

WINE News

Don't be shy about celebrating with Champagne.



FEBRUARY 4, 2019 FEATURES

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Champagne: A Region Focused on Quality

By Gary Westby

The Champagne region has the highest minimum quality standards in the world: mandatory hand harvesting; every site measured for suitability and already planted; minimum aging sur-lee in the bottle; and too many other standards to mention. But the minimum standards are the boring part. The best of the grand marques and growers are pushing, and pushing hard, to make the best possible wine from their already fully planted appellation. The only place for growth is in quality, and they are leaving no stone unturned. While the entire

region is moving to implement better farming techniques, such as HVE (High Environmental Value) traceability and certification, the most interesting moves are individual. In these pages, I take a close look at four different producers: one famous grand marque; one medium-sized negociant; one medium-sized grower; and one tiny producer, for a glimpse of what is exciting in Champagne right now. I hope that you will read, and hopefully sip along. This is some of our best stuff, and many are great values. A toast to you!

It is growers who are innovating the most radically in Champagne, and no wine in our stock shows that more than the **A.D. Coutelas “Cuvée Louis Victor” Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**. This comes from a single large barrel and is made in the solera style, with wines from 2007 to 2014 included in the blend. The composition is unknown, as 20% is bottled each year and replaced with the best vin clair in the cellar, regardless of variety. This wine has savory, deep richness and fans of Selse and Krug should take note.



The Champagne of James Bond belongs in your refrigerator too. No famous negociant goes to as much trouble as Bollinger does to make their **Bollinger Special Cuvée Brut Champagne (\$59.99)**. These crazy folks not only barrel ferment, they also age 250,000 magnums of reserves for an average of 10 years to make one batch of this Champagne! The results are both fantastically complex and refreshing. **93 WS, 92 RP**



The all Grand Cru, all Pinot Noir **Laurent-Perrier “Cuvée Rosé” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$64.99)** will always be made the hard way: with all the skins macerated with all of the juice. In order to do this, cellar master Michel Fauconnet built out a separate winery just for rosé. This method, which requires perfect grape skins as well as juice, yields Champagne with real Pinot depth, but no tannin whatsoever. This masterpiece is an icon of Champagne for a reason.



Cover: Maurice the cat investigates a photo shoot at Champagne Egrot.

Baron-Fuenté: K&L Staff Favorite in Value Champagne

I like the idea of Champagne being accessible, affordable and delicious, and so do Sophie and Ignace Baron of Champagne Baron-Fuenté. We have been working direct with this medium sized negociant from the Western Valley of the Marne for 10 years now, bypassing the markups of import companies and distributors to bring fantastic-tasting Champagne to your table. Each year their wines get better, and yet the prices remain more than fair.

I have to stop being surprised by how good the **Baron-Fuenté “Grande Réserve” Brut Champagne (\$24.99)** is. It is composed of 60% Meunier, 30% Chardonnay and 10% Pinot Noir and aged for three years on the lees, and is given richness and complexity from 40% reserve wines. It is a perfect party wine, with a light color and zesty zip that belies the large percentage of dark fruit. Subtle croissant-like notes balance out the citric liveliness, and the wine has a real finish that will



make you wonder: why do I pay too much for big names that don't deliver the goods? An even better deal is the **magnums (1.5L \$49.99)**, which get four years on the lees, and manage both more freshness and more complexity—if the K&L employees don't buy them all first! We also have **half bottles (375ml \$14.99)** available. **90 W&S**

Don't be fooled by the plain gray label of the **Baron-Fuenté “Esprit” Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**. This all-estate wine is aged for a minimum of seven years on the lees and is composed of an even third each of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier from Charly-sur-Marne. Effortless, classy and deep, this can go down quite easily and just be delicious Champagne, but the seriousness is there if you care to pay attention. Keep in mind that only Krug habitually ages its non-vintage for this long. This is a special, special wine at a screaming deal! **92 WS, 91 WE**



Michel Arnould: Rare Value from Verzenay

It is hard to beat the Grand Cru of Verzenay for pure class when it comes to Pinot Noir Champagne. The northernmost of all the Grand Crus, the village of Verzenay faces the wrong way, nearly due north, and yet produces nutty, deep yet delicate wines prized by every negociant and Champagne fan alike. We have been lucky enough to work with Patrick Arnould of Champagne Michel Arnould for 18 years now, and he has consistently delivered for our customers, with one of the best values in top-flight grower Champagne: estate grown from Verzenay Grand Cru.

His **Michel Arnould “Reserve” Brut Verzenay Champagne (\$32.99)** is the type of deal that makes me want to pinch myself. Composed of 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay, this wine is aged for three years on the lees, minimum. It is a dry style, with just the right amount of baguette-like toast on the generous nose. It is complete, balanced, easy to drink and has a great texture. But it also has the hazelnut elusiveness that one only finds in this cru; a subtle nuttiness that can easily be mistaken for barrel influence, and seems to play hide and seek in the mouth. The chalky terroir also comes through on the finish, making it a wine that it is easy to drink too much of! **90 DC**



one of three plots, and sometimes a combination of all three. This year it is made from the Perthois, near the lighthouse in Verzenay. It is a 100% Pinot Noir Blanc de Noirs, and the vines are 60 years old and massal selected. This wine is dry and tense, with kaleidoscopic complexity. The airy maraschino cherry fruit and lightning rod acidity play very well with the best pieces of sushi-grade tuna right now, but the best this wine has is yet to come. In another five years it will open up to reveal a warm, nut bread toast to rival the best Krug your cellar.



Vineyard of Michel Arnould in the Grand Cru of Verzenay, with the famous Moulin de Verzenay in the background.

On this shipment, we also received a very small allocation of his top wine, the **2012 Michel Arnould “Memoire de Vignes” Brut Champagne (\$69.99)**. This Champagne is always sourced from



Elisabeth Goutorbe and her husband Jean-Marie Egrot toast to the good life.

Easy to Love: Champagne Egrot

Elisabeth Goutorbe and her husband Jean-Marie Egrot run their tiny production Champagne house almost entirely by themselves. They get very little help from their cat Maurice, but can rely on Elisabeth's father, René Goutorbe of Champagne Henri Goutorbe for a little bit of help. Of the 15 acres they own in Ay, Louvois, Tauxieres and Mutigny, they only keep the fruit from their 2.5 best—mostly in Ay, but also a touch of Louvois Chardonnay for balance. Their home straddles the border of Ay and Mutigny, two great terroirs in the Grand Valley of the Marne, while their production facility is in the heart of Ay. We have been working with them since the launch of their brand, first sold as Champagne Elisabeth Goutorbe, back in 2008. Because of our long relationship as their US importer, we get a good allocation of their wines—even though they only make between 5,000 and 10,000 bottles per year! Their wines are a statement on the terroir of the Grand Valley of the Marne. In each of their offerings you will taste the power of the wines made from steep, south-facing slopes that are right next to the majestic Marne river. Any other spot this chalky would be planted to Chardonnay, but because of the precipitous steepness and dead south exposure, it is ideal for Pinot Noir. The moderating effect of the water on the temperature preserves acid in hot years and helps with ripeness in cold ones. All of the wines have big, dark cherry Pinot power married to crisp, knife-edge chalk drive.

Elisabeth and Jean-Marie are willing to wait for the wine to be right before selling it, and unlike any other producer we work with, their non-vintage Champagne is kept longer than the vintage. The **Egrot Brut Champagne (\$34.99)** is based on 2008, with reserves from 2007, and the current batch has seen eight years on the lees. It is composed of 80% Pinot Noir from the Grand Cru of Ay and 20%



Since being rescued from the pound, Maurice also enjoys the good life at Champagne Egrot.

Chardonnay from the Premier Cru of Louvois and dosed at a little under 8 grams per liter. This wine has the silky texture and tiny streamers that only patience brings and I think you will be surprised at the finesse of this bottle. That being said, the power is still there, and I love this Champagne with full flavored, hot smoked salmon. The dark cherry flavors are intertwined with perfect sourdough toast here. If you are only going to try one thing from them, this should be it.

The **Egrot Extra Brut Champagne (\$39.99)** is made for Champagne lovers who are looking for something extra crisp as an aperitif or to pair with oysters or other shellfish. This Champagne is composed of two-thirds Pinot Noir and one-third Chardonnay, entirely from the 2010 harvest. It is dosed at just 2 grams per liter, but with over six years of aging on the lees, it does not come across as overly austere. It actually shows more creamy notes on the nose than the brut, perhaps because of the addition of softer wines from Mutigny from the sunny 2010 harvest. The cherry fruit has a slight hint of exoticism, but it snaps back into laser focus on the finish, which is as dry as Champagne can be without having a mean spirit. I love this with the Kumamoto oysters that we get from Hog Island Oyster Co. up in Tomales Bay this time of year—this Extra Brut richens up with the shellfish, and gets me shucking the next one!

We have two vintages in stock from Egrot now, and although they are both 100% Ay Grand Cru and both two-thirds Pinot Noir and one-third Chardonnay, they couldn't be more different from each other. The **2011 Egrot Grand Cru Brut Champagne (\$39.99)** comes from a cold, wet and very traditional Champagne vintage and is dosed at 7 grams per liter. The wine is round and rich, with a pain grillé generosity that reminds me of old style Bollinger or Charles Heidsieck. The dark Pinot fruit has wonderful savor and complexity; like a red Burgundy of the same age. The texture, like all of the Egrot Champagne, is flawless, with tight streamers and nice creaminess. The back end is virile with great acidity and freshness, making this a pretty complete package.

The **2009 Egrot Grand Cru Brut Champagne (\$39.99)** by contrast is from one of the sunniest vintages on record, and is a brut nature with zero dosage. Tasting them side by side, I don't think anyone would guess this is lower dosage than the 2011, with tons of dark cherry fruit and pie crust richness. It is clean as a whistle, and the chalk drive of Ay Grand Cru brings it together perfectly.



Jean-Marie disgorges a preview of his upcoming 2008 vintage release.



Always a Pleasure: A Visit to Champagne Billecart-Salmon

This past year, I had the pleasure of visiting Champagne Billecart Salmon not once but twice. Located in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, in the very heart of Champagne, they produce Champagne here that is rightly famous for freshness and elegance. My first visit was during the snows of early March, to taste the vin clair with Chef de Cave Florent Nys. The second was in the heat of June to celebrate their 200th anniversary with the Billecart family. Both were unforgettable occasions.

The first place that Florent took us to see was their new barrel room. They just purchased 25 giant, 8,000-liter foudres, a few from nearly every barrel maker in France. These large oak vats will bring even more complexity and depth to their wines in the future. Billecart has one of the largest barrel programs in Champagne, with only Bollinger, Krug and Gratien owning more wood than them. They have 450 different barrels, of all sizes, but with an average age of 15 years currently. They only use them for alcoholic fermentation, never malolactic, and use them for their best Pinot, Chardonnay and even Meunier.



François Billecart and Clyde Beffa at the 200th anniversary party at the property this year.

After our visit to the barrel rooms, we went to the tasting room that the Billecart winemaking team uses for all their technical tastings, including the final assemblage. We tasted through the 2017 vin clair, which Florent explained will not be a vintage year for them. We also tasted the unbelievable Meunier and Pinot Noir soleras that they use for reserve wines. Now with more than 10 vintages blended together, these two wines, started in barrel and then assembled into tank, are the heart of their reserve program. Then we tasted the Champagne.

The Billecart-Salmon “Brut Réserve” Champagne (\$44.99) is one of the most consistently refreshing and balanced wines of France. It is composed of 40% Meunier, 30% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir, and the wine that we have now is based on 2015 with 60% reserves. This incredible commitment of reserves from past vintages gives the wine depth and complexity while maintaining the racy, zesty, pure flavors that are synonymous with this Champagne. You can never go wrong with this for the aperitif! **95 DC**

For good reason, the Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé Champagne (\$74.99) defines the entire rosé Champagne category. Composed of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir and 30% Meunier, it gets its color and rosé flavor from 8% red wine. This red wine is almost exclusively sourced from Billecart’s own village of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, from massal-selected Pinot Noir plots of 60–80 years old. These plots are picked at still red wine ripeness—12% potential alcohol—and then de-stemmed and cold macerated before fermentation. It is this red wine that makes the Billecart Rosé so special, and unfortunately also limits the supply. The finished product is the most elegant, restrained, dry and delicate wine that one could drink. The complexity is there if you search for it, but the pleasure is easy to find! **93 RP**

When we returned in June for the 200th anniversary party, my wife Cinnamon and I also had Clyde and Trey for company. It was a great opportunity for Clyde to catch up with François Billecart, and for me to catch up with Antoine. Not only did we get to drink the super rare Billecart-Salmon Bicentenary Cuvée (1.5L \$1,699.00), but we talked them out of a few magnums for the stores. This was a magnum and jeroboam only release—no 750mls were produced. It is 50% barrel fermented, 50% tank, and blended from the very best wines in the cellar from 2000, 2003, 2008 and 2012. This Champagne combines complex, spicy, pastry-like elements with an airy ease that one can only find chez Billecart. Currently, we only have two bottles! **96 DC**



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