awful. Then they get all populist and claim we should drink whatever we think tastes good. I find such an argument staggeringly obtuse, and seriously unnecessary.

If you want to consider the Big Houses based on how they *behave*, i.e., how they ration information, how they treat their customers, how they treat the growers they buy grapes from, you'll quickly learn that most of them are... um, not very nice. Whenever I have a spasm of indulgent tolerance, people who know the region better than I do are quick to remind me how silly it is to cut these guys any slack at all. Apart from which, to them I'm just a flea.

Most of the Big Brand Champagne is ordinary mediocre wine. It's industrial, and tastes like it. It is, arguably, "reliable" and there's something to be said for that. I admire how decent some of the wines are, considering how and in what volume they are made. But insisting on drinking them because you should "drink what you like" is a waste of time and money.

It goes without saying that honorable exceptions exist. All of us know who they are. And it *should* go without saying that I'm talking about the basic NVs here; the Tête-de-Cuvées are almost always excellent and sometimes superb, and cost about 70-100% more than they're worth.

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. 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.

All of this is entirely to be expected, but it does I think compel us to ask: do we want to buy wine from these guys? Especially wine with so much expectation attached! "Champagne" carries a charge, and even those of us who argue for its everyday usefulness at-table must admit that, emotionally, Champagne is used differently than other wines. We invest our hearts in it, whether we're celebrating or consoling, and in those moments do we really want to be observing these solemn or glad occasions with something a suit-with-a-spreadsheet designed?

TWO THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW

Most of you do know that Champagne villages are classified on a so-called "scale of growths," and that 17 of these villages are Grand Cru, after which there's a slew of Premier Crus and then a very big glom of just-plain Crus. Many of you know, or have wondered, how they could classify entire communes, when any given commune's vineyards are bound to vary in quality. To use a blatant example, the least of (GC) Cramant isn't as good as the best of (PC) Cuis, its neighbor. The natural question becomes, why isn't there a classification of actual vineyards within communes, so that the best of them can be recognized?

The usual answer is, everybody knows which are the best parcels and sites, but it would be politically impossible to enact such a granular classification, because all it could do is harm. That is, think of a grower who trades on his "Grand Cru" Cramant, whereas in fact he has the lowest-quality land in the commune. If his parcels are suddenly downgraded to Premier Cru, it's tantamount to lifting Euros from his pocket. Growers would take to the streets with pitchforks. So, it is argued; such a classification is impossible.

Except, it already exists. And is used. Just not shared with the likes of us.

Each commune has land in categories A, B and C, and the hierarchy is taken into account for all manner of vineyard work *including* the issuing of the official permission to start harvesting. It is based largely on microclimate. These things have been studied, observed, and are known. So JB Geoffroy might receive permission to pick his (warmest) category-A vineyards in Cumieres 3-4 days before he's allowed to start in the category-B vineyards, and Cumieres *in general* will begin earlier than, say, Damery or Dizy.

Ambient warmth isn't everything. There are geological factors in play, as well as exposure, and it could well be that a grower's cooler vineyard—say an east-facing parcel—will give his best wine because of a longer hang-time.

Degree-days alone are a blunt object. Yet! I think this information should be shared with the public, because I think the more we know about where wines come from, the more deeply we will understand them.

Another thing we don't talk about enough is this:

When Didier Gimonnet told me "We waited to pick and then had to pick all at once because the grapes were ripening immediately; we actually picked some lots with 10.5 and even 11% potential alcohol," my first question was how you keep the eventual Champagne within the typical 12.5% alc after the second fermentation. It turns out there are two ways. One is, you manipulate the second fermentation by the amount of sugar in the *liqueur de tirage*, and the other is you manipulate residual sugar. In short, you will create less supplemental alcohol by using less sugar in your sugar-yeast mixture. Which in turn means you won't necessarily have the six atmospheres of pressure one presumes are present in normal Champagne. In fact this is far from uniform, and one grower told me, "You can find everything from four and a half to six and all points between."

Something we hear less often is that not all secondary fermentations complete to absolute dryness. I don't suppose it happens a lot, but I'm also certain there are Champagnes *with residual sugar* in the base wine before dosage is added. It's worth remembering when you listen to the dry or anti-dosage purists. Most of them of course mean exactly what they say, but we should at least bear in mind, when someone says how dry his wine is because he uses little or no dosage, that his base wine may have had a dollop of its own sweetness.

I opened my existing Champagne catalogue and saw I'd written a desperate note: "*Must* we talk about residual sugar any more?" This is the inevitable downside of the Champenoise entering the current of trendiness.

Last year was the year-of-the-dosage-trials, as growers let me further in to their process. I am touched by the collegial gestures of trust. I also have strong opinions on this question, or better said, one strong opinion. It's simple and seems self-evident, until you contemplate how infrequently it is applied.

Wine should be balanced. Different wines are balanced with different amounts of sweetness, and a few are balanced with little or none. The 4 g/L of a Lallement Rosé would simply not work with Margaine's Rosé, but it's perfect for Lallement. Other examples abound.

But why does this even need to be said? This is kindergarten wine understanding! But, sadly, a common-sense proposition like this one is mortally threatened by an obtuse and dogmatic insistence that drier is always preferable. And this idea is just stupid enough to be speciously seductive, and a lot of otherwise sharp cookies were seduced.

So I was hugely encouraged when two growers shared their dosage trials with me, because these were two who seemed at risk of slipping down the rabbit hole whereby dryness was *forced* into their wines as proof of purity. I

watched them return to reasonableness, and was happy.

Less dosage is not always better. It doesn't make your wine more honest, more pure, more transparent, more sophisticated or more honorable; it just makes it more dry. Among the many dubious things we owe the big Champagne houses is that they've poisoned the well by making their commercial bottlings treacly-sweet in order to mask the deficiencies of the base product, or because they presume their "market" wants the wines sweet. And so we all believe that less sweetness is more desirable. First we let them dupe us, and then we duped ourselves.

Less sweetness is more desirable under two and only two circumstances in Champagne: one, the wine tastes better that way; two, the drinker happens to honestly dislike sweetness in his Champagne. (We'll leave aside for the moment the sweetness he accepts in myriad other things...). You cannot determine these things *until you taste*. Can you imagine someone saying "I ate a lot of Fritos when I was a kid, and now I just can't stand the taste of salt in *anything*." Somehow it's only sugar that inspires these theological disputes.

Tom Stevenson recently published an article in *World of Fine Wine* in which he said—someone finally said—that Champagnes with less than 6 grams per liter (g/L) wouldn't age well. I'll revisit this subject when I write about the many shades of "Brut" a little later on.

There's a fragile balance of power in Champagne. The Houses need the growers to supply them grapes. Many are abjectly dependent on their network of cute little paysannes. The growers claim to need the Houses to act as flagships, furthering the good image of Champagne throughout the world. Publicly, the Houses put on a tolerant face as regards the growers. Privately... well, you see.

One grower with whom we discussed the "ethics" of marketing grower Champagne said, "We ourselves are really not in a position to criticize the Grandes Marques, because they break new ground for Champagne, open new markets, and eventually we get our small share of it too. We'd never have the ability to do that on our own; we're too small. Look, we taste around, we know *very* well how mediocre their wines are, but we need them."

"It sounds like you also need us," I observed, "to fight this fight for you, to say the things you know but can't say."

"Exactly," came the reply.

Champagne Fleury was threatened with a lawsuit because the label on their Rosé bore a certain resemblance to Perrier-Jouët's Fleur de Champagne (never mind the Fleury was a Rosé, in a clear bottle, unlikely to be mistaken for PJ's wine except by the color-blind), thus invoking trademark protection issues, PJ's having effectively trademarked flowers apparently. I can only imagine how threatened they must have felt by the 100 cases of Fleury Rosé rampaging through the American market. But still, zero tolerance and all that. Around the same time I learned that Clicquot was suing a sparkling wine producer in *Tasmania* who had the temerity to use a yellow label on their fizz. Perhaps the Houses should

collectively trademark VOWELS, so that the growers would have to call their wine “Chmpgn.”

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “BRUT?”

One thing it isn't is drier than it used to be, despite those news reports that “Brut” would be confined to 12 g/L or below, instead of the 15 g/L which was formerly allowed. Well, that is not exactly true; it's *truthy*, as Mr. Colbert would say. Because this fierce new rule permits a tolerance of 1.5 g/L in either direction. “Nothing's going to change,” is what I was told again and again.

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!”

The *dosage* liqueur is one of two things: either wine (of varying type) to which cane or beet sugar is added, or concentrated grape must. And naturally, growers' opinions differ!

Insofar as all the must-concentrate seems to hail from the Languedoc, I have some doubts. Uneasy is the mouth which speaks of *terroir* in one breath and describes adding Languedoc must concentrate to Champagne in the next. Even more uneasy is the mouth intoning its organic credentials while adding chemically produced Languedoc must concentrate to his wine instead of the organic alternative: sugar (organically grown) dissolved in his own organic wine. What you have to probe to learn is that must concentrate is much easier to work with than conventional dosage liqueur. Easier means cheaper, and an earlier end to the workday.

A basic conceptual error is to consider *dosage* exclusively as a corrective device by which an inadequate wine is made viable. Thus you hear growers say “My wine is so good it doesn't *need* a high dosage.” What further complicates the issue is that *sometimes this is true*. But sometimes not! For me, the idea that *dosage* is a necessary evil to be minimized at all costs is short-sighted. It also distorts the grower's view of his wine, because he is only seeing through a prism of sugar. *Dosage* should be adjusted according to a wine's beauty and to its aging capacity.

CHAMPAGNE AT THE TABLE

I warn you now: if we do a wine dinner I won't allow Champagne to be used as an aperitif and ignored

thereafter. Not when it's one of the easiest slamdunk 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 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.

THE 2005 PROBLEM

As recently as two years ago, I felt fairly confident that many 2005 Champagnes suffered from an off-aroma and flavor resembling rotten potatoes or moldering mushrooms. Among all the various explanations offered as to the possible cause, a geosmin infection seemed most plausible. The problem, at first denied, was now being discussed openly, and the CIVC (and credit where it's due, many of the big houses) were spending money trying to get to the root cause.

With the passing of a year, I'm more in the dark than ever. Some of the affected wines have actually *shed* the yuckies and are now tasting clean. I have no idea how this could have happened. If it is random bottle variation, then why?? If it is some *thing* that passed into and then through the wines, then what?? And how?

Peter Liem reports having experienced the phenomenon with several 2006s—which I have not. But if this is true, then what does it suggest? Let's remember, a starchy aroma and also the scent of fresh button mushrooms are typical for many Champagnes. Is 2005 aberrant only by having exaggerated these ordinary things? Or is it alien? Again, we don't know, I don't know, and the only sensible thing to do as a professional and a human being is to keep tasting, let all hypotheses be provisional and malleable, and admit the limits to one's knowledge.

Whether one likes 2005, assuming you have a pristine one, is a simple question of taste. They're heavy-footed and, by Champagne's standards of finesse and grace, a little crude. As always, exceptions exist. But it's a vintage for tasters who like 'em gutsy.

Indulge me a minute. When I did a Champagne lunch for the Chicago trade, I found myself talking a lot about the benefits of being wrong, or being clueless. When I was younger I wanted to appear authoritative, and I thought the way one did that was to affect omniscience. And to state big strong opinions. As the mystery of the 2005 vintage deepened, I found I felt happier. The demolition of successive theories was a helpful lesson in humility, and a reminder to always be prepared for surprise; wine knows more than we do, and it *always* has the last word. It seemed more valuable to share this with my fellow professionals than to sound like I Knew My Shit because I harbored no evident doubts. I wonder if it did any good—who knows?

There's more conversation about reduction in Champagne, but one year I learned that the so-called

Gout de Lumière (the taste of light) is often mistaken for reduction. A gentleman named John Woodward wrote this very useful explanation.

[The *gout de lumière* is] “light-struck taint caused by methionine and vitamin B2 degradation with the generation of a bevy of noxious smelling thiols. It will occur in just a few weeks on a retail shelf, even sooner under bright fluorescent lighting, and will persist in the bottle through cellaring.” To which I would only add, it is of course most prevalent in clear-glass bottles, even *frosted* clear-glass, which need to be wrapped in UV-ray repelling paper. I experimented in the ol’ home cellar, putting one bottle of Rosé on the wine rack where it would be exposed to daylight, and I left another in its case. Opened them both after 30 days, and the difference was apparent.

There are more oaky Champagnes than ever before. Trendy. Ugh, for the most part. Though some are very fine, the problem arises because oak always tastes... like oak. It’s like that period in cuisine when everyone was cilantro crazy. Again, many of these oak-driven Champagnes are fine and even excellent, but to me they’re guilty until proven innocent.

There is a new problem to talk about, and in the spirit of humility I’ll tell you what I tasted and admit I don’t know what caused it or where it might go.

Some time last year I ordered a Chablis by the glass in a restaurant. Serious wine list, good wine sensibility, how wrong could I go? As it turned out I might just have ordered the Reuilly, because this Chablis tasted like Sauvignon Blanc. A few weeks later there was another from a different grower, and I wondered whether this grassiness was a signature of ’11 in Chablis.

I looked at my tasting notebook for 2012, where I’d have noted any 2011 *vins claires* I’d tasted in Champagne, and saw frequent references to “ladybug” flavors, and thought *ah-ha*, the same flavors I saw in those Chablis. A month ago in Burgundy I saw the flavor again, in several of the whites. And not just satellite appellations; these were wines with pedigree. So it seems reasonable to conclude that flavors one might describe as “vegetal” or “grassy” seem to be present in 2011 wines from at least this part of the world. I don’t know whether this is an aspect of underripeness or whether actual ladybugs were present, but this flavor is often there.

2011 wines are entering the non-vintage cuvées now, and their “special” flavor enters with them. The flavor isn’t inherently objectionable—some people relish it—but it’s atypical. Though I tasted it in virtually every wine with ’11 juice in the blend, at times it was no more than a nuance. At other times it appeared to dominate. It doesn’t seem specific to Chardonnay, because I tasted it in a few PN-based rosés. I also tasted it in TWO négociant Champagnes I happen to have drunk in the past several weeks. One cynical observer pointed out that the big houses would remove this flavor as part of the process of removing all flavor, and yeah, that could be. My growers didn’t seem aware of the flavor, or perhaps this was an

affectation. We asked the ones we knew could be bluntly honest, and they claimed they weren’t smelling or tasting what was blatantly clear to us. (We all know that wine growers can be somewhat blinded by being so close to their wines.)

There were “grassy” flavors in 2010-based wines also, but these seem to have faded (even disappeared) over the past year. Where do they go? Will the more vegetal flavors of ’11 also disappear? I wish I knew. What I do know is, I can’t have you tasting those flavors, and then looking at my notes where I don’t refer to them, and you think “Can he possibly *NOT* have noticed this?”

I *suspect* the 2010 grassiness was finally “cleansed” away by ordinary development and/or by additional time on the lees. Peters NV, one of the wines where the flavor was most conspicuous, is also one of the wines that have *changed* the most in the last 9-12 months. And so this is what I’ll do: first I’ll be honest and clear with you. I’ll say when that “2011” flavor is present and to what degree. I’ll emphasize that the taste may *very* well be fleeting. I’ll point out that many of you won’t mind it, and some may even love it. I’m a low-tolerance taster where pyrenes are concerned, so I may be exaggerating its impact. But I don’t sleep well if I’m dissembling with you, because I want you not only to trust me, but to *keep* trusting me.

A SMALL DIGRESSION ON THE QUESTION OF PRIDE

I’m often asked if I’m proud to have created a grower-Champagne revolution, and while I understand the question, I can’t think of it in terms of pride. That’s partly because pride is a dangerous thing for me. I was a vainglorious young man, and it wasn’t pretty, and it took a good deal of blowback to beat it out of my system. And believe me, I don’t want it back. So I avoid feeling “proud.”

I am, though, really happy this all happened. Whatever my role may have been, it began with me indulging my love of Champagne, and wanting an excuse to be there and drink the wines as often as I could. Then once there, I noticed how interesting the terroirs were, and how no one talked about them. I also noticed a nascent culture of growers whom no one talked about either, because they were being sold the wrong way. Slapping one or two Champagne growers into your French-wine-portfolio seemed to me to be tokenism. So I followed an instinct that this story was a compelling story, and set about to tell it. I lucked out by having a splendid field of excellent growers among whom I could cherry-pick. But each time I’m tempted to feel über-cool, I remember that you guys had to be receptive to the story (and the wines) and that it wasn’t me who made the wines; it was all these brave unselfish growers, who could have made a better living selling grapes like their fathers did. If there’s any “pride” in this equation, it belongs to **them** and to you, not to me. I am just very pleased that my work made things better. Because I know it did.

Pierre Gimmonnet

Côte des Blancs // Cuis



vineyard area // 28 hectares
annual production // 20,800 cases
villages & soil types // Cramant Grand Cru, Chouilly Grand Cru, Oger Grand Cru, Aÿ Grand Cru, Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru (chalk); Cuis 1^{er} Cru (chalk and clay)
grape varieties // 98% Chardonnay, 2% Pinot Noir

Didier is proof that you can't just let the cat's whiskers out of the bag; if any part of the cat gets out she all gets out.

First he breached his 100% Chardonnay rule with the scandalous *Paradoxe*, which contained the alien Pinot Noir. And now, heaven help us, he has a Rosé. And even more amazing, this man who has always insisted that blending is indispensable to creating elegant Champagnes, is now planning a trilogy of single-commune wines from the outstanding 2012 vintage. Chouilly, Oger, Cramant; maybe just this once, he says. Uh huh!

Gimmonnet's is a polished domaine as small-growers go, with his 28 hectares, the most in the Côte des Blancs. He's renovated his reception area, and you can now taste as the delicate ladies and gentlemen I know you to be. It is, dare I say, elegant. But then Didier wants to find some piece of information about a harvest gone by, and instead of pulling it up on his up-to-the-minute iPad (nowhere to be seen, in fact) he pulls it from a decidedly ratty pocket-sized little notebook, where all the data are scribbled by hand. This I just love.

After seven years of tasting *vins clairs* with Gimmonnet, I'm beginning to grok his thinking about these "ingredients" in his pantry. I'm also better able to understand his cognitive unease at the new alien terroirs with which he has to work in Oger and Vertus. They don't

fit in the existing recipes. So either those recipes must change, or new recipes created.

The wines of Cuis, especially from the climat "Croix Blanche," are fresh and redolent of fruits and flowers, especially quince and peonies. They give a lively femininity to a cuvée, and often are viable as wines on their own. Didier feels that a certain amount of Cuis is indispensable to his style, even though it costs him the Grand Cru designation in many instances. That's integrity.

Chouilly I admit I find obscure. It shows very little fruit as-such. Instead there's a berried tartness and a serious spine of structure alongside an indirect minerality. The climat "Mont Aigu," down on the plain, "smells like Gimmonnet" according to... Gimmonnet!

Its neighbor just across the Cramant line is called "Les Gromonts." Suddenly there are flowers and quince again, along with a tactile crushed minerality. Who knows why they put the commune line just there, when we all know terroir is a hoax.... Cramant in general is the Riesling lover's Chardonnay. The very old parcel in neighboring "Fond du Bateau" (planted in 1911) often recalls Grüner Veltliner in its forceful char. "Buissons" is open and tangy; other climates echo Riesling at its greenest and most

Gimmonnet at a glance // 28-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. Old vines impart a palpable creaminess. The majority of Gimmonnet's vineyards are more than 40 years old, the oldest parcel (in Cramant) is 100. The wines tolerate a very low dosage, 6-8 grams per liter for most Bruts. "For me, we must have concentration, but also balance, elegance and harmony," says Didier. This is more than just word-wash for him. He's constantly challenged by callow journalists for his views on yields and ripeness. And he goes on making his lovely wines, which have all the density they need and no more. "In 2003 we had, as you've surely heard, a great vintage," he said. "And just as an experiment we left some grapes hanging three weeks after the end of the regular harvest. They achieved a potential alcohol of nearly 13% (T.T. here: 9-10% is considered normal) and we vinified them separately. Later, when we were tasting the lots for assemblage, we agreed unanimously, this wine was useless to us; it belonged nowhere. We ended up selling it off. It was heavy and clumsy."



iridescent. Cramant is complex and incisive, not powerful.

Then came the “Terres de Noël”—utterly different, sweet-smoky like cherry tobacco, but suave and yummy. But happy as he is to have this outstanding vineyard, Didier can’t see where it fits in his style. It’s too smoky, too masculine; even 5% of it in a cuvée dominates the cuvée. Though he was intrigued when I suggested it as a stand-alone wine for his zero-dosage Oenophile cuvée. The wine has the belly-richness an extremely dry Champagne needs.

Didier is very much the gadfly as regards yields, and quite proud about his own, which are generous. He could easily flimflam it; we all know the right things to say, but he is convinced the press has gotten it all wrong. His honesty is bracing. We want it to be simple but nature isn’t like that. For me the only way to view the issue that comes anywhere close to the “truth” is to look at each vine, how it’s pruned and how its production is guided and managed.

Nor should we ever forget the question of vine density.

In a region where 8,000 vines per hectare is common, a grower who has 10,000 may have what look like “high yields” on paper, but his yield-*per-vine* is lower than his neighbor’s. In this as in all value-weighted questions in wine, the easy thing is to form and assert an opinion based on such scraps of information as you’ve accumulated – or on the person you think you want to be. “The cool kids think low yields are a must, and I want them to accept me.” But the true, hard work is to actually *examine* the question and not shrink from its intricacies, or insist on easy answers. They’ll say you’re scared to take a stand, but you have, and it’s a smarter stand than they take.

Didier believes and is delighted to tell you that too low yields in Champagne make for wines of opacity, like over-reduced sauces; black holes of intensity through which no flavor can emerge. He prizes instead a kind of moderation, transparency, and elegance. And none of you have ever complained his wines are dilute, because they are not; they are just what he says they are.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V.
Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 12/375ml
Pierre Gimonnet et Fils Cuis 1er Cru Brut, N.V., 3/1.5L

KPG-1
KPG-1H
KPG-1M

Permit me an anecdote. I was on my way to dinner at SPQR in San Francisco, and they have an all-Italian wine list. I wanted Champagne and figured they'd indulge me especially if I shared. So I wandered into D&M wines down the street, and found a bottle of Gimonnet NV in the cold box. Lucky me. When it was opened my companion and I were amazed. "This is the best bottle of Gimonnet NV I've *ever* had," we agreed. We also agreed it was among the very best bottles of any Blanc de Blancs NV we'd ever had.

"Cuvée 151" is based on 2011 (77%), with 2010 (6%) 2009 (12%) 2007 (4%) and 2006 (1%). It is barely above the level of "Extra Brut," which shows a bracing integrity on his part, because he could have glommed onto that trendy designation but opted instead to be *just* above it because it was better for the wine.

The salient aspect of this wine is, the reserve vintages are stored in Magnum not in tank, because it keeps them fresher. And, the "vintage" is actually the NV blend of that year, so we have in effect a chain-reaction of complexity; this wine could easily have the fruit of 25 growing seasons in it.

I tasted an 11/2013 disgorgement which should last us until very late this year. It was among the most attractive of the '11-based cuvées. It has potential to turn into a classic NV Gimonnet.

The MAGNUM is not the same wine—in fact it's a (++) quality wine, "cuvée 133" and based on 2008 (72%), with 13.3% of 2007 and roughly equal proportions of 06-05-04. Disgorged 10/2013, it had steely Magnum-aromas at first, but the palate is dramatically mineral and the finish is a beautiful garden of herbs on a sunny evening. In between you get bitten by jagged steel teeth. The grainy-green complexity is spellbinding, and all you need is patience and luck. Luck? Yes, because sometimes these Magnums come alive all of a sudden, and you want to be there.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Rosé de Blancs" Brut, N.V.

KPG-5

This is based on the *Cuvée Gastronom*e blend along with 10% still PN from Bouzy. It's 35.8% Chouilly (Montaigu, a top climat), 27.5% Cramant (mostly Buissons, very old vines), 11.7% Oger (Terres de Noël, Brulis, Champs Nérons), 14.8% Cuis (Croix Blanche, a top climat) and 0.4% Vertus.

The wine is very young—disgorged 11/2013—and shows herbal (but not vegetal) right now; it also smells like fresh King Salmon, and will probably taste amazing with just that fish in another couple months when it starts arriving.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils "Cuvée Gastronom" Brut, 2009 +

KPG-209

The concept is a food-friendly Champagne by dint of a gentler mousse. It's also in effect a "young-vintage," that is, always a single year but not the *Vintage* wine. It's also dominated by Chouilly and Cuis.

In this case 39% Chouilly (Montaigu 58 years old) and 26% Cuis (Croix Blanche), with 20% Cramant and 15% Oger (see above for plot-names). Disgorged 9/2013.

This is always a subjective favorite of mine, and I love this one; a wonderful aroma, the vibrating mineral of the cuvée with the sunny greeting of the vintage; it's really *all-in*, loaded with clear upfront flavor dominated by a cobalt-like mineral density, like iron, with an ozone-y wet-forest echo; both stirringly complex and also glad to see you.

Top Value Alert!

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Fleuron” Brut, 2006 + +

KPG-706

Disgorged October 2012; I’ll mention the low dosage of 6g/l only because of a sage remark of Didier’s; “It’s not a question of the level of sugar or acidity; it’s a question of elements.”

For me this is usually Gimonnet’s most masculine wine. It’s strikingly leesy and chalky, the kind of wine y’all would call “killer;” mussels and black pepper, and pungent with ’06’s gorgeously weird play of roundness and pointedness. Already expressive, it will hugely reward another 7-10 years. In fact with more time *en tirage* it’s slimming down and showing more chalky leesiness, with seductive slinky vinosity and a stunning finish.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Cuvée Oenophile” 2006

KPG-306

This is Fleuron without dosage. It’s 83% Grand Cru, hence its weight, and as always this is a very fine bone-dry wine; oyster shell and sweated fennel, chervil, talc and white flowers; a beautiful salty wine, starchy and strict yet generous. Bring on the Malpeques...

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Spécial Club” Brut, 2006, 6/750ml + + (+)

KPG-406

Could have been designated “Extra Brut,” FWIW.

Disgorged January 2014, we’ll see this masterpiece in the early Autumn, and then you’ll know why Gimonnet Club is one of the Icons of the Côte des Blancs.

It’s 65% Cramant (three climats, about one-third consisting of well over 100-year vines), 22.5% Chouilly and 12.5% Cuis (“for freshness and the Gimonnet signature”).

It’s a pure, classy Gimonnet fragrance—really, no other Champagne smells this way—and the palate is saturated with grip and class; in this case a highly intricate flavor of *patisserie*, wet cereal, gliding weightlessly over the palate yet asserting a huge volume of savor and big mineral; it’s not pixilated or defined but rather a complex sauce that has married into a splendid Whole. The best vintage since 2002.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Millésime de Collection” Vielle Vignes de Chardonnay Brut, 2005, 3/1.5L

KPG-605VM

Disgorged September 2012, it’s a necessarily superficial look at a wine with decades in front of it, but that first impression is one of salt, bergamot and old BaoZhong tea.

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils “Paradoxe” Brut, 2007

KPG-907

52% PN (from Aÿ and Mareuil) and 48% CH (from Mareuil, interestingly, along with Cuis, Cramant, Chouilly and Oger), disgorged 11/2013. Of course the “paradox” is that this arch-wizard of Blanc de Blancs, who swore he’d never make Champagne with PN, did it anyway and did it brilliantly.

And this is detailed, sophisticated Champagne, judicious and prudent, but it needs time, time and more time—as many ’07s do. If you recall last year’s 2006 with its open-armed greeting, this one seems markedly stern, for now at least.

Varnier-Fannière

Côte des Blancs // Avize



vineyard area // 4 hectares
annual production // 3,000 cases
villages & soil types // Avize Grand Cru, Cramant Grand Cru, Oger Grand Cru (chalk)
grape varieties // 100% Chardonnay

I'm on a total Varnier kick these days. I don't know how Champagne can give more affectionate pleasure.



Not only are they incisive in that graphite-y way, but they are correctly conceived as regards dosage. They exude class and fastidious detail. They are like the calligraphy of Avize. And this year I learned they have slightly lower pressure than many Champagnes – about 15-20% less. This may be why they feel so silky and limpid

It turns out Denis has as much land in Cramant as he does in Avize, and I also learned one possible reason

his Champagnes are so silky and refreshing: he micro-oxygenates the still wines in order to use less sulfur and to encourage the tertiaries to express.

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 Péters and Larmandier-Bernier, but the fruit is unique. The wines are fastidious and etched: even his Rosé. You

Varnier-Fannière at a glance // Tiny, 4 hectare domaine with exclusively Grand Cru land. Young vigneron making feline-snappy ultra-clear wines.

know those magnifying goggles the jewelers wear when they're inspecting a stone? Drinking Denis' Champagnes is like looking at flavor through those spectacles.

I had a colleague with me one year making his first trip to Champagne, and for some reason he hit upon the topic of temperature control during fermentations. Denis answered the question thus: "For me control of temperature is an industrial way to produce Champagne." Denis is a modern-looking gentleman who gives the impression he could fix your

computer, and his domaine is small and so we don't focus on him as we really should. I had friends over for a glass of Champagne and we drank the Clos Jacquin monocru that's the Tête-de-Cuvée for Pierre Callot, another good small grower in Avize. And we admired it as it deserved; it's excellent fizz. Then I opened a bottle of Varnier's 1990 and we got perspective in a hurry. I enjoy drinking "other" grower's Champagnes for recreation (and education) but each time I return to what I already have, I am affirmed and grateful. This 1990 was great wine.

Varnier-Fannièrè "Cuvée de Jean Fannièrè Origine" Extra Brut, N.V. +

KVF-5

As always, this is an homage to the style of wine his grandfather might have made, and the driest wine in the range. Disgorged 10/2013, half-half 08-09 (and what a pleasure to see *that* tandem again), this is some good-smelling fizz! Cereal-y, doughy, rusky and incisive and ripe. 3 g/L of RS for all the sugar-averse.

Varnier-Fannièrè "Grand Vintage" Brut, 2008 + +

KVF-308

I'm listing these in the order we tasted them, and this gorgeous 2008 is half-half Cramant-Avize, and is entirely wonderful, enough to make me misty-eyed thinking how exquisite 2008 is, and how they're getting more scarce all the time. The fragrances split the difference of the two communes, green tea and graphite; <whew> this is extraordinary Champagne, with the ravishing chalk and flowers of '08. It may be as great as 2002; it has the guts and length of that vintage.

Varnier-Fannièrè "Cuvée Saint-Denis" Brut, N.V. + + (+)

KVF-2

This astonishing Champagne is THE SINGLE GREATEST VALUE IN THIS PORTFOLIO IN 2014.

From a single parcel with 77-year-old vines (and older) called *Clos du Grand Père* in Avize, near the viticultural school, on the plain.

Allow me a digression. One thing I learned is that in the Côte des Blancs, many of the best vineyards are not in fact on the hillsides, but on the flatter land yet not too far into the plain. Soils are even chalkier lower down. This may be true throughout Champagne, a theory I will test going forward, but here in the CdB everyone seems to agree. It's like *Le Montrachet*, which from its outward appearance doesn't look like a great vineyard.

This *Clos* is clearly a great vineyard, but it's going to need to be replanted, thanks to viral infections, and in the near future this cuvée will hail from a mix of the oldest vines from various parcels.

OK, so what do we have? 40% 08, 60% 09, disgorged 12/2013, dosage perfect, and I have never smelled a better edition of this; it's the very perfection of young Côte-des-Blancs, and I had to flail myself with a giant stick to withhold that third plus. Call it 2.99999 plusses, because it's *all* here, a stunning stab & jab of mineral and flowers.

Varnier-Fannièrè Grand Cru Brut, N.V.

KVF-1

Half-half 2010-2011, and among the better of the wines containing '11, as its aromas are delicate and well-jacketed by the surrounding fruit and minerality. The chatter was active at this point and I struggled to write notes. Y'all just shut up so I can emote, y'know?

Varnier-Fannièrè Rosé Brut, N.V.

KVF-4

After a spell when this was just the basic NV plus red, this is now older—60% 09 and 40% 10; the PN still comes from the very fine domain Paul Dethune in Ambonnay, and it's 10% of the total. I know the wine was excellent but man, the chit-chat was fierce. Did anyone else write a tasting note??

Jean Milan

Côte des Blancs // Oger



vineyard area // 6 hectares
annual production // 9,000 cases
villages & soil types // Oger Grand Cru (chalk)
grape varieties // 100% Chardonnay

My emotions were flapping around like a racquetball this visit. The wines were almost entirely very good, and a few were outstanding, the best in many years from this domain. But my friend Caroline Milan is ill with a chronic condition that will diminish her, and this will enact changes in the estate, which I'll tell you about up ahead.



Caroline's condition isn't fatal, but it entails a change-of-life, and because I am very fond of her I am awfully sad for the pain she must endure. That's first and foremost. There is also the dimming of a gleaming bright star, as this is a resolute woman and a seriously glowing human being. And yet, the glow will not disappear; it will turn into a

kind of power, by which she will both endure and find the way to her essence. And Caroline's essence is a bright and beautiful thing.

The estate had been growing, but that will end. In fact it will shrink to a size consistent with sustainability. The cuvée(s) from bought-grapes will cease (which may

Jean Milan at a glance // Wonderful discovery in the heart of the Côte des Blancs. Champagnes of marvelous purity and focus.

how the wines taste // They have that pencil-y minerality beneath the loveliest imaginable fruit. They are truly exquisite wines. Just don't miss them. Prices are amazingly reasonable and availability is better than you'd expect from a small domaine.

have the effect of restoring the “RM” designation) and a couple of different wines will collapse into single wines now. This is also not a bad thing.

If you're new to this portfolio, then all you need to know is Milan is the best grower in Oger, and the wines thread the needle between minerality and fruits and smokiness, which is Oger at its most vivid and expressive.

Oger sits between Avize to the north and Le Mesnil to the south, and though it's tempting to suppose its wines are a stylistic bridge between those communes, I see it otherwise. There's more steep hillside land in Oger, a lot of it on a south-facing hill that gives the wines more generosity than, say, Cramant or Chouilly. Gimonnet finds them entirely alien to the cool green stony wines

from his neighborhood. To him Oger is masculine and smoky, but again, I see it otherwise. Oger is big-bodied, yes, but it isn't burly, and if I use a word like “queenly,” I hope you'll know I mean regal in a womanly way.

In fact there are at least two faces of Oger. One is overtly fruity and buttery, with pear and even stone fruit; they can make you think of Puligny. The other is a shady coolness, with some of the cucumber-saline savor of west coast oysters. What I have yet to find in Oger are the Riesling-like green tea notes of Cramant, the Chenin face of Cuis, the deep earthiness of certain Mesnil, or the orange-blossom notes of certain other Mesnil. Oger stands alone—and is better for it. The Champagnes I'll offer you are all 100% Oger.

Jean Milan “Millenaire” Brut, N.V.

KML-10

This cuvée, which was the “superior” NV, will henceforth be combined with the “regular” NV (called *Brut Spéciale*) and become a single wine. That being the case, I opted to offer only this one now, though the price is a little higher than was its simpler sibling. It's 09 and 10 in equal parts, disgorged 12/2013 (and showing it), and it has some of the '10 grassiness to shrug off, though its fluffy texture combines well with the rather herbal fruit. The lovely finish points the way forward.

Jean Milan “Transparence” 2007

KML-207

This is the extremely dry one. Disgorged 4/2012 so it's had time to develop on the cork. It's curiously tasty, this dry beastly, showing some of the mustard-green zing of the vintage but also the “shady” side of Oger terroir.

Jean Milan “Symphonie” Brut 2009 +

KML-509

The name combines “symphony” with “Caroline,” and yes it's a bit cute, but isn't it better than yet-another *reserve-prestige-selection* etc? Disgorged 1/2014 it shows '09 at its best; ripe, scallop and brioche, a markedly generous version of a normally “cool” Champagne. It's from four parcels in Oger: Zailleux, Beaudures, Barbettes and Chênets. This is actually better than the single-vineyard *Terres de Noël*, which is why I'm waiting for the next vintage of *Terres de Noël*!

Jean Milan Grande Reserve Brut “Cuvée de Réserve,” N.V. + +

KML-7

A *superb* edition of this wine. Remember, it's a cask-vinified, long-aged late-disgorged old-school rural woodsy Champagne, aged *agrafé* (with a cork instead of a crown-cap), and it stands among the highlights of my Champagne trip. Equal parts 05-06, it exhales a truly fantastic fragrance, burnished and dignified, loving and compelling and woodsy, inferential and haunting. Good bottles of this have always been a singular pleasure, and this is all dripping trees in a warm rainy forest, leaf-floor, a fire somewhere far away blowing threads of smoke; tranquil, content and numinous.

Jean Milan “150 Ans” Brut, N.V. + +

KML-512

Two wines were made (the other is a Rosé) to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the estate. The bottle's in a funny kind of white wrapper, but the wine is sensational. Equal parts 08-09, some vinification in wood, and leaving everything extraneous aside, it's a stirring and inspirational Côte des Blancs, and as gorgeous as Oger could ever be. Wanting to confirm my good first-impression, I drove a bottle over to the Mosel and drank it a week later with Johannes and Barbara Selbach and with Clint Sloan and Robert Houde (my amazing Chicago distributor) and if you don't believe me, ask *them*—the wine rocks.

(The Rosé, by the way, was showing the 2011 flavor courtesy of some Bouzy PN from that vintage, so I decided to wait and see what happens. Also a note to lovers of the Sec bottling “Cuvée Tendresse,” this is also showing that 2011 aspect, and until I know what happens to those wines I'm going to be ultra-selective in what I offer you.)

Pierre Péters

Côte des Blancs // Le Mesnil-Sur-Oger



vineyard area // 20 hectares
annual production // 14,000 cases
villages & soil types // Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru, Oger Grand Cru,
Cramant Grand Cru, Avize Grand Cru (Cretaceous chalk)
grape varieties // 100% Chardonnay

It's a hive of activity, growing acreage, a new cuverie, several projects to upgrade the wines—as though they needed it—and all in all the buzz of a happening place.



Even with this growth we're basically maxed out. Nor is there any chance of getting more, because Rodolph's customers are eager to take their allocations, just as we are. We'll be planning and so should you, as otherwise we'll all run out of wine by October.

These were the most exciting *Vins Clairs* we tasted from the 2013 vintage, and I understood Rodolph's excitement; he told me it was perhaps the estate's greatest harvest. (!) I'd have accepted several of the wines as they were, as still wines.

He's making a second single-vineyard wine now, *Les Mont Jolis*, a vineyard out near the Mesnil-Vertus road in the plain. He has six parcels there, and wants a feminine consort to the very "manly" wines of Chetillons. We'll see the results in a few years. The *vin clair* was excellent. And a 2000 vintage was entirely off the ga-hinges, a potion of lobster and tonka bean and duck demi-glace and cocoa and malt and porcini powder; at least as good as the 2000 Chetillons we drank alongside it.

Finally there's a new non-vintage wine called *Reserve Oubliée*, the quantity of which is homeopathic. Alas, the wine is completely superb, so I'm dustin' off the knee pads.

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

how the wines taste // Let's put it this way: if Blanc de Blancs Champagne has something in common with Mosel wine in general, then these are like Saar wines, a concentration of the mineral essence of the type, and straining at the leash as though the fruit wanted to burst free and run at full gallop. Lately I have described the wines as starched, for they have that crisp stiffness. Though not exceptionally high in acidity, they are exceptionally low in pH, which gives them their attack on the palate and their trilling high notes of aroma. My best German wine customers tend to prefer these to any Champagne I offer.

Pierre Péters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V.

KPP-1A

Time on the cork really did reward the 2010-based version we sold last year, which started out grassy and morphed into a classic Péters in a lean vein. In principle this is half of the current-prevailing year and half a cuvée of all the preceding years, so you can call it a “solera” or a “perpetual reserve” but the principle is the same—to constantly freshen a complex assemblage. One of Rodolph’s aims is to give this wine greater age, and this process takes the time it needs.

The last disgorgement of that ’10 cuvée was 9/2013 and I doubt if there’s any left of it. The new ’11-based wine is in the process of knitting together; part of it shows the round doughiness of the “solera” and the other shows the vegetality of 2011. He said he found it “malic, like an unripe pear,” but there was also a minerality struggling to emerge. I’m deeply curious to see where this goes.

Pierre Péters “Reserve Oubliée” Brut, N.V. +

KPP-6

There will be *very* little of this for us.

The wine answers a challenge presented to Peters by a British wine writer, to loosen the wines up by permitting casks to be used. What he did instead was to age the wine an extra year in tank before *tirage*, to create a “mature but not oxidative” Champagne. It’s aged *agrafé* on the lees, also for longer than the regular NV.

The wine is wonderful. Alas! Disgorged 6/2013, it’s all 2008; tighter than the basic NV and in this case more pointedly intense; vigorously white and green—verbena and osmanthus, talc and lilies. They make their own dosage from must-concentrate they do themselves (does anyone else in Champagne do this???) and age it in a 60-liter barrel of old wood from Cognac, so the Champagne has a sly bit of *bois* after all.

Pierre Péters Millésime Brut, 2008 ++

KPP-208

Pierre Péters Millésime Brut, 2009 ++

KPP-209

What a pair! The final disgorgement of the ’08 is 1/2014, and it’s racy, chalky and splendid; more mineral and less flowery than many ’08s, but lilting and incisive; white lilacs and hyssop. The purist can lie down with the hedonist over this one.

The fantastic 2009, about to be sold, is much “sunnier.” (’08 is lunar.) It’s classic brioche and saffron in a velouté that’s entirely seductive, yet below all that is a swollen wave of chalk, chervil and fennel-frond; Rodolph said “pink grapefruit and quince.” It’s very dry (4 g/L RS) but doesn’t need a micro-fraction more. It’s this type of wine that encourages me to hope that 2009 will shed its youthfully oafish ways and slim down into something fine-grained.

Pierre Péters Cuvée Spéciale “Les Chétilons” Brut, 2007 ++ (+)

KPP-307

Disgorged 11/2013; this has the peppery ’07 attack, and the usual tendency of fruit and substance needing air to emerge. But it ends up like cobalt or titanium concentrated into a tiny narrow tube and then *rammed* onto your palate. It has the gigantic weightless precision of Nigl’s best wines. The finish is a doctoral thesis in terroir trigonometry.

Pierre Péters Rosé “For Albanne” Brut, N.V.

KPP-311

In principle a Chardonnay (from the parcel Musette) is blended with macerated Meunier and, I gather, co-fermented. The upcoming edition, disgorged 12/2013, is all 2011, has the color of sockeye salmon, and of course the special fragrance of ’11.

Marc Hébrart

Vallée de la Marne // Mareuil-Sur-Aÿ



vineyard area // 15.5 hectares
annual production // 8,750 cases
villages & soil types // Avize Grand Cru, Oiry Grand Cru, Chouilly Grand Cru,
Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru, Bisseuil 1^{er} Cru, Avenay Val d'Or 1^{er} Cru (*chalk*)
grape varieties // 70% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay

Again and again I confront these Champagnes, tasting them there with him, tasting them elsewhere with you, drinking them at home, and every time I've had them in my glass for the past several years I've found myself thinking "Does Champagne really get any better than this?"

Anyone in my line of work rises and falls with the fortunes of his agencies if you're in business long enough. Generations change, sometimes for the better and sometimes not. Now and again it's just a matter of time for the young person to get his legs under him. Then, if you can, you wait. Sometimes, also, estates will coast. But sometimes, like now, an estate that was always excellent becomes stellar. It happens one time, you think it's a fluke. It happens again and again, you know it's not.

When I first came to Hébrart I was looking for fruit. I had all the rock-head Champagne anyone could want, and I sought something a little more chipper and chummy. I certainly found it—Jean-Paul's wines are replete with fruit. But what I couldn't have predicted was how ever-more *precise* they'd become. At this point I can't recall—can't even *fathom*—a Champagne that gives the best of both worlds; the utmost purity of fruit with the utmost clarity of expression. You get such brilliance and transparency you'd swear you could taste each grape. This little domain is Champagne aristocracy.

There's always a surprise here. We were tasting vins clairs and two samples were poured, the first was a little clunky and showing its oak, while the 2nd was more refined and higher toned. They were the same wine. The first was unfiltered, the second filtered two days before.

An interesting moment to pay a call on one's assumption that filtration is always evil, eh?

Jean-Paul has 15 hectares now, thanks to the purchase of two new parcels in Aÿ and one in Avize, which is wonderful news. He now has sixty-eight different parcels.

This came up when we were talking about biodynamics. You can probably infer the rest.

The fruit of Mareuil Pinot Noir is unlike any I know in Champagne: firmer and less malty than Aÿ, altogether less chunky than Bouzy, not unlike Verzy but richer, far more *comme il faut* than the savage power of Verzenay, less softly perfumey than Ambonnay, less smoky than Cumières. Indeed if it were Burgundy, Mareuil could well be Morey-St.-Denis.

The estate as such exists since 1963, but it was in 1983 that fils Jean-Paul began to grow it, joining the Club in 1985. Along with Chouilly, Oiry, and Mareuil there's land in Bisseuil and Avenay Val d'Or — all 1er Cru. It's 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay, with vineyards averaging 36 years old. The wines undergo malo.

Marc Hébrart at a glance // Exciting producer in the Vallée de la Marne producing 75% Pinot Noir from the great 1er Cru vineyards of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, Avenay Val d'Or and Bisseuil and 25% Chardonnay from the Grand Crus Chouilly and Oiry in the Côte des Blancs. Hand selected grapes, Bucher pressing, fermentation in petite cuvée, malolactic, hand remuage.

how the wines taste // Hébrart represents a departure from the other producers in this portfolio, for Jean-Paul's wines marry the top Pinot Noir sites of the Vallée de la Marne with Grand Cru Chardonnay sites in the Côte des Blancs. Hébrart's wines are buoyant and lithe with deft integrations of minerality and juicy fruit. That said, he does produce a Blanc de Blancs from Oiry and Chouilly which I really like.



Marc Hébrart “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V.

KMH-1

54% 2011, 46% 2010-09. It's 77% PN (from Mareuil, Avenay and Bisseuil) and 23% CH (from Mareuil). Disgorged 10/2013.

When this is on form it offers an incomparable expression of Pinot Noir, like some clear ether of Volnay. This edition is like a puppy version of the wine, though he did well to increase the volume of reserve wine in the blend. The fragrance is elemental; the palate is sprightly and chalky and Ceylon-tea-like. It is typically deft and focused, and atypically perfumey and taut. It is not showing any of “the 2011 flavor” which is extremely interesting; this was the 2nd estate I visited, and I hadn't seen that flavor yet, so my notes didn't remark on its absence.

Marc Hébrart Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V. +

KMH-6

65% 2010, 35% 2009-08. It's 30% Oiry and Chouilly (Grand Cru) and 70% Mareuil 1er Cru (though rated 99% on the *échelle des Crus*).

This has always been a wonderful Champagne, that's only inconspicuous because we get very little of it. And this has a superb fragrance! A markedly flowery palate—what flowers I don't know—but really overt. It isn't inferential nor especially mineral; it is savory, puff-pastry, very much Mareuil, and totally delicious; tomato-water, tonka beans... I know nothing like it.

Marc Hébrart “Sélection” Brut, N.V. + +

KMH-2

AMONG THE VERY BEST VALUES IN THIS PORTFOLIO!

This “superior” NV is 72% 2009 and 28% 2008-07. It's 65% old-vines Mareuil PN, and 35% CH from Oiry and Chouilly. Disgorged 9/2013.

After the stunning quality of last year's edition—the only Champagne I've ever bought a solid case of for my own cellar—this is just as good. A vamping refined *sexy* fragrance; and the palate is *insane*, a thousand tiny explosions of flavor all happening together, leading to a minty finish of finicky refinement.

Marc Hébrart Rosé Brut, N.V. (+)

KMH-5

Complex blend: 50% Mareuil CH from 2011. 43% Mareuil PN from 2010-09. 7% still red PN from Mareuil, from 2010. Disgorged 11/2013.

This wine has a definite image-tone, as least for pervy little me. Think of a lady librarian, who at work wears a conservative suit, has her hair pulled back in a bun, wears horn-rimmed glasses that accentuate her high cheekbones. Now imagine her getting home from work. She shakes her hair loose; it flows and tumbles. Off go the glasses. As she removes her clothes it is revealed the lady has ooh-la-la taste in *dessous*. Perhaps her lover is visiting, or maybe she just likes feeling sexy.

Either way, she pours herself a glass of Hébrart Rosé and settles down to read her mail. What sort of wine does she find this year? A gushing fragrance, more overt than usual. The palate is a little catty (the impact of the 2011), but it resolves into an oddly compelling greenness. Fascinating, curious.

Marc Hébrart “Special Club” Brut 2009, 6/750ml ++ (+)

KMH-309

60% old-vines PN from Mareuil. 30% old-vines CH from Oiry and Chouilly, and another 15% of that wine vinified in barrel. Disgorged 11/2013.

This is more plump than the ravishing '08. It smells like Champagne. Riper yellow fruits—the '08 was more high-toned—more power but less incisiveness; still, this is truly splendid. Is there a better Club? Drink this beauty while you wait for the 2008.

Marc Hébrart “Rive-Gauche-Rive-Droite” Grand Cru Extra Brut, 2008 ++

KMH-708

50% PN from Aÿ (from climats Pruche, Chauzelles, Longchamp and Chauffour). 50% old vines CH from Oiry and Chouilly (climats Justice and Montaigu—the one we know from Gimonnet). Vinified in 3rd use barrels. Disgorged 10/2013. Unfiltered, no cold stabilization, ambient yeasts.

The original idea was a 50-50 blend from Grand Cru that would give him more wiggle-room than the Special Club does. Begun with vintage 2004, this is by far the best version I have tasted.

Let's call it a unique aroma: '08 flowers and deftly expressive wood—put in perspective, it's less oaky than Bollinger—but also salty and vinous, avuncular even; chestnuts and brown butter, meat *jus*, a slinky wonderful sideways attack and an ever-so-delicately attenuated finish. Enormously impressive though, and I'll be watching eagerly to see how it develops.

Henri Goutorbe

Vallée de la Marne // Aÿ

vineyard area // 22 hectares
annual production // 10,000 cases
villages & soil types // Aÿ Grand Cru, Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru (Cretaceous chalk, limestone)
grape varieties // 70% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay, 5% Pinot Meunier



Relatively speaking, these are “mainstream” by grower standards.



You won't find old-vines Petit Meslier fermented with grasshopper antlers in an underground amphora shaped like your large intestine. But hey, all you Special-Club lovin' somms; Goutorbe is the current *president* of the Club. Let's hope he gets the label situation sorted out.

So yes, the wines taste like Champagne “should.” But as with any grower, there are quirks and specificities, and if these are “conservative” they're by no means fuddy-duddys. When they're in form, they show a sensuous generosity and a suave maltiness that typify Champagne for many drinkers. But they also show an atypical precision and terroir character that identifies them as growers.

If you've visited the region recently there's a fair chance

you know the family, as they've opened the very popular and badly needed Hotel Castel Jeanson in Aÿ, just a few steps from the winery. If you're a grape-grower in Champagne you almost certainly know Goutorbe, as he's one of the leading vine-nurserymen. When word reached me they would indeed be interested in export, I was delighted that no one had grabbed them.

I'm also really pleased to find a supplier for Aÿ Pinot at last. There's a consensus among fizz-heads that the “top-5” Grand Crus are Aÿ, Ambonnay, Verzenay, Cramant and Mesnil, and for me Aÿ has always stood out for its special malt and blueberry aromas and overall class. If, as I've written elsewhere, Ambonnay is Volnay or Chambolle, then Aÿ is Vosne-Romanée.

Henri Goutorbe at a glance // “Venerable” might be an apposite term for an estate that's existed for less than 60 years, but Goutorbes are a Grand Family of Champagne, and this domaine embodies the generous and vivacious side of the region.

how the wines taste // They are ripe and extravagant; they are seldom mystic or searching, but instead direct and delicious. This doesn't preclude a great refinement and class! It means they are oh-so-easy to love.

Henri Goutorbe “Cuvée Prestige” Brut, N.V.

KGO-1

This is the superior NV—there’s a “basic” NV that contains fruit from the Aube and Sezannais, and which is improving considerably the last few years. It’s currently based on 2007 (80%) with 20% 06-05-04, and disgorged 1/2014. You could say it’s “back in form,” but I want to talk about that.

It seemed the wines based on 2005 and even on 2006 showed that potato-y aroma most of us found objectionable. BUT, I recently had a disgorgement from precisely that era, and the bottle was fabulous. So, um??? Returning to “back in form,” two things to say. One, do you notice how much more *mature* this is than every other NV in the portfolio? (Probably in any portfolio?) Two, though it was still concussed from disgorgement, this really did show why we loved this little bugger in the first place. Malt, mirabelle and sweet straw are its signatures, and it deftly combines weight and “luxurious” flavors with bright and *fresh* flavors.

Henri Goutorbe Millésime Brut, 2005

KGO-405

75%PN, 25%CH, all Aÿ. Disgorged 10/2013. I offered this two years ago, skipped it last year, and now want you to see it again. It tastes like a *healthy* ’05, with the heavy tread and sternness of the vintage, but there’s also class and breed, malt and oyster-mushrooms; a thumping solid Champagne from outstanding terroir.

Henri Goutorbe “Spécial Club” Brut, 2004, 6/750ml + +

KGO-204

100% old vines Aÿ, disgorged 10/2013. Amazing it’s still available, but don’t defer the purchase because I may well skip over the ’05, which means a supply-gap while we wait for 2006.

The wine is amazing. It has all the gorgeous manic green of ’04 but with age it’s also offering the full measure of Aÿ malt and blueberry. This latest disgorgement is fresher than ever, a real injection of vitality and lift; the finish is a minty shimmer until it yields to a wet cereal “sweetness.”

Henri Goutorbe “Collection René” 1999 + +

KGO-599

They didn’t tell me the disgorgement date but it looked like 4-5 years ago based on the appearance of the cork. It’s an entirely gorgeous adult Champagne; not gigantically long but a total sweetheart while it lasts, and the initial moments of finish are carob-y and truffley, and intriguingly serious.

Henri Goutorbe Rosé Brut, N.V.

KGO-3

All Aÿ, disgorged 9/2013, 2010-based (with a small amount of ’09), 65% PN and 35% CH. This is very good and will only get better as the ’10 fleshes out. The aromas are wonderfully pure Aÿ Pinot. Right on the little vein between elegant and sumptuous.

Drinking the '53 at Gaston Chiquet

It was a quiet Sunday and we'd just driven from Germany. My hotel's wife was balky and it was a crisis-time at the company, so I was distracted and jangly. But at least we'd be with Nicolas Chiquet, who is among my favorite people, and I knew I'd get lost in the wines. That's easy to do there.

Nicolas says he doesn't have very many people who love old wines, so when we visit it's an opportunity to plunder the cellar. That makes me feel bashful. I mean, who am I to deserve this? And the cellar, after all, is finite: when those bottles are gone, they're gone.

Two wormy old bottles arrived, coated in cellar fuzz. Your hands get all goopy if you hold a bottle like that. The cork was balky in the first one, and in the moments after it was poured none of us could be sure it wasn't corked. Old wine sometimes starts off smelling like the cellar, i.e. moldy. The wine was "from the 50s" but more than that we could not know. Nicolas thought it may have been demi-sec, which would make it non-vintage quality, which implies Meunier. Yes, maybe. The color was oddly fresh—further evidence of TCA—and the initial aromas were riotous until the TCA subsumed them; truffle, brown-butter, tonka bean, orange zest, maple, melon, some crazy esterization of fructose, and we had a good 5-10 minutes with it before we all had to agree, sadly, that the cork taste was winning the race. Still, I was grateful to visit the wine at all.

Nicolas knew what the next wine was, but I don't know if he knew it was my birth year, 1953. It was one of his last four bottles. I was half in tears before the bottle was open, me and my little 60th birthday last summer. As he eased the cork from the neck of the bottle, I felt suitably grave. Mortality, beauty, friendship; the little parlor where we tasted might as well have been a chapel.

It was a difficult time, and I was a long way from myself. The man I brought to that glass was in a state of *what, me, now?* Nicolas said the cork was strong, "perfect," and the wine was poured with delicate ceremony. I sniffed it, and it took all my strength not to weep out loud. Not that I'm scared about crying in front of others, but this wine would entail outright sobbing, and that would never do. Still, my eyes filled and my voice caught, and I followed the wine into whatever dusty starlight it wanted to show me.

It smelled like every weeping buttered nut since the beginning of time. It had a 4 octave complexity, a full measure of power that was virtually heroic, and the vitality of a great wine from a great vintage, in miraculous condition. I was out past the galaxy of associations; there was only an infinitely tender and mysteriously complex loveliness, a consoling sweetness in the finish that froze

my heart with ecstasy and regret, as such things always do, that sweet sad message of the beauty of the world, telling me, *try to not forget this. It's hard, I know, but try.*

The room grew very quiet, four tasters, stilled, our souls coated in silk, expanding infinitely. There were murmurings in the wine, and the silence was a balm. But what I heard was unquiet. I haven't given much credence to "turning sixty" because I don't know what it means. I don't feel "60," whatever that is, and I feel no dilution of passion. I do feel certain changes in the body, asking me to be a little more gentle, and I feel powerful shifts among my sources of joy, all of them asking me to spend more time at my wellsprings, the taproots and fountainheads that a young man feels he can safely ignore. I know I can't ignore them now. There's not enough time. And this dancing thing in my glass was a herald of time.

How much time do I have left, I wondered. Believe me, I'm not especially lugubrious and I'm not fixated on questions of death. But sixty, you know, you let a few of those thoughts in. You can't help it. Sitting there, drinking a wine precisely as old as I was, aware of the dark penumbra always around beauty, I asked myself if I felt "ready" for death. I mean in an abstract way. Ask me "Are you ready to die?" and I'll say *fuck* no, but ask "Are you ready for death?" and I'd say "For sure not tomorrow, but I guess eventually." But this wine wouldn't let me split that question. It knew very well how I really felt: *How can I bear to leave this world? This world.*

And what of all the days and days between these moments of still-framed stunning kindness? The days when we forget what it actually is we *do* by living. In the rapturous gravity of these exquisite flavors, I think I never want another single one of those days. But of course I do. I want those ordinary beats of living and I want them never to stop. But I also don't want to forget the way a wine like this can light up the interior, and we need to wander down there now and again and do a census of all the strange critters who live there. They get obstreperous otherwise. I took another lost sip of wine. I must have been quiet for a long time. "Wow, that's some tasting note," somebody said, as I wrote and wrote.

Gaston Chiquet

Vallée de la Marne // Dizy



vineyard area // 23 hectares
annual production // 18,300 cases
villages & soil types // Aÿ Grand Cru, Mareuil sur Aÿ 1^{er} Cru, Hautvillers 1^{er} Cru,
Dizy 1^{er} Cru (belemnite chalk); Crugny, Nanteuil la Forêt (chalk and clay)
grape varieties // 45% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Meunier, 20% Pinot Noir

I drank a glass of the NV while out to dinner recently. And as I did I felt the same admiration and affection I always feel for that wine, because it so perfectly threads the needle between its silken precision and its forward fruit. It's not jumping through hoops of fire of terroir, it's just saturated with caring and craftsmanship.

And yet in a way we're tasting *pure* terroir in Chiquet. Except for the definite Meunier fruit of the NV, nearly all of the other wines are anti-varietal, even the Chardonnay from Aÿ, which is less a Chardonnay and more a dialect of Aÿ we don't usually hear.

Peter Liem writes: "This is one of the finest grower estates in the Grande Vallée de la Marne. Chiquet's wines combine a generous depth of fruit with a pronounced character of place—if you want to know what the wines of the Grande Vallée should feel like, these are an excellent introduction. Chiquet's wines generally show well young, thanks to the forward fruitiness of their Marne terroirs. Yet with their balance and depth they can also age extremely well, even the non-vintage Brut Tradition, as I've seen from several old examples dating all the way back to 1964."

We sell a lot of Chiquet, though I sense the Champagne is in some way misunderstood. By me as well. I am struck by how chiseled and articulate Nicolas' wines are. I usually think of them as either chalky or fruity, but really they are precise, careful and thorough. I wrote they were "quiet heroes," because they don't often get the attention some of the others do.

This is a large estate as Récoltants go, with 23 hectares. Chiquets have vineyards in Hautvillers, Mareuil-sur-Aÿ and in Aÿ, from which they make what is probably the only all-Chardonnay Champagne to emerge from

this Pinot Noir town. Their base wines always undergo malolactic, but the Champagnes are quite low in dosage, yet they have a suave caramelly richness.

I've sometimes heard myself say that Chiquet's NV is what Moët & Chandon's *should* be. There's a walnutty style they have in common. Mind you, I don't clamor for opportunities to drink the Big Fella, but one time we were surprised with a bottle and two flutes waiting in our room when we checked into a hotel we frequent. Curiosity got the better of me, and we opened it. The Champagne was "correct" and a little bland and featureless, and I felt sad that it represented "Champagne" to so many unwary people, who probably don't think they like Champagne and wonder why it costs so much. Yet at the same time I felt considerable admiration; considering the volume that's churned out, this wine might have been much worse. I felt it was an industrial wine made with a certain scrupulousness. The parent company's business practices are another story, but the wine held up its end. Of course it was the Brut Imperial, and it was a European bottle....

I was at Chiquet less than a week later and played that Moët back in my head when Nicolas' NV was served. Chiquet has more character in every way, more fruit, more interplay of flavors, clearer diction, just more interesting *and tasty*.

Gaston Chiquet at a glance // 23 hectare estate means we can get some wine to sell! Which is lucky for us, because these are sensually gorgeous, hedonistic wines that everyone can cozy up to.

how the wines taste // They taste focused, refined and friendly. Even at their ripest they're slim and even at their tallest they're willowy. They taste like the wines of a man who respects his land. They split the difference between the really adamantly mineral Champagnes and the overtly fruity ones. They are classical, not romantic. They are thoughtful but not aloof, like their maker!

**Gaston Chiquet “Tradition” Brut, N.V.**

KCQ-1

Something I adore about Nicolas is that he really does care about adjusting his disgorgement schedules so we're neither tasting nor selling cruelly woozy, bitingly inexpressive wines. This is the *same assemblage* we sold last year, just a more recent 7/2013 disgorgement. 82% 2009, 8% 08 and 8% 07. Almost everyone else is deep into 2011 and one grower's already using '12. So: no infantile temper tantrum Champagne from *this* grower.

As always, 40% Meunier, 35% CH and 25% PN. I had a plate of coppery east coast oysters one day and wanted a half-bottle of Champagne to wash 'em down, and the restaurant was out of Pétres. I “compromised” with Chiquet—or so I thought. To my delighted surprise, this “fruit-forward” wine was better with the briny bivalves, and it taught me something. Basically, that I don't know shit from shinola.

But I do know this: the Champagne is completely delicious, every single thing there is to love about NV Champagne in its unfussy essence. You'll catch the pumpernickel flavor from the Meunier. You'll notice how silky it is. You'll feel a fleeting brush of chalkiness, and a cool hint of walnuts.

THE NEXT ASSEMBLAGE will be 2010-based with 14% 2004 and 7% 2009; disgorged 10/2013, with the same varietal blend. It's more pungent and scratchy, as one would expect, but what I didn't expect was how chiseled and delineated it would be. Even peppery. Not as fruity as the 09 but even more incisive and classy.

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

KCQ-2

Disgorged 7/2013, this has come a long way. It's still adamant and still 100% 2009, but it's become a fine forceful terroir statement. As it slims it should grow hazlenutty and wet-cereal-y, and its early coarseness is fading fast.

Back in '97 when I introduced this, it was seriously rad to have 100% Chardonnay from the cradle of PN that is Aÿ. I still don't think there's any other. You can see Aÿ terroir detached from PN.

THE NEXT ASSEMBLAGE OF THIS WINE will be a 2010 that was disgorged in 10/2013. It's a + wine also, though of a different sort, very green and sorrely; sencha and marjoram, but the palate is hugely mineral and savory, filigree and with a super juicy finish. This is the best 2010 I've tasted to date, and I wonder whether the vintage is quite the sourpuss I'd thought before. As 2009 loses flesh, 2010 gains it, and it may turn out to be a satisfying vintage for those of us who like acupuncture flavors.

Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Aÿ Brut, 2005, 3/1.5L +

KCQ-705M

The mags carry a vintage designation, and this 2005 shows the scallop-y side of that year, even a bit of maitake, and clean and delicious; quite round and ready for a large-format; barley and veal stock with bouquet garni, all into a long rocky finish. Disgorged 10/2013

Gaston Chiquet Millésime Brut, 2004 +

KCQ-304

AMONG THE VERY BEST VALUES IN THIS OFFERING.

Same disgorgement (09/11) as last year, so a chance to watch it mature on the cork. It's fantastic Champagne and shows '04 at its best. At various times my notes have included associations of blueberry, thyme, chervil, burdock, basil oil, mizuna, sencha, chalk and rose hips, and it's also a chance to see a *vital and different* expression of PN—the blend is 60-40 PN-CH.

LATER THIS YEAR WE'LL SEE THE 2005 VINTAGE, which gives a fine impression and is more generous than the '04.

Gaston Chiquet "Spécial Club" Brut, 2005, 6/750ml + (+)

KCQ-405

Disgorged 07/13, this keeps getting better. It's 35% Aÿ CH (from "Croix Courcelles"), 40% Hautvillers PN (from "Colombier, our best PN parcel") and 25% the Blanc d'Aÿ blend! It's turning into a grinning chalky beast, an incisive Champagne with a ton of torque and the sense of cold-pressed grapeseed oil. This and the Gimonnet Club are the two best '05s I can recall.

Gaston Chiquet "Spécial Club" Brut, 2007, 6/750ml +

KCQ-407

11% Frère Martin (Aÿ—Chardonnay), 59% Cerisier (Dizy—Chardonnay) and 30% Greboursy (Dizy—Pinot Noir), so as you see, an *entirely different assemblage* from the '05, which shows a vintner who is thinking and not just proceeding by rote.

Disgorged 9/2013, this is nearly ready to offer; it's pungent, as '07s can be, and needs air, but it's detailed and salty and incisive, and to tell you the truth—absurdly delicious. In this case lightness is a virtue, and this lovely wine is a potion of white flowers, white tea and delicate herbs and mint.

Gaston Chiquet Rosé Brut, N.V.

KCQ-8

Now all 2010, disgorged 10/2013, 40% Meunier, 40% PN and 30% CH, and yes that's 110% but it includes the still red, and I suck at math. That still red, by the way, is a mix of PN/PM and all from 2009. Basically, boy, is *this* pretty! PM scents of strawberries, chocolate, *patisserie*, leading to a finish that's like sucking on wisteria blossoms.

vineyard area // 14 hectares
annual production // 10,400 cases
villages & soil types // Cumières 1^{er} Cru (calcerous soils, sandstone and clay)
grape varieties // 41% Pinot Noir, 37.5% Pinot Meunier, 21.5% Chardonnay
Ampelos Certification // lutte raisonnée



OK, here's the many previews of coming attractions:



Houtirants is the field blend of all the allowed Champagne varieties. It's the name of the parcel. It's starting to smell and taste like Champagne, and rather good! We'll see it in 2-3 years, if all goes well.

2006 vintage is on its way at some point. 70-30 PN/CH and half done in casks, it has fantastic potential. I hope he releases it before the...

2005 vintage, which is... complicated, and while it's moving forward, I think it will need 4-5 more years.

2002 vintage redux, a new disgorgement, from which a tiny amount should be offered in 2015, and which is sensational.

2000 vintage, from which we had two corked bottles, so I don't have a note.

1999 vintage is an amazing masterpiece, to be sold "some time." Cool, OK; put me down for "some wine."

Coteaux Champenoise Rouge, 2012 Pinot Meunier is quite seductive, though we'll need to wait at least a year to consummate our attraction, as it were.

Arriving at Geoffroy is sometimes like stepping onto a fast-moving treadmill. One year we were greeted with the prospect of a fascinating tasting of dosage, but Jean-Baptiste (or "JB" as we know him) added a twist.

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



We would taste a single Champagne with five different dosage levels as well as different types of dosage: traditional liqueur and “MCR” (*basically must-concentrated-rectified*), the method JB prefers, and one about which I have voiced a certain wariness.

To remind you, I know that MCR is easier and cheaper to work with, and it conveys a heavier sweetness, so you can use less and still obtain the sense-of-sweetness you desire. I worry that the only source is the Languedoc, and it troubles me that conventional Languedoc grape-must concentrate is going into Champagnes whose producers are want to speak of terroir and sometimes of organics. Up till now, when I’ve been able to taste direct comparisons, I’ve preferred the traditional liqueur. So JB put me to the test. We would line up the wines in order of perceived sweetness and would guess which type of dosage was used.

We were five: my colleagues and me and Peter Liem. We were almost perfectly aligned in the sense-of-sweetness, i.e., sample #4 tasted sweetest to four of the five of us. But it wasn’t. And though it was my personal favorite, it was drier than I’d have preferred *in theory*, and it used MCR. So, time to modify my hypotheses! Interestingly, three of the five of us liked sample #1 best, and this was in fact the least dry of the range, and was made with traditional liqueur. All of which demonstrates there is no substitute for tasting, and rigid philosophies that don’t account for the different needs of different wines are fatuous and intolerant.

The family has moved into brand new quarters in Aÿ, on the same street as Deutz and on the same street as Goutorbe, which gives me two suppliers on the same rue. This place rocks. The winery is constructed so that Jean-Baptiste never has to pump any more; everything can be handled by gravity. He also (finally) has the space he needs. Look, basically what this means is that the most *excited guy in Champagne* can now do everything he’s always wanted to do. And so his estate, already among the best in the region, will climb to new altitudes.

He’s joined a group called “Ampelos” which practice the so-called “Lutte Raisonnée” (or “sustainable culture,” or what the Germans call “integrated” viticulture) which formalizes a set of practices just a baby-step short of certifiably organic, and enforces the protocols with random inspections.

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 Geoffroys own 14 hectares in Cumières, Hautvillers, Damery and Fleury-la-Rivière, 42% Pinot Noir, 39% Meunier, 19% Chardonnay.

This year I had the impression JB was also seeing the question as one of balance, rather than trying to “force” the wines dry. I don’t mean to imply there was any sort of debate between him and me, far from it. We just talk as colleagues who can be candid.

Geoffroy “Expression” Brut, N.V.

KRG-11

This is still the same cuvée we’ve had since late 2013; disgorged 9/13, 25%CH 32%PN, 43%PM, 35% 2009 and 65% 2010.

It may be the most sheerly delicious very dry Champagne in the offering. The basis of this wine is front-loaded *big* flavor along with silky texture and a surprising sense of refinement. It’s also Meunier at its most soy-shiitake.

Geoffroy “Cuvée Empreinte” Brut, 2007 +

KRG-207

If I did a **WINE OF THE VINTAGE** for Champagne it would very likely be **this one**, not because it’s the “best” wine, but because I have enormous admiration for the choices JB made in producing it.

It’s a new disgorgement (12/2013) of the wine we had last year. Let me put it to you this way. The 2006 was an extremely dry Champagne, and this one is not. “After tasting blends with 2,4,6,8 and 10 grams of sugar, I was sure the best one would be 4 or 6, but it turned out to be 10, so that’s how we bottled it.” *OMFG—bless this man*. You don’t taste anything you’d ever have associated with “10 grams;” you just taste perfectly balanced dry Champagne, with a lot of smoky Cumières PN fruit and a curious overtone of apples. This will make fools of the dry doctrinaires. Balance is everything, and tasting is *all!*

Geoffroy “Cuvée Volupté” Brut, 2007 (+)

KRG-807

Disgorged 1/2014, and decidedly on the dry side. 80% CH, and 10% each PN/PM (that’s a first), and 45% cask vinification, less than the ’06.

Let me demur from giving a detailed note, as it was surly from disgorgement, and 2007 needs some babying in any case. It’s hugely promising, and certainly in-the-family of this always masterly cuvée, that represents **AMAZING VALUE**.

Geoffroy Millésime Extra Brut, 2004, 6/750ml ++

KRG-604

It’s growing (relatively!) more sedate with age, but it’s still a stunning “country” Champagne, thrillingly unpolished. The last disgorgement was 6/2013. I wrote “wintergreen, verbena, cherry-smoke and spice box” last year, and dem tings still be true, mon.

Geoffroy Rosé de Saignée Brut, N.V.

KRG-9

It’s all 2011, disgorged 10/2013, and it carries a faint whiff of “2011” and a rather more prominent impact on the palate. This bottle’s been open a day, we are told. A newly opened bottle is fruitier and the palate’s more angular, whereas the one-day bottle was... let’s say “herbal.” (*Incidentally, the Blanc de Rosé showed aggressively vegetal, and I’m deferring an offering until I see how it does over time.*)

Moussé Fils

Vallée de la Marne // Cuisles



vineyard area // 5.5 hectares
annual production // 4,100 cases
villages & soil types // Cuisles, Jonquery, Olizy-Violaine, Châtillon-sur-marne
(chalk, marl)
grape varieties // 80% Pinot Meunier, 16% Pinot Noir, 4% Chardonnay

Several years ago Didier Gimonet told me there would be a new member of the Club Trésors (of which he was then president) who would provide the very first Spécial Club bottling entirely from Meunier. He added that the guy was still below-the-radar but definitely an up-and-comer, a super-nice man, young and ambitious.

So I made a beeline. And all of it was true. I had long been aware of the Meunier Renaissance taking place way up valley in the Marne, in all the terra incognita near Château Thierry, an ad-hoc group of growers who'd rediscovered their old vineyards and wanted to give Meunier the respect it almost never got. I went first to Lorient in Festigny, liked the people and the wines (and especially liked the landscape, the loveliest I think in all of Champagne), and mixed a case to ship back and drink. I then went to Cuisles, to find young Cédric Moussé. Getting to Cuisles is no simple matter. You make one turn off the Marne into a side valley, and then another turn off the side valley into an even smaller valley, and then *another* turn to the quietest most out of the way village, one of those places where you can hear the chickens clucking in the *next* village, it's so still.

I visited twice and assembled wines both times. I emphasize this point, because I find it urgently necessary to drink the wines as *you* do, before I commit to a new agency. Tasting of course is fine, but wines are one way being "tasted" and another way being "drunk." And I need to see, as I work my way through a case, if the wines remain as interesting and attractive as they seemed at the moment of "tasting." A wine that shows well but grows at all tiresome after the 4th or 5th exposure is too superficial.

What I liked and admired about Moussé's wines was their poise and polish. They were refined, even intelligent for Meunier wines. As a rule the Meunier Champagnes go either into deeply earthy areas (e.g., Chartogne's *Les Barres*)



Moussé at a glance // Our favorite among the Meunier pilgrims in the Marne Valley (and elsewhere), an up-and-coming young grower who's the newest member of the Club Trésors.

how the wines taste // Classy Meunier beauties; savory and dark-bready and with the sorghum-sweetness of the variety, but also with a certain reserve and containment – elegance is the right word.

or they're hedonistic fruit bombs, but Moussé seems both to thread the needle between those profiles and to add something of his own. I would call that thing "good posture," but that's a silly Terry-image and you may not know what I mean by it. Put it this way: the Champagnes are highly flavory and loaded with Meunier charm, but they're also *put-together*, color-coordinated, all the flavors "drape" perfectly; they're fit, symmetrical, contained. They don't sprawl.

Cuisles has 20-40cm of topsoil over what Cédric used to refer to as "schist" but now says is not precisely schist. Either my French or my knowledge of geology is inadequate to explaining exactly what this rogue-soil might be. He shows photos of it on his website.

The estate is 5.5 hectares. "I don't want it to be too big; then I couldn't go to the vineyards," he says. The new winery is indeed impressive, especially from the environmental standpoint; get in touch with us if you want the details. Cédric grows a little Chardonnay but only uses

it for a Blanc de Blancs; everything else is all *noire*.

Cedric discussed a new production model with interesting ramifications I want to run past you. Basically, he takes vineyards belonging to a neighbor, and works them for a fee. He then *buys* the grapes, that he himself grew, from vineyards that "technically" belong to said neighbor. This would be in Cuisles alone. He could double his capacity, and he has the wherewithal, and he needs more wine—we're not the only greedy sybarites in the world, it would seem. Makes perfect sense, right? But it would make him an "NM" because that's what you are if you buy more than 5% in grapes.

This is irrelevant to me and it should also be no *thang* to you. Yes I know you were taught to look for the tiny "RM" on the label, but we're going to see more and more of these micro-negoçes exploiting a technicality in French tax laws. The artisan spirit isn't compromised, and everyone wins.

Moussé Fils "Noire Réserve," Brut, N.V.

KMS-3

Please note: there used to be TWO non-vintage Bruts, but what we have done is to collapse them into one, and give that one more age. The former "Or Tradition" is discontinued.

What we're shipping now, therefore, is still the 2009-based assemblage (50%, with 50% 08-07-06), disgorged 3/2013, and likely to sell out before the autumn. The dosage is perfect (of course, as it was assisted by *moi*) and the extra time on the cork has made it an awfully tasty wine.

Moussé Fils Millésime Brut, 2009 (+)

KMS-509

95% Meunier; the pre-disgorged sample had zero dosage, but his plan for the final wine is "It will have a very small amount." *Something like two grams, I asked?* "Yes, like that." The wine is solid and sophisticated, the firm face of Meunier. I'd accept it as I tasted it, it's so balanced and suave, and minutes long on the finish.

Moussé Fils Blanc de Blancs "Opale" N.V. +

KMS-2

All 2010, disgorged 7/2013. Cool and apple-y, blossomy and silvery; has less sheer fruit than 09, but the slim spine of apple-skin and graphite recalls Avize—maybe it's from the soil formerly-known-as-schist. Clean, satisfying length on the finish. He's so good at Chardonnay fizz, you wish he could make more.

Moussé Fils "Spécial Club" 2009 Brut, 6/750ml +

KMS-609

He will release this in July; the sample I tasted was disgorged before my eyes, still on the lees. It tasted firm and generous and salty; solid and (positively) earthy. A wine that stands at attention. Again, tasted without dosage, and a very small amount is planned.

Moussé Fils Rosé "Tradition" Brut, N.V. +

KMS-4

60% 2011, 40% reserve wines, some cask aging, some ambient yeast fermentation, and some 2011 flavor—though this is not in the foreground; it's blanketed by spice and fruit—but not entirely.

Henri Billiot

Montagne de Reims // Ambonnay



vineyard area // 5 hectares
annual production // 3,750 cases
villages & soil types // Ambonnay Grand Cru (limestone)
grape varieties // 75% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay

Generational transfers can be tricky. Laetitia and her husband really have control of the domaine.



Serge has fully retired now. I had the sense he was an uneasy retirement at first, and he may have, let's say, hovered. A little. "My father had his formulas, and they almost always worked," said Laetitia. "But in his later

years he may not have noticed when they didn't work, because he often didn't really taste."

That would explain the unevenness over the last 3-4 years, I said, and she agreed. She added that the "Cuvée

Henri 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 // Billiot's are not filtered 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 she 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. Her wines have marvelous stamina and brightness. They're hedonistic but not sloppy. Too firm and impeccable to be sloppy!

Laetitia” was in the process of being changed, “to be fresher and not to have the apple taste.” I shared my thought that there was one dud in the solera. It turns out Laetitia used to be a number of small tanks, but was shifted into a single larger one at one point, and there was indeed a flaw in the large tank.

Of course what’s curious about all this is, the so-called “flaw” in Cuvée Laetitia was actually enjoyed by many drinkers and *also* by knowledgeable reviewers, who saw its pear-droppy notes as exotic. And why not? But I still own old bottles of Laetitia, and she after

whom it is named concurred when I said it was a *classic* of grower-Champagne, that had become perhaps *strange* of late.

Ambonnay is Pinot land; 350 hectares and only 20 of them Chardonnay. Ambonnay Pinot Noir seems to be the sweetest, most Volnay-like in the Montagne de Reims. (Bouzy, in contrast, is darker but more earthy, while Aÿ is firmer with less overt berry fruit). The Ambonnay signature might be strawberry, forest-floor, sweet-100s. All of which are certainly present in Billiot’s wines.

Henri Billiot Brut Réserve, N.V.

KBA-1

50% 2011 and 50% 10-09, disgorged 1/2014, no malo (as always). Fresh aromas nearly obscure the 2011 character. The wine is hale and clear and *back* from whatever afflicted it, but the day I was there it was still stung from disgorgement. Still it felt like welcoming an old friend home.

Henri Billiot Millésime 2007 Brut (+)

KBA-207

The “plus” was given to the sample I tasted in Ambonnay, but I’d remove the parentheses from the bottle I drank four nights ago. That wine is pure vintage Billiot, though the commercial bottles are more recently disgorged—12/2013. It’s smoky, meaty and very good, quite *noir* but fresh; enveloping, luxurious yet bracing as ’07s often are. The empty-glass aromas are like an essence of Ambonnay.

Laetitia is exploring reducing the dosage in their wines, and I agree this would be welcome *provided the wines can handle it*. If you don’t do malo a too-dry wine can taste tart. A vintage like 2007 emphasizes this tendency. But I applaud them; they’re tasting and *thinking* instead of merely adapting to whatever’s trendy at the moment.

Henri Billiot Rosé Brut, N.V.

KBA-4

The same assemblage as the NV, with 9% still Ambonnay PN. Also disgorged 1/2014 though a couple weeks earlier than the NV. This was a bit more hazy, not literally, but its flavors were obscured by the 11-thing and fresh disgorgement. Must revisit.

Henri Billiot “Cuvée Julie” Brut, N.V.

KBA-6

Still 2006, disgorged 12/2013; it shows a little less clunky oak (and they agree this wine got too oaky, and they’re throttling way back with future cuvées) at least for those of us for whom anything more than a little oak is too much. It’s actually a lot like modern White Burgundy. Patience will also be rewarded as the oak is subsumed. Persons less persnickety than I will love this wine oodles and scads.

Jean Lallement

Montagne de Reims // Verzenay



vineyard area // 4.5 hectares
annual production // 1,700 cases
villages & soil types // Verzenay Grand Cru (limestone)
grape varieties // 80% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay

Michel Bettane was flipping through this catalogue and issuing various mutters of approval or otherwise, but when he got to Lallement he boomed out “Lallement: I discovered them!”

As well he did, and I can see why they appeal to him, as he lays high emphasis on precision, focus and a crystalline texture. All of which these Champagnes display. As do many others. But what very few Champagnes display are these virtues together with strikingly singular and distinctive terroir expression. I am always secretly delighted when Lallement's your favorite among these Champagnes. There goes the secret. If you want me to totally approve of your gnarly hippitude, just froth over Lallement and I'll donate my organs to your family.

Just four wines—but what wines! Original, complex, inimitable and yummy.

Starting with his 2004s the wines aren't filtered or cold-stabilized, and they are 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.

It's a singular flavor and Lallement's virile style exemplifies it. This doesn't seem the terroir for someone who wants to make gracious or delicate wines. If it were Burgundy it'd be Nuits-St.-Georges, animal and sauvage. Juhlin accords it special praise, saying “The village produces the blackest grapes in all Champagne... rich, peppery and virile. As a Pinot village, Verzenay is definitely the genuine star of the Montagne de Reims... pepper and iron notes... persistently long and hard for many years before it settles down to utter perfection.”

Lallement's vineyards are spread between Verzenay and Verzy both Grand Cru. It's 80%/20%, Pinot Noir/ Chardonnay, as you'd expect in these parts. There are twenty different parcels, about half of which are older than 40 years. Yes to malolactic.

I had hoped at one point to see the estate grow. I was told that a contract to deliver grapes to a *négoce* was



Lallement at a glance // Grand Cru village in the Montagne de Reims making powerful, grippingly intense Pinot Noir-type Champagnes. Tiny producer, only four wines, but WHAT WINES!

expiring. But here's what happened. Jean-Luc wanted to reclaim just two parcels for his own production. Just two! It was about 15% of what he was selling the Big Boy. But the *négoce* did what they're trained to do, and leveraged like a punk. "If we can't have those grapes then you can just keep all your grapes."

And this is one of the *négoce* we actually approve of—one of the good guys. But this sort of behavior is hard-wired in them. Still, it would seem to be child's play to either call their bluff or just sell your grapes any old where. It's not like there's a soft market for Verzenay Pinot Noir.

But I didn't feel it was my place to ask. There was no way to phrase the question that didn't amount to "No *juevos*, huh?" But there was one thing I could do, and I did it. "Jean-Luc," I said, "If you kept your entire production, and are concerned there's no one to buy all the additional wine, I'll buy it. We can never get enough Champagne from you as it is." This seemed to register.

Of course there's more to it than that. To vinify another 800 cases would entail a large investment in space and equipment, not to mention a radical change in cash-flow and quality of life. Still, I hate to let the bully win.

Jean Lallement Brut, N.V. + +

KLT-1

Now 80% 2010, 20% 2009, disgorged 9/2013. With '10 in the mix it's more silvery but man, is this chiseled and filigree and lacy, like those closeup pictures of snowflakes. So gossamer yet so long, it seems classier with each passing year. As always, 80-20 PN/CH.

It's the same *cuvée* as last year, just more recently disgorged—November 2012 in fact. If anything it showed leesier and chalkier than usual, and I had the sense there was more Verzy showing through. But really, this silvery crystalline being is just absurd, one of the treasures of the wine world.

Jean Lallement "Réserve" Brut, N.V. + + (+)

KLT-2

I'm certain this is the best edition of this wine *ever*, and along with Varnier's *Cuvée Saint Denis* it's a ludicrous value for a stellar Champagne. It's the most mineral edition I've tasted, and with time on the cork it could come tinglingly close to perfection.

The blue label, and our "Old Blue" is a good ol' dawg. Thank you for your response to my statement of last year that this was **THE BEST VALUE IN THE PORTFOLIO**. It is again. It probably always will be.

It reverses the vintages of the above, so it's 80-20 '09-'10. Different parcels go into it, giving stronger juice, and the signatures here are berries, orchids, violets; this one is seriously smoky and a *very* strong edition of this wine. It wants another year on the cork; the finish isn't quite as suave, barkier and crustier, more salt and at first more brash. Then watch as it gets all caramelized, like the "candy" of the brown bits you scrape from the pan.

(NOTE: we're still awaiting the next vintage, 2008. He's in no great hurry to release it, and I'm barely willing to wait. But wait I shall, however impatiently.)

Jean Lallement Rosé Brut, N.V.

KLT-3

Is there a more singular Rosé in all Champagne? Aubry has the blackberry but not the mint, and as dry as this is, it has both *gras* and oyster shell, plus green tea and flowers. It's all 2010 now, disgorged 6/2013, had some reduction to shrug off but it became true to type, duck breast and rose hips; the texture is crisper and more phenolic than in riper vintages, but these '10s are really pixilated, at least in this house.

*(Psst! The 2008 vintage is promised for this October. Lock it in **now**)*

Pehu-Simonet

Montagne de Reims // Verzenay



vineyard area // 9 hectares
annual production // 4,000 cases
villages & soil types // Verzenay Grand Cru, Verzy Grand Cru, Sillery Grand Cru, Maily-Champagne Grand Cru, Villers-Marmery 1^{er} Cru (limestone);
Le Mesnil-sur-Oger Grand Cru (Cretaceous chalk)
grape varieties // 78% Pinot Noir, 22% Chardonnay

The label, I'm told, is going to change. Good news. And David Pehu seems to want to deconstruct, for example, one Verzenay wine into 3-4 parcel-specific Verzenay wines, which is the kind of thing that always fascinates me.



And our hero David Pehu is a man on the move. In a couple years he promises an organic single parcel PN from Maily (Les Poules), which should be interesting. He also plans to bottle a trilogy of Chardonnays, each from single communes: Villers-Marmery, Verzenay and Mesnil. Alongside these will be mono-commune Pinot Noirs from Maily and Verzenay. So this is a grower who doesn't just talk about terroir; he wants it to show.

I was stoked to have discovered this man and his wines. The Chartognes led me to him. It was hard to take a second supplier in Verzenay, first because of the diplomacies involved and second because the portfolio space is taken up with something redundant instead of something new.

But not really, as you will see.

The wines are quite different from Lallement's in every way except basic essential flavor. Verzenay is, after all, Verzenay. But Pehu's wines are rather more glossy and fleshy, and correspondingly less sleek and filigree. He has 9 hectares of which 6 are Grand Cru; the balance is Chardonnay in Villers-Marmery (home of our hero Arnaud Margaine), but which he sells off – he wants to bottle only Grand Cru Champagne. His vineyards are a remarkably ecumenical group: Verzy, Verzenay, Maily, Sillery – and Mesnil!

The six hectares from which Champagne is actually bottled are divided into 39 parcels; there's some talk of producing a still Chardonnay from three parcels in Villers-Marmery.

Pehu-Simonet Blanc de Blancs Brut, N.V. +

KPS-2

All 2009, all Mesnil, all stainless steel, no malo, disgorged 9/2013, the only 100% Mesnil I offer at the NV level—and the wine is sensational, showing *the* aroma of hillside Mesnil; the palate is wonderful, satsumas, fennel pollen, mussels and langoustine and chalk like a madman, with classic saffron and brioche.

Pehu-Simonet “Selection” Brut, N.V. +

KPS-1

70% 2011 and 30% a “solera” going back to 2005. Disgorged 12/2013, 70-30 PN/CH, with all CH from Verzenay; the Champagne is lavish, glossy, with aromas of plum blossom; it’s what I’d call “swank” and yet it has all the angular wonky charms of farmer fizz.

Pehu-Simonet “Transparence” Extra Brut

KPS-5

Partial malo, and not on purpose! It’s all 09, 70-30 PN/CH, disgorged 10/2013, dosage teensy, all Vernenay and as always a PN statement in an earthy angular form; a husky sort of wine, it would have a 5-o-clock shadow at 2-o-clock. Like an applewood smoked pork chop with a perfect crusty sear and char marks here and there.

Pehu-Simonet Blanc de Noirs Brut, N.V.

KPS-6

As always from two *climats* in Verzenay—Pertois and Noues. 60% in cask, all 2009, it’s a seductive and sumptuous Champagne, at least if you can be seduced by quirky smart people whose body type runs toward “fleshy.” I used this wine at a seminar at last year’s IPNC and tasters all agreed, it’s a *statement* of Pinot Noir with surprising expressiveness and character. Disgorged 10/2013.

Pehu-Simonet Millésime Extra Brut, 2006

KPS-406

50% PN Verzenay, 50% Chard from Mesnil and Verzenay, disgorged 12/2013. It’s full of character and the stockiness of ’06, but I must say I wonder why it’s so dry. Maybe it’s a tic of mine, and maybe you’ll think it’s perfect, but the Champagne has a dour cast, even with all other aspects in place, especially length. I won’t block it from you, but I have my reservations.

NOTE: there’s a Rosé 100% 2011, disgorged 1/2014, that has some of that celery-broccoli thing to shed – or not to shed. In any case I want to buy us some time to see where this “thing” goes. If we offer it later in the year it’ll be because it cleaned itself up.

A. Margaine

Montagne de Reims // Villers-Marmery



vineyard area // 6.2 hectares
annual production // 4,600 cases
villages & soil types // Villers-Marmery 1^{er} Cru (clay-limestone)
grape varieties // 90% Chardonnay, 10% Pinot Noir

The redoubtable Brad Baker wrote a very flattering report on Margaine in issue 17 of his Champagne Warrior e-zine. It goes into great detail, and is exceptionally well researched. Visit www.champagnewarrior.com/ChampagneWarriorIssue17.pdf to read it.



Brad was accurate describing Arnaud as “humble,” though I myself would say he’s exceptionally thoughtful, and humility follows naturally from that temperament. His wines, also, are careful and focused, not especially gushing. A curious facet of a visit to this domain is how good the Vins Clairs are. The ’13 Chardonnays made me think of ’99s: very seductive yet still classical. Yet even after malo they showed very low pH, in the 3.1 to 3.15 range,

and of course this translates eventually into Champagnes that the palate can “read” as phenolic, especially when you rush-taste through a bunch of them. You know the old trope about Champagne with oily food? These boys will sandblast any goop off your tongue, believe me.

He experimented with cover-cropping in his vineyards. It’s trendy, and the results seemed to be favorable. Plus it gives a grower a chance to say a fashionable thing. But

A. Margaine at a glance // An island of Chardonnay in a sea of Pinot Noir creates near Blanc de Blancs giving the most simply delicious Champagnes in this portfolio.

how the wines taste // They have their own minerality and tropical fruitiness; they’re bigger bodied than wines of the Côte des Blancs, and to my mind they’re just about as pretty as Chardonnay can be. Damn, they could almost be Riesling! Recent developments seem to suggest a transition to a more “serious” and less flowery style. We shall see! It’s a 95% village for Chardonnay. These can be some of the most hauntingly beautiful and original Champagnes you’ll ever drink.

it didn't work. The first few years he tried it, it depleted nitrogen and potassium inputs into the vines, leading to reduction flavors in the wines. Equilibrium is since restored.

I would never claim this is a sacred Truth engraved in stone; it's just one guy's experience. To be considered, whenever sacred Truths are asserted.

Arnaud has also experimented with a *saignée* Rosé, to be offered alongside his regular Rosé in about three years. It was delicious! And a 2002 reserve wine we tried was so like Riesling it would have been guessed as Riesling by 90% of growers in Germany.

Arnaud brought out some 2007 Pinot Noir in its red form for us to taste, to show the kinds of wines he's blending into his Rosé. This wine was delightfully ridiculous; it reeked of strawberry, and was compulsively tasty. We wanted to sneak the bottle under our topcoats and basically, you know, vandalize our host.

Driving around Villers-Marmery you notice all the Veuve Clicquot signs in the vineyards; they own a lot of vineyards here. And I imagine this Chardonnay is part of their "style"—if indeed this house even has a style any more—for these are unique Chardonnays. Yet I

thought of the wines being blended away and felt nothing but regret. Why do anything to diminish the singular? Can there ever be too much distinctiveness in the world?

Villers-Marmery is an anomaly in the Montagne de Reims, an island of Chardonnay in a sea of Pinot Noir, you might say. You have a meter of topsoil, then chalk (in the Côte des Blancs it's just 10 cm of topsoil). Yet Chardonnay evidently came to Villers by accident. Around the turn of the century one grower happened to try it and lo, it was good. Others followed. Now we have something unusual and actually gorgeous.

I tasted another grower's wine from Villers-Marmery and it had that flavor, though without the class of Margaine. The village expresses a new face of Chardonnay and expands the range of possibilities for Champagne. Or so I opine. There's evidently quite some debate about the particular clone of Chardonnay planted in these vineyards. I think you'd have to have a schoolmarmish palate to object to Champagnes such as these. In fact there's some chit-chat about Villers (and its neighbor Trépail) being ideal for Chardonnay because its eastward exposition guards against spring frosts, to which the Chardonnay is prone.

A. Margaine Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut, N.V.

KAM-7

Malo here, half-and-half cask-tank, all 2010, disgorged 1/2014, and of course, tres sec. The fragrance is markedly talc-y and chalky, like fresh fish chowder made with starchy pasta water; less mint than ginger, it needs food, but not the usual salty-cheesy stuff. Maybe fish & chips if you go easy on the tartar sauce. The very thing I can *never* do...

A. Margaine "Cuvée Le Brut" Brut, N.V.

KAM-1

As always the assemblage is highly intricate, markedly so for a smallish grower. Ready? 48% 2011, 20% '10, 12% '09, 4% '08, 12% '06 and 4% '02. It's 92-8 CH/PN, disgorged 1/2014. Classic Margaine aromas; the palate shows the cattiness of '11 but let's allow for the very recent disgorgement, and watch what happens with time on the cork. When this wine's on form it is about the most wistful, exquisitely white-flowery crushed chalky Champagne I know.

A. Margaine "Spécial Club" Brut, 2008, 6/750ml + (+)

KAM-408

Taste this next to Hébrart's 2008 Club, and see the dramatic significance of texture. Hébrart floats, Margaine adheres.

This new (11/2013) disgorgement smells sensational, and the palate is penetrating and strong. It's a tiny bit drier than the last disgorgement (as often happens with successive disgorgements), and its ravishing early phase is drawing to a close. I suspect it'll be powerful and brooding before entering a hale maturity.

It's from three parcels, Brocot, Montmedy and Champs d'Enfer. 25% in cask.

A. Margaine "Spécial Club" Brut, 2007, 3/1.5L (+)

KAM-407M

No malo—brave man! 34% in cask, two parcels, Brocot and Basleuri. The cask shows to very fine effect here, and the zippy '07 needs it. Digital hi-def texture, racy, kirsch and flint; highly snappy but not at all tart.

A. Margaine "Cuvée Traditionelle" Demi-Sec, N.V. (+)

KAM-5

As always this is the same base-wine as the NV Brut, which shows respect and integrity. It has some of the '11 veggies though the higher sweetness (33g/l) obscures it a little. I repeat I am finicky about these catty flavors, and you should taste and decide for yourself.

Vilmart & Cie

Montagne de Reims // Rilly-la-Montagne



vineyard area // 11 hectares
annual production // 9,000 cases
villages & soil types // Rilly la Montagne 1^{er} Cru (calcerous clay and limestone)
grape varieties // 60% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir
Ampelos Certification // lutte raisonnée

At one point we stood in Laurent's new treasure-room in the cellar, tasting a few wines he'd let us select. I wanted to taste unremarkable wines, to satisfy my curiosity. But there's nothing at Vilmart that isn't remarkable, as I ought to have known.

We were four people, standing shoulder to shoulder across a small table, and as the wines proceeded I felt a kind of intimacy settle over the room, the kind that children feel when they're hiding from someone. Perhaps we were hiding from the quotidian world outside, drinking a friend's old wine, enveloped in gratitude and happiness.

When you read this we will have been working for a few months with Laura Williamson, M.S. and I know it will be fruitful and joyous. Laura and I did a little "retreat" up here in Roslindale, just to talk in meta-terms about this ever-strange thing I do, and to toast our new comradely bonds I opened a bottle of Vilmart's 2001 Coeur du Cuvée. Boy do I love that Champagne. And drinking it with Laura I was delighted again by its energy and luminosity. It always moves me, that sense of beauty with no apparent effort, as though it were ordained to have been just—like—that.

As I arrive at Vilmart, I find I have a feeling of anticipation and pleasure similar to the feeling of arriving at Dönnhoff. Not only will the wines be beautiful, but I'll be breathing my own air. Laurent Champs' wines have reached the level of making-it-look-easy, the lit-from-within-ness and serenity of that lapidary style so few wines have. I feel at home here.

It's not that the wines are always calm and serene. Sometimes they're frisky and even hyper—like the

crazy-good 2004 vintage. But they offer the flavor of homecoming, the flavor of belonging, the silent harbor of welcome. And even when they're animated they're never flirtatious, because in order to be coquettish or seductive you also have to be arch. And Laurent's wines already accept you. They are loving.

Peter Liem writes: "Vilmart & Cie. is not only one of the greatest grower-estates in Champagne, but one of the finest champagne producers of any type in the region."

There is a larger existential meaning to Vilmart, having to do with the circumstances of Laurent's father's life and the way these things have ramified for Laurent and for his wines. There is a gleam about them that isn't accidental. And without getting into the silly business of who the "best" grower is, I'll let myself say that no grower in Champagne is more significant than Vilmart, and that the wines, which were already remarkable, have become almost uniformly beautiful.

Beautiful is a word we seldom hear in wine-speak. I can't really say why. It might be similar to the absence of the word "delicious" in most published tasting notes. We seem to approach wine as if it were a sudoko puzzle we had to solve by grasping at it with our intellects. Alternately, when we respond spontaneously and sensually, the emotions can't help but engage. There are plenty of impressive wines and even *exciting* wines that aren't necessarily beautiful. Some of the wines

Vilmart & Cie at a glance // Wood-aged base wines give these Champagnes distinctly mealy and Burgundian flavors. They're often described as the best grower in Champagne or "the poor man's Krug." Vilmart's wines can offer a resonance and majesty unique among small estates.

how the wines taste // At best, Vilmart's wines are grandiose and resplendent. With sufficient bottle age these can take you up and up into rare altitudes of complexity. Even at ground-level they've got lots of flavor, as though the flavors were stated in BOLD CAPS. A further key to quality is the large proportion of pre-clonal Chardonnay vines. "These grapes are yellower than those from clonal vines," says Laurent. "And they have an incredible Muscat aroma." And Laurent, like every great producer, has a wife who says he's "a maniac for his vineyards."



that certain tasters describe as “hedonistic” are merely gaudy and lurid. Beauty seems like a prerequisite for profundity, and I mean *true* profundity, not just the affect of significance by virtue of mere power. I promise you, if you vowed to start thinking about wine in terms of its beauty, even for just a day (or to humor me), you’d find yourself starting over. Most of what you know—or “know”—won’t at all be useful.

When I reached the end of the tasting with Laurent this year, I felt as beauty often makes me feel, the presence of a certain silence. You notice the ever-present thrum is absent, the grinding background buzz of just coping. The wine in your glass is a psalm. Everything everyone says is wonderful. You feel actually pretty dopey, melting away like you are. You hardly feel you have to speak.

It’s clear to me Vilmart is a Champagne estate of unassailable consequence, a must-have for anyone

interested in the possibilities of this most suavely powerful and graceful of all wines. Casks are hardly the point anymore. Organic viticulture, (truly!) low yields, remarkable polish of fruit, and the deliberate patient pursuit of a vision of perfection make Laurent Champs’ estate a gemstone gleaming among the chalk.

I’ve written a lot here, and I respect that you need to know whatever may be *decisive* for you to buy or not. I get that. But I in turn need to know something. I need to know that you too are able to pause just enough to remember that feelings and history and culture and meanings orbit every single wine, and when we remember that, we bring more of ourselves to the lip of the glass. Other than being a decent habit of living, you’ll find that if you can do this, you’ll have a stay against burnout. It becomes a well you can drink from when you’re feeling parched, and the water will always be clean and cold.

Some Notes on the Cuvées

GRAND CELLIER is not the regular NV Brut, but rather a superior NV or, seen from the other angle, the least among the luxury-cuvées.

GRAND CELLIER D'OR is the regular vintage wine, majority Chardonnay, from older vines, half aged in foudre and half in barrique.

COEUR DE CUVÉE is from the very oldest vines (all above 50 yrs.), 100% barrique aged, 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir. There seems to be some confusion about the age of the barriques used, arising perhaps by Laurent's sensible policy of letting the vintage decide. In any case, some of the oak will be new and some of it won't.

CUVÉE CRÉATION. This cuvée will end with the 2000, and the fruit it contained will improve the quality of the Grand Cellier and Grand Cellier d'Or. It started as a "millennium" cuvée (remember them?) and then continued, but it turned out it was one special cuvée too many for this 11-hectare estate.

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier" Brut, N.V.

KVM-1

What I'm about to say is true of most Champagne, but it's especially true here: if you leave this on the cork for three years or longer, you'll get three times the quality you first purchased.

This year's wine is one-third each '11, '10 and '09—as always 70-30 CH/PN, disgorged 6/2013. Its signature flavors are lobster stock, saffron and Meyer lemon, and while it does show that "11-thing" it's also elegant and quickly integrating, and the dosage is ideal.

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier d'Or" Brut, 2009 +

KVM-609

I have two parallel notes, because we tasted from both the Juhlin glasses and from the newest darling, the Jamesse Grand Champagne. M. Jamesse is the excellent sommelier at Ch. De Crayeres, and he's designed a couple of stems that certainly do flatter many Champagnes in the most cunning way.

So, this is a really pumpkin-y and cox-orange pippin and apricot-y version of this wine, though from the slimmer glass it was more silvery, malic and mineral. I'd suggest the wider-bowl Jamesse for seduction and the Juhlin for study, as it really delineates the wine, almost deconstructs it. In either case it's a splendid GCdO, disgorged 4/2013, 80-20 CH/PN, *vin clair* in barriques for ten months.

Vilmart & Cie "Grand Cellier D'Or" Brut, 2007, 3/1.5L + (+)

KVM-607M

Disgorged 11/2013. Here the bigger glass is called for, albeit the Juhlin does its micro-surgery thing; the wine is more sumptuous and hedonistic from Jamesse, though with the pepperiness of young Magnums. It's lovely, if bracing right now, but will be a masterpiece in 4-5 years.

Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2006 + +

KVM-506

The best parcels, the oldest vines, the "heart" of the free-run juice, slightly more new wood, disgorged 3/2013. It's false to say these are "oakier" than the regular vintage wine; they're deeper and stronger. This has an iron spine above which are embers of leather, earth, caramel, and somewhere in the tasty depths, even fruit. The finish is sea salt caramel, saffron, sauce reduction and pan scrapings, and it's long and balanced, the best since 2002.

It was overwhelming in the Jamesse, but I preferred it in the Juhlin, where it showed more graphite and fruit.

Vilmart & Cie "Coeur de Cuvée" Brut, 2004, 3/1.5L + (+)

KVM-504M

Disgorged 8/2013, this swings in a quick wide arc between silver and green, wet forest and the whole verbena-balsam-wintergreen-Chartreuse madness of this beloved year. It's leesier and silkier than the bottle was, and also more complex; the finish is precise, deliberate and articulate. You needn't wait long—even two years will do—but try to do at least that.

Vilmart & Cie “Cuvée Rubis” Brut, N.V.

KVM-3

As always, 90-10 PN/CH, and again as always, one of the most singular and vinous Rosés in all of Champagne. Disgorged 7/2013, it's blend is half-half 2010-2011, and it reminds me of certain 2008 red Burgundies, their asperity and also their fervent aromas. There's a lot to like here, but it's like drinking a glass when someone's steaming cauliflower in the next room. Whatever will happen with these '11s?

Vilmart & Cie “Grand Cellier Rubis” Brut 2009, 6/750ml +

KVM-309

Disgorged 12/2013, and aficionados will know to get those orders in now, because we won't get much and he doesn't make it every year. It's pretty in a surprisingly *cool* way, and it's refined and classy, and in its precise way, intense. A real journey from the perfumed aroma to the wonderfully apple-y finish. You can ratchet up the fruit by using the wider glass, but why? It has all the fruit it needs; what's wonderful here is complexity and refinement. A regal, intelligent wine.

L. Aubry Fils

Montagne de Reims // Jouy-lès-Reims



vineyard area // 17 hectares
annual production // 11,700 cases
villages & soil types // Jouy-lès-Reims 1^{er} Cru (clay-limestone)
grape varieties // 40% Pinot Meunier, 30% Chardonnay,
30% Pinot Noir (with Arbanne, Petit Meslier, and Fromenteau)

The essential point of Aubry is to limn the very fine line between a kind of country classicism and an absolute embrace of the avant-garde.



And they do this in an idiom of naked dryness; the *relatively* mainstream NV Brut is the “sweetest” wine in the range, with all of six grams.

When I first introduced the wines I was thrilled to highlight all the heirloom varieties, and the many ways

Aubrys were true originals. I still am, and they still are. But what’s striking me more and more of late is the *dignity* these wines have been showing. My marketing side—as pathetic as that is—keeps wanting to be playful about the novelties of the wines, but my human side keeps pausing

Aubry at a glance // Great find offering unique Champagnes. Among the best pink fizz in the entire region. Be ready to have your mind expanded!

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.

before them, noticing their basic and unfussy truths.

The (twin) brothers themselves can seem irascible, and certainly they are colorful. But again, below these flourishes of personality are two very serious people. They didn't do the heirloom varieties because "it would be cool," but instead because they were curious. Why were these vines planted at all? What became of them? What do they taste like?? What could they possibly say?

We spoke with Philippe Aubry about the 2005 issue, and mentioned a theory that geosmin was the culprit. He was unsure, and thus produced what came to be known as "Aubry's Box Of Hell," consisting of little vials of wine-flaws by which one learns to spot their special torments. You should have been the fly on the wall, with all of us sniffing at these teensy eye-dropper bottles and wrinkling our faces in disgust. We love our work, man. Next year we should ask him if we can sniff some glue.

One year we arrived at 1:30 and the first thing Philippe asked was whether we'd had lunch. "No no, we're fine," I began, but he cut me off. You see, he wasn't offering lunch; he wanted to know what condition our palates were in. I've been doing this gig twenty-seven years now, and this was a first. And a VERY smart one. He would calibrate his pouring sequence to account for the change in our palates had we in fact eaten.

It's a hoot tasting with these guys. I can tell the twins apart now, but only because Philippe had double-bypass surgery last April, and is a changed man. That's not a happy reason, but he feels better and doesn't smoke any more. I wonder if his palate will change, and if it does,

whether his sense-of-sweetness will change. For this is always a very dry group of wines. They love doing the flavor-association thing; when they pour a sample they are constantly muttering flavors to themselves, having a big ol' time. If you say an association they stop and say "Yes! Blackberry!" and log it into their book.

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 Petit Meslier, but all I can say is that's as may be; what I taste at Aubry is entirely convincing.

I finally got to taste Arbanne and Petit Meslier as still wines. The Arbanne was, as anticipated, fascinating; full of green flavors (i.e. the tastes of green things, not underripeness), along with lemon, litchi, cloves, mirabelle and sweet hay. The nearest cognate was in fact *Grüner Veltliner*.

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

I'm glad there's Arbanne and Petit Meslier in our world, because each unique thing is another word in the vocabulary of existence.

Aubry's is a seventeen hectare estate with vineyards in Jouy, Pargny and Villedommange, all Premier Cru.

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V.

KAB-1

60% 2011 and 40% the "solera" or perpetual reserve, whichever you'd rather call it, started in 1998. It's 45% PM, 25% CH, 25% PN and 5% "other" which means Arbanne et.al. A couple years ago, when I learned of this, I asked "Is this something new?" *Oh no, we've always done it; we just didn't tell you.* Disgorged 2/2014.

The '11 flavor is inescapable, but this is otherwise very long, incisive, coppery and a bit grassy, with a fine minty finish. Among the best of the year, in fact.

Meunier expresses here as barley, rye, rusks, crackers. So the wine is rusky, saline, iodé, mineral and appetizing.

L. Aubry Fils Rosé, Brut, N.V.

KAB-2

It is very dry, and tastes like ripe blackberries from which the sweetness had somehow been bled out, leaving the flavor of the pure berry. That is its signature essence.

This year's edition is 40% CH, 35% PN, 12% Meunier-as-white and 13% still Meunier red. Disgorged 2/2014, it is all 2011, which is to say it's Aubry Rosé plus NZ Sauvignon Blanc. Whether this abides or shape-shifts, time will reveal.

L. Aubry Fils "Ivoire & Ebene"

KAB-709

All 2009. 60% CH in wood, 15% PM and 25% PN, disgorged 12/2013. It always comes from the same three parcels, high on the hill and starkly chalky, and now "from a year we chaptalized nothing." It's round and rusky and like a big steak-y fish, tuna or swordfish, frizzled herbs, porcini dust, and chalk to the end of creation.

L. Aubry Fils “Sablé Blanc des Blancs” Brut, 2009

KAB-809

All the white grapes. 30% CH, 20% Arbanne, 30% Petit Meslier and 20% Fromonteau (a.k.a. Pinot Gris). Their word *Sablé* is used to designate low pressure (4 instead of 6 atmospheres), and this wine has zero dosage. Disgorged 3/2014, it was arch and sharp when I tasted it, but if flavor follows fragrance it will be fresh chicken, raw dough, Burgundy truffle; it's ripe and strong but with smoky char; an evanescent finish, long and duck stock-y.

L. Aubry Fils Sablé Rosé “Nicolas François Aubry” Brut, 2009 +

KAB-609

Also *sans* dosage. 30% PM & PN co-fermented, 10% CH, 20% AR, 25% Pet-Me, 10% Pinot Blanc and 5% still PM. Disgorged 3/2014, this is really exotic and fluffy, and is more flattering than the white, at least out of the gate. It's like petals, oysters and those pink *Biscuit de Reims* you see all over Champagne, plus nutmeg and duck skin. The weirdest iteration of the weirdest wine in the region, and I adore it.

L. Aubry Fils “Le Nombre D’Or Campanae Veteres Vites” Brut, 2009 +

KAB-409

It means “the old vines of the countryside.”

25% PG and PB (from the same parcel), 20% Pet-Me, 15% AR, 15% CH, 5% PM and 20% PN. Disgorged 2/2014. Maybe the sexiest-ever vintage of this. Orange-blossom, quince, chalk—it's actually Champagne mixology, you know; incredibly complex, rich yet hyperactive interplay of herbs, flower essences, minerals, langoustines; wonderful length into an ore-like finale.

L. Aubry “Aubry de Humbert” Brut, 2006 +

KAB-306

Named for the bishop who laid the cornerstone for the Reims cathedral, it's equal parts CH (in oak) PN and PM, old vines, a “couer de cuvée, disgorged 11/2013, and while this is generally a resplendent, almost corpulent Champagne, the new disgorgement is generous, round and crackery, with more silk, talc and chalk than last year.

L. Aubry Fils “Dualis” Brut, N.V. + + (+)

KAB-9

**THE MOST PROFOUND AND REMARKABLE CHAMPAGNE IN THIS OFFERING,
BUT THIS 2ND TRANCHE IS NO LARGER THAN LAST YEAR'S.**

The wine is explosively salty, with mind-warping minerality.

It's a first for them, a new cuvée. It consists of 1998 Chard, aged in new wood for “two seasons,” no malo, and a “sablé,” i.e. 4 atmospheres rather than 6. There's also 1999 PN that did malo, in 4-year wood for “one season.” It went *en tirage* in 2000 with “agrafé” (a cork, not a crown cap), and was disgorged in February 2013. Barely any dosage. Total production: 1000 bottles.

I'd had a disappointing bottle of praised-to-the-skies (and criminally expensive) Cuvée Winston Churchill a couple nights earlier, and as soon as I sniffed *this* baby I felt the gravelly darkness the Pol Roger seemed to have been striving for. My image-vision was of an old, stoic man who's spent his life working outside, and when he comes in for lunch the smells of earth and smoke follow him. The wine is adamantly long, with a keen forest-y finish. The empty glass smells like pigeon and summer truffle. This is the very opposite of frivolous. It speaks to a depth the Aubrys don't let you see otherwise. It is extraordinary, meaningful wine.

Chartogne-Taillet

Montagne de Reims // Merfy

vineyard area // 11.5 hectares
annual production // 7,500 cases
villages & soil types // Merfy (sand, clay with chalk and limestone)
grape varieties // 40% Chardonnay, 38% Pinot Noir, 20% Pinot Meunier,
2% Arbanne



You may have heard there was no real winter to speak of in central Europe, and the spring came early. How early? I was in Merfy at Chartogne on March 14th, and the cherry tree in the birdy courtyard was in full bloom, easily four weeks early.



Speaking of birds, an exceptionally lusty blackbird was singing its horny heart out, and my very sensible wife shot a little video from her I-Phone, to record the idyll. Maybe if one of us can figure out how, we'll upload a link, so you can see how giddy and consoling the world can be, if your sanguinity is flagging.

Mine often does, and when it does I can reset to

my standard prevailing jocundity, just by thinking about Alexandre Chartogne, and how good this all has been with me and his family.

A few recollections...

Elisabeth Chartogne went far out of her way to help launch this portfolio in its inception, by being my *liaison* on the ground in Champagne, and refusing to take any

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.

how the wines taste // Extremely spritzzy and highly leesy—one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronomer! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

money for it. Yes it was self-interested, but not directly, and it couldn't have happened without her.

At first all I knew was there was a son. Then I learned he was interested in wine. Then one day, as we sat under a blossoming early spring tree in their garden, schmoozing with Phillippe Chartogne (and drinking some urgently needed caffeinated beverages...) I learned that Alexandre was *stage-ing* at Selse. "That's all I need; now he's going to want us to buy three dozen wooden barrels..."

Sometime in those years Elisabeth brought her (then) young son to meet my wife and me at L'Arnsbourg, a remote 3-star in the northern Vosges National Park. I'd been singing its praises to her, that it was stellar and affordable, and she wanted it to be junior's first 3-star meal. Awwww!

I wasn't surprised when Alexandre assumed the estate, and I wasn't surprised that he was ambitious. What did surprise me, and continues to surprise me, is that he is the most passionately curious vigneron I know, not only in Champagne, but just maybe anywhere. He is pursuing something that doesn't take the form of accolades—though these will surely come—and hardly even asks for *answers*. It's a quest for a kind of immersion, an unquenchable desire to experience.

I believe that Alexandre Chartogne is ***the most exciting young producer in Champagne***. And I also believe he drank from the fountain of wisdom when he said to me, "I do not feel good when I'm sure about something." Because that's how you measure the hunger in a man's soul.

It begins with a new/old approach to vineyard work, bio-dynam-ish, one might say. Critters (sheeps and horses), soil analyses of remarkable detail, each aspect of viticulture challenged and changed as necessary. Cellar-work is also excitingly new. Indeed there's almost too *much* information to give here. Alexander's blog is a lovely source for info and updates, and the estate's website gives all the basics. Suffice to say there's a vivid spirit of inquiry here, the likes of which I have never seen in this habit-riven region.

Here's an example. Alexander has installed two fermentation/storage "eggs" in the cuverie. He wrote to us one year, parts of which I reproduce (having edited misspellings etc.).

Concerning those eggs, there is a huge vinification difference between the eggs, the barrels, the vats (inox or enamel).

- *In the barrels, the lees from the fermentations are moving casually. The winegrower decides to make a batonnage or not for many reasons.*
- *In the eggs, the Brownien movement helps the lees to be always in contact with the wine. This really helps me to reduce the sulfur amount (thanks to the natural lees production of sulfur), but also regroup the lees with the wine who are for me two inseparable elements.*
- *The result is:*

In the barrels: more wild in the barrels, more variations, possibility to lose the freshness of the wine, but have a big advantage, let a big oxidation level for the wine, and we often obtain the best result in wood (if it's not woody and hiding the flavors, and also if the parcel is a very good one).

In the eggs: a pure but also breathy wine, more thin and delicate than in the barrels. The lees do not influence the wine too much, but also do not give the wines reduced aspects as it often happens in the inox vats.

I also read in many articles that the eggs make very fruity wines. At home, that's totally false. It could happens on poor terroirs, but when the soil is respected, and the wine isn't only influenced by the grape variety, but also and mainly from the soil, we lose this very easy fruit, and obtain a pure terroir wine, focusing on the mineral, on the stones, subsoil influence (here, the result is more salty or stony thanks to our chalk or from our specific limestone).

Maybe this is all too geeky, but what it really shows is the questing of a restless mind and an ambitious spirit. Which is what the new family of Champagnes shows and then some.

The most important passion our young hero brings is a result of his *practicum* at Selse: biodynamics. Here are his words:

What is the terroir? Some say it's more than just the soil, but the terroir is first the soil. The roots take 46 elements from the soil that give the grapes complexity, finesse, sometimes minerality. The plant only takes 4 elements from the air that give anything to the wine, 4 elements that permit the plant to grow, but that's all; no flavors from the air into the wine. I never try to instruct my soil or my vines, how they have to live or what flavors they have to give. I only want to let the vines live in the best conditions; when the roots stay on top of the soil because the winegrower is too lazy to work or plow his vines, it's a real shame. I make walls in the soil, to see how the population in the soil is living and how the roots are reacting, and if something needs to change I change it.

With Chartogne-Taillet one appreciates the significance of terroir. Their land, while good (Merfy is "84%" on the Échelle de Crus) is not aristocratic.

Merfy in fact lies in the so-called Coteaux de Vesle; it sits on what was once the beach of an ocean covering what is now the Reims depression. Thus its 60cm of sand over the chalk.

Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste-Anne” Brut, N.V.

KCT-1

Next time we ship it will be this assemblage, disgorged 3/2014, and 50-50 PN/CH, 80% 2011 and 20% 10-09. It's drier than last year's masterpiece. It was the first '11-based Champagne where the green flavor was actually *agreeable*, if unusual for Champagne, showing almost Riesling-like green herbs, verbena and aloe vera; other than that it is bright and stony, polished and concentrated. The pick of the '11-based NVs.

I have to tell you, though, we're pulling ahead of our allocations, which is actually not helpful, because we take the 1st-quarter new-year wine to make up shortfalls in the previous 4th-quarter, which means the wines are younger and more freshly disgorged. I'd rather tell you what I said about Pierre Péters: Plan! We're not going to be able to keep stock for the full year, so buy in so *you* don't run dry.

A final anecdote. I dined a few months ago at Ame in San Francisco, and my companion was a well-known wine author, and they served Chartogne by the glass. So we drank some. My companion, who may not have had this cuvée for a few years, said “Wow, this Champagne has a huge amount of *impact*.” And yes, it does. It's a sensory parade, and seriously powerful considering how light on its feet it is.

Chartogne-Taillet Millésime Brut, 2008 + (+)

KCT-308

Disgorged 2/2014, 60-40 PN/CH, and as always made from parcels with more clay in the soil, and thus the acidity is more pointed. But this gorgeous wine is pointillist and silky; ginger and mint and white flowers; incredibly incisive and classy.

Chartogne-Taillet Blanc de Blancs “Heurtebise,” Brut, 2008 + +

KCT-9

The first in the single-parcel series, the base wine is unfiltered, the dosage is perfect, and the wine will be legendary. A mouthful of crushed minerals and pear-blossom; tastes as though it were passed through scree and glacier-dust; ginger and freesia and just-fading peony, but it's incandescently delineated, and if such a thing can be said, it's dramatically refined. And absurdly solid and long. Disgorged 1/2014.

Chartogne-Taillet “Les Barres” Extra Brut, 2009, 6/750ml + +

KCT-709

Scoring any of this wine has become a bellwether of your hippitude, certainly in Champagne itself. You merit, you get some.

As you know, it's ungrafted old vines single-parcel Meunier. The fragrance is wonderful, a patriarcho of Meunier; it's oratorical, declamatory, and fantastically complex; star fruit and 5-spice, underlying stoniness; long, chewy and generous. A low growl of vinosity; a truly masterly Champagne.

Chartogne-Taillet “Les Orizeaux” Extra Brut, 2009, 6/750ml +

KCT-809

Again single-parcel, this time Pinot Noir. Leathery PN aromas, even a little bacony, or like pancetta or coppa; it's more delicate than Les Barres; a fine splendid lady with demure manners. Notes of roasted tomatoes, cloves and ginger, but the whole personality is wry, dancing and smiling, with a salty vocabulary when the mood is right.

Chartogne-Taillet Rosé, Brut N.V. +

KCT-6

Disgorged 1/2014, and all 2010; roughly half-half PN/CH; it's spicy and needly as '10s can be, but it's also salty, rose-hippy and tart-berried—yet the *wine* isn't at all tart, but rather redcurranty, *groseille*, salmon-y and spicy.

Champagne Vintages

These will make you humble.



Most of you know that the vintage wines, i.e. the ones above the NV level but below the tête-de-cuvée level (if there is one) are where the values are.

It's tempting to start sussing a vintage when its wines begin to appear in the NV cuvées. Yet I find it can easily mislead, because the quality of material that goes into the *actual* vintage wine is different, and will often surprise you.

2009 is a case in point. It looked like a sunny round cheerful vintage as it entered the NV cuvées, but the vintage wines are quite adamant and sometimes even clunky and heavy-footed – or so it seems. 2009 recalls the young '99s, another vintage marked by yellow fruit and which seemed rather vulgar on first glance, but those young ducklings turned into graceful swans with time. They slimmed down, became sensuous and silky, and started showing class. My “issue” with '09, such as it may be, is based on a suspicion that growers will react to its low acids and give the wines insufficient dosage. The vintage *seems* less sanguine and more kvetchy a year on. But I am beginning to learn that we hardly know just *what* a Champagne vintage will finally look like until it is *out of its childhood*. So the only accurate things to say about 2009 are that it is ripe and strong, less flowery than fruity, and it remains to be seen where and

how it will find its inner gracefulness.

2008 has been lovable from the first instant. It's a high-acid and extremely flowery vintage that always smells fabulous. It feels like an easy vintage to have a huge crush on. But I felt that way about another floral high-acid year, 1998, and when that vintage left its babyhood it went into a shell from which it is only just starting to emerge. But when you taste a wine like the '08 Special Clubs from Hébrart or Margaine, nothing like those were made in '98. So I'm tentatively declaring that 2008 is the best vintage of the decade after 2002, which it resembles in miniature.

2007 is... small, a modest year of barely adequate ripeness, in many cases. Yet even this little vintage has given some beautiful wines. They don't seem like long keepers though.

2006 looked like a big chummy galoot of a vintage as it entered the NV blends. Yet when the vintage-wines arrived, I was struck by the incisiveness of the chalky mineral blade-end that so many of them showed, especially the Chardonnays. At this point I'd say I really *really* like this vintage, and that it appears to be reliable. It doesn't



suggest any adolescent funks or tantrums.

2005 is the geosmin vintage or whatever the hell it is, or was. Its basic nature is an undisciplined power; it is not a gracious vintage, even when it's clean. Often it tastes like the soapacious side of Pinot Blanc. Yet one finds exceptions, wines of a certain gracefulness that absorbed

for each '02 I think may be developing hastily, I open three or four that want to be left alone, as they should at this stage. In any case, the great wines of this excellent vintage offer everything the Champagne lover could ask for: focused aromas with flowers leading a charge including fruits and spices; textures of restrained power and keen expressiveness; flavors showing classic parameters, nothing



their strength of fruit. And as for the dubious aspects, that rotten potato thing so many of them had... all I can say is let's get ready to HUM-BLLE... because we didn't know where it came from or why, and now we don't know where it's disappearing to (in some wines) or why.

2004 seems to have become the badge of entry into the society of True-Champagne-Lovers. It was a huge crop, and much of its wine was competent and unexciting. But the *best* of them were the purest most vivid examples of *green* flavors Champagne may ever have shown. Green like balsam, wintergreen, spearmint, chartreuse, tarragon, verbena, lime-zest. It isn't always a *fetching* vintage, and some wines need more time, but whew, when you land on a good one it'll curl your toes.

2003 gave few vintage wines, not because of the heat but because of the tiny crop. The wines were sometimes good and always atypical, as if someone were marooned in Chablis and tried making sparkling wine there—in a hot vintage.

2002 is the Great One, about which the only caveat seems to be the markedly quick evolution of some examples. Yet

out-of-the-way. Certainly a marvelous vintage; potentially a classic.

If you find any older vintages, *2000* is/was a good year that seems to be aging fast, so drink 'em if you got 'em. *1999* is a beauty, or has become one. It's the closest thing to the Champagne paradigm, and very tasty now, though the top Chardonnays will keep and ought to be kept. *1998* is back from its cave, and showing well again in a snappy acid-focused manner. Best in Chardonnay. *1997* was an undemanding and entirely decent year, which I haven't tasted in eons. *1996* is and will probably always be a conundrum. Is it *finito* now, since its fruit is over-mature and seems to have detached from a still-stinging acidity? Or is this just a phase? And how could it be a "phase" when so many wines taste so decadent? I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I *suspect* the vintage was misjudged by people who love acidity, and who often make the mistake of supposing wines age *from* acidity. But I also remember how profound those wines tasted in their youth, when we thought they'd never die, or even grow old. Then some of them got old before they were ever young.

Like I said, Champagne will make you humble.



**LE MESNIL-SUR-
OGER**

If its true that the road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom, Terry Theise has been there and back. A brief perusal of his writing makes it quickly apparent that the man has no reservations about conveying his thoughts and feelings on wine, life, sex, philosophy and general cosmology. In Terry's world, it's all interrelated. We encourage you to jump headlong into the wonderful world of Terry Theise Estate Selections. Prepare yourself for a psychotropic experience.



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