

WINE News

*Every season is springtime
with Champagne.*



FEBRUARY 3, 2020 FEATURES

- 2 Ariston Aspasié: Our First Direct Import Champagne
- 3 Bollinger. Champagne Bollinger; Bonville. Blanc de Blancs.
- 4 Champagne Louise Brison: Value from Expense

Our Relationship with Champagne: Better than Ever!

By Gary Westby

It was February of 2000 when I started here at K&L, twenty years ago this month. So much has changed since then. I remember competing with my colleagues in the early days to see who could grow the longest paper “tail” from our old analog price guns. Now we use iPhones to stock the shelves, and our website is the envy of the retail wine industry. But K&L’s commitment to bring value to our customers has not changed, and I am proud to say that in the Champagne category, we can offer better value now than ever before. As our buying power has grown, we have become a leading retailer of Champagne in the US. Not only has our stable of Direct Import producers expanded, allowing our customers to buy at prices without the markups added

by import companies and distributors, but our relationships with the Grand Marque producers have deepened, as well. In the coming pages, Scott Beckerley writes about our first-ever Direct Import, Champagne Aspasié—we celebrate our 19th anniversary with them this year. Diana Turk follows him with a Bollinger story, Hollywood style. Finally, I wrap up with two pieces, one on perennial K&L Direct Import favorite Champagne Franck Bonville; and another on the elegant wine that Delphine Brulez is crafting at Louise Brison on the border with Burgundy. Below, please find three exemplary values: The Baron from the west of Champagne, the Arnould from the north, and the Launois from the mythic Côte des Blancs.

Baron-Fuenté “Grande Réserve” Brut Champagne (\$24.99)

A Champagne that our customers like to buy by the case! Ignace and Sophie Baron are a brother and sister team who make one of our easiest-to-drink Champagnes. This has wonderfully tiny bubbles thanks to three years on the lees, and very nice, refreshing zing, without being overtly lemony. At this price you can’t afford not to have a bottle ready.



Michel Arnould “Reserve” Brut Verzenay Champagne (\$34.99)

This Grand Cru Champagne comes from the Arnould family estate vineyards and is 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay. This has great power, but also subtle hazelnut flavors, and a very dry finish. It is aged for three years on the lees for seamless texture and a nice long finish. How can it be such a great price? We have been buying direct from the family for more than 15 years!



Launois “Cuvée Réserve” Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99)

The best-selling Champagne at K&L is back—but it will run out again. It always does! This all Grand Cru, all estate-grown 100% Chardonnay has the biscuit toast charm and lime zest refreshment that one can only get from massal-selected vines on the few acres of blessed land in Mesnil, Cramant, and Oger—sacred ground in Champagne!



Ariston Aspasie: Our First Direct Import Champagne

By Scott Beckerley

Back in the mid-2000s, I worked in our Spain and Portugal sector.

To this day, I still love the wines of these two countries. Rioja and Monstant remain perennial favorites of mine. The magic word “Tondonia” still causes a Pavlovian response in me, drool and all. About that time, an opening came up in the San Francisco store’s Champagne department. I had already been reading *Wine and War* and *The Widow Clicquot*. These two books sparked my interest in Champagne. So, it was *adios* to Spain and *bonjour* to Champagne. After a while in the Champagne department, I was thrilled to be invited to visit the region itself, with Gary and Cindy Westby.

The first stop, right off the airplane, was the graceful estate of Aspasie. My favorite Paul Vincent quote is about the village of Brouillet, where they are located. He said, “We are so small that we do not have a boulangerie, a pâtisserie, or a hairdresser!” Those three French staples. To this day, I am not sure if he was joking or serious. Aspasie was founded in 1794. Paul Vincent’s father, Remi, started running the estate in 1964. He and Paul Vincent work together to bring us their wonderful Champagnes. Aspasie was also the first estate to sign up for our small-estate program, so they hold a very special place in our hearts by taking this chance with us. The estate is 12 hectares, with vines going back 35 years, and though it’s primarily planted with the classic varieties of Champagne, they also have tiny plantings of Petit Meslier, Pinot Blanc, and Arbanne, ancient varieties which are rarely used. Aspasie is that great combination of the very old and the very new!

The entry-level nonvintage **Ariston Aspasie “Carte Blanche” Brut (375ml \$16.99; 750ml \$29.99)** is a bargain. This blend of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir, and 30% Pinot Meunier smells toasty at first, with a nice yeasty characteristic. Then, the underlying acidity and cleanliness comes forward. This is rich and zesty, all at once!



Competing with the popularity of this bottling is the always super well-received, by customers and staff, **Ariston Aspasie Brut Rosé (375ml \$19.99; 750ml \$34.99)**. Pinot lovers rejoice with this one. It is a blend of 50% Pinot Noir and 50% Pinot Meunier. A whopping 12% of the Meunier is vinified as red wine from an older plot of this variety. It is dry, creamy, and very cherryish in character. The minerality comes through on the finish, which retains that Aspasie “snap.”

The nonvintage **Ariston Aspasie Brut Blanc de Blancs (375ml \$19.99; 750ml \$34.99; 1.5L \$84.99)** incorporates grapes that come from the steeper part of vineyards that have soils with less chalk content. The result? A blanc de blancs that is creamy, with flavors of lemon meringue, vanilla, and golden apples. Unlike a lot of blancs de blancs, which need food to be enjoyed with, this one is just lovely on its own.



Paul-Vincent and Remi Ariston lead a tasting in Brouillet.

Also stepping out of tradition is the nonvintage **Ariston Aspasie Cepages d’Antan (\$99.00)**, which is a blend of the three “ancient” varieties of 20% Pinot Blanc, 40% Petit Meslier, and 40% Arbanne. Initially, it comes on rich and creamy, with hints of toasted almond and hazelnut. Then, white fruit flavors come to the forefront; and finally, that delicate and long, chalky finish. I hate to choose favorites, but, I have always admired and loved this bottling of theirs.

Other offerings this time out include the nonvintage **Ariston Aspasie Brut Prestige (750ml \$39.99; 1.5L \$84.99)**. A blend of 50% Chardonnay, 25% Pinot Noir, and 25% Pinot Meunier, this bottling definitely favors the Pinot components with its dark cherry fruit and spice. The Chardonnay pops out at the finish, with dry and lingering acidity.



The new **2011 Ariston Aspasie Vintage Brut (\$39.99)** is one-third each of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier, and has loads of pastry dough, nut, and cream flavors.

Last of all, there is the nonvintage **Ariston Aspasie Brut de Fut (\$59.99)**. This is a super small production Champagne (only 14 barrels) composed of the same blend as the Brut Prestige. It is fermented in oak barrels but sees less than six months aging in them. This results in a rich, fresh, complex, and clean character, with golden apples, cream, and lemon zest on the long finish. This, and the Cepages d’Antan, are always in the shortest supply, so don’t wait to purchase. Everything from Aspasie is memorable and unique, so there is something here for everyone! Here’s to you, Paul-Vincent, Remi, and Caroline!



Bollinger. Champagne Bollinger.

By Diana Turk

If James Bond isn't ordering a vodka martini—shaken, not stirred—then he's drinking Bollinger. Born out of a handshake deal where, to this day, no money has officially changed hands, Bollinger has served as the secret agent's Champagne of choice since 1973's *Live And Let Die* (and technically, a 187-milliliter bottle makes an appearance in the literary version of *Diamonds are Forever* even earlier). To commemorate this epic partnership and the release of *No Time To Die*, the twenty-fifth Bond film, Bollinger hosted a spy-themed food pairing event at Petrossian. Luxury lovers of LA suited up and headed to the celebrated West Hollywood caviar destination to check it out.

Bollinger is a Grande Marque founded in 1829 and based in Aÿ, a Grand Cru village in Vallée de la Marne best known for Pinot Noir.



Andrey Tolmachyov, Champagne Bollinger; U.S. Brand Director Valerie McDaniel; K&L's Diana Turk.



In 1911, Georges Bollinger's British representative suggested using the English spelling of "Special" to name the nonvintage release, since "brut sans année" didn't do the complex wine justice.

Bollinger "Special Cuvée" Brut Champagne (375ml \$34.99; 750ml \$59.99; 1.5L \$139.99) Though this is the entry-level wine in Bollinger's collection, the quality is astonishing, featuring a large amount of reserve wines that have been resting in magnums for five to fifteen years. The grapes—60% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay, and 15% Meunier—are sourced from over 85% Grand and Premier Cru sites. Once blended, the Special Cuvée is aged from three to five years.

The wine has a quicksilver character about it: nimble and bright enough to cut through heavier foods such as crème fraîche fries, yet lush when complementing classic pairings such as seafood and, of course, briny caviar. The textured mouthfeel is tempered by steely acidity and a racy finish. This is an opulent Champagne that still feels delicate, with a tiny bead. And at a tasting that included multiple vintages of La Grand Année, the Special Cuvée held its own.



Franck Bonville: Blanc de Blancs Greatness

By Gary Westby

We have been importing the great Champagnes of Franck Bonville now for almost two decades, and these wines have been a great success. I learned early to order extra magnums—no matter how many I get, our owner, Clyde, buys half of them! Visiting this great grower in Avize is one of my top recommendations for any trip to Champagne. Olivier Bonville, the current owner, is a lucky man. He has 50 acres of vineyard, all in the prestigious Grand Crus of the Côte-des-Blancs. With four acres in Mesnil, twelve in Oger, and whopping 34 in Avize, this is one of the great estates of Champagne.

His **Franck Bonville Grand Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99)** is just what I want in blanc de blancs. The current batch is based on 2017, with 50% reserve wines from a perpetual blend



Clyde, Olivier, and Gary in Avize.

that goes back more than a decade. It is a dry style and dosed at just 8.33 grams per liter. This Champagne has a perfect medium-bodied texture, limey, Puligny-Montrachet-like drive, and a chalky finish that won't quit. Out of **magnum (1.5L \$69.99)** it is even better, with an extra three years of aging the lees. The current batch is based on 2014, and with the extra time on the lees, the dosage is reduced to 6.67 grams per liter. If you have the people, buy the magnum—the step up in finesse and texture is remarkable.

I love to tell the story of the first time I tasted the **Franck Bonville "Belles Voyes" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$69.99)** with Olivier, back in 2004. His father had told him that no one would be interested in a single vineyard, barrel-fermented Champagne from his oldest plot, planted in the late twenties or early thirties. I played the ugly American and asked for half the production! That first batch was based on 1996, and now we are on the 2012. Our allocation has shrunk a little over the years, but we still get more than our fair share. This is simply one of the best Champagnes we stock at any price, with profound Meursault-like richness and off-the-charts electric minerality on the near-endless finish.



Champagne Louise Brison: Value Champagne, Made the Most Expensive Way Possible

By Gary Westby

Delphine Brulez is one of the few Champagne producers we work with who owns the vineyards that she makes wine from, and is also fully trained, holding a diploma of enology—a master's level of education in winemaking. Her Champagne Louise Brison, named after her great-grandmother, is in Noë-les-Mallets, in the Aube department, closer to Dijon than Reims. In fact, she studied her craft at the university of Dijon in Burgundy and considers herself closer to the vignerons of the Cotê-d'Or than to the marketers of Reims. As such, the main part of her production is vintage wine. She feels that the year is a critical part of the story of the wine.

Her latest release is the **2014 Louise Brison Brut Champagne (\$34.99)** and is composed of even parts of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, all grown on her estate. Everything is barrel fermented in small neutral barrels, just like at Krug or for the vintage wines at Bollinger. But the wines do not show that oak in an obvious way, at all. Delphine gives these wines a delicate, feminine touch that is flattering and elegant, never heavy or obvious.

The 2014 vintage is what they would call a classic vintage in the old days—something that they could expect twice or three times a decade. It was a long, cool, consistent season. Sadly, we have not had a growing season quite like this since 1988. The closest was 2004. While many wine writers have hyped up the opulent 2015s, the hottest vintage in Champagne until 2018 unseated it, over these more elegant 2014s, I disagree. We will have plenty of chances to buy warm Champagne vintages, but cool, consistent ones are on the endangered list.



Delphine Brulez at Champagne Louise Brison presents her wines.

If you remember the great 2008 that Delphine made, the 2014 has a lot of similarities to it, but with a more laid back and integrated personality. In my tasting book I wrote, “What a streamlined beauty!” It has not only subtle cherry fruit from the Pinot Noir, and lovely white fruit from the top-class Chardonnay, it also has cashew complexity that draws me back for more. If you enjoy it, cellar some bottles—this will go the distance!

We also love these Louise Brison Champagnes:

Louise Brison “L’Impertinente” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$39.99) Morello cherries, a touch of cranberry, ample structure, and a racy finish.

Louise Brison “La Mignonne” Brut Champagne (375ml \$17.99) Picnic size!



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