

WINE News

Ready for a road trip?



FEBRUARY 8, 2021 FEATURES

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Join Us on an Armchair Tour of Champagne

By Gary Westby

In this newsletter, we'll be touring the Champagne region through the bottles of our Direct Import producers. If travel restrictions ease, I hope to follow up by going in person—and I encourage you to do the same. If you are interested in suggestions, read through this and then email me at garywestby@klwines.com as I would love to give you suggestions. This varied region earns its reputation for quality with some of the strictest standards of any appellation in the world, but the incredible variety of styles, driven by an even more incredible variety of terroir, is less well known. Because Champagne is most often drunk as an aperitif, it is rare to make comparisons between the various wines.

But our Champagne team, and our Champagne-loving customers, are up to the task! I will start the tour on this page, with three selections, continuing on the back page with three more representatives from other subregions of Champagne. On page 2, we welcome Gio from LA, who will be taking us way out west with the wines of Baron-Fuenté. Stephanie from Redwood City will continue down to Mesnil, the most famous and expensive village in all of Champagne, with her piece on Launois. And on page 3, Scott from San Francisco will take us to the undiscovered slopes of the Côte de Sézanne.

Jean-Jacques Lamoureux “Réserve” Brut Champagne (\$29.99) We start our tour of Champagne in the southern village of Les Riceys, just three miles from the border with Burgundy and on the same Kimmeridgian clay soil as Chablis. This 100% Pinot Noir Champagne benefits from 50% reserve wines and is entirely estate. If you like a Champagne that has some bready richness and body as well as great refreshment, this under-\$30 bottle is a perfect choice!



Ariston Aspasié “Réserve” Brut Champagne (\$34.99) Continuing to the opposite corner of Champagne, a half-hour northwest of Reims, we find Aspasié in the tiny hamlet of Brouillet. This wine is aged for an amazing five years on the lees before release, double of wines like Veuve Clicquot. It is 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir, and 30% Meunier, and has an extroverted, toasty character as well as an incredible bead of perfect bubbles.



2008 Philippe Gonet “Cuvée Belemnita” Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$149.99) From one plot of Chardonnay planted in 1929 in the most famous village in all Champagne, Mesnil, this is from the greatest vintage of my 20-year career at K&L. This light golden, 13-year-old wine has fine brioche up front, and the finest minerality of any wine in our stock. This profound wine shows just how incredible small-estate Champagne can be. **93 DC**



Baron-Fuenté: The Spirit of the Vallée de la Marne

By Giovanni Bueno

If you take the high-speed train from Paris to Champagne, you might not even have the time to take a satisfying, jet lag-induced nap before the train conductor is calling out the stop for Gare de Reims. But, if you take the leisurely train, you'll find your spirits unfolded by the meandering Marne river and the beautiful, forest-tufted hills of the Vallée de la Marne. Here the limestone and chalk dive deep under the surface, and soils of sand, calcareous clay, and clay marls emerge. The soil, combined with cold, moist air, which challenges ripening of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, provides the perfect opportunity for the forgotten stepchild of Champagne to shine: Pinot Meunier.

Located in Charly-Sur-Marne, Baron-Fuenté is an excellent steward of the Meunier grapes, and nowhere is it better showcased than in their Grande Réserve bottling. Baron-Fuenté has invested in state-of-the-art pressing houses and employs dedicated care of their over 90 acres of estate-grown grapes to produce excellent, cool-climate wine.

The **Baron-Fuenté "Grande Réserve" Brut Champagne (375ml \$14.99; 750ml \$24.99; 1.5L \$54.99)** has robust acidity, but that's



softened by a full malolactic fermentation. With charming aromas of apple and pear, with slivers of lemons and marzipan, the Meunier in this blend makes for a juicy, delicious wine. The *cépage* is a Vallée de la Marne powerhouse with 60% Meunier, 30% Chardonnay, and 10% Pinot Noir, and they are all aged at minimum with three years on lees, with the magnum getting an extra year of age. If you're looking for something sweeter to pair with dessert rather than an aperitif, leap for the **Baron-Fuenté Demi-Sec Champagne (\$24.99)**.

And if juicy Meunier is not what you look for in Champagne, try Baron-Fuenté's Esprit range.

The **Baron-Fuenté "Esprit" Brut Champagne (\$34.99)** *cépage* is a more traditional one-third Chardonnay, Meunier, and Pinot Noir, but the wines are aged seven years *sur lie*, which awakens the brioche and orchard fruit flavors in an exceptional way.

The **Baron-Fuenté "Esprit" Brut Nature Champagne (\$34.99)** is the right bottle for you if you like your wines mineral and stoic, with grassy herbal notes meeting fresh citrus fruit, and toasted bread on the finish.



Champagne Launois: Catch It While You Can

By Stephanie Vidales



Séverine and Bernard Launois in Mesnil.

Anyone who has had the pleasure of drinking Launois will tell you it's a Champagne buy that you won't want to sleep on. This Direct Import is so well-loved, it's honestly difficult to keep in stock year-round. This spectacular Champagne house was founded in 1872 south of Reims in the village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger. This village is located on the famed Côte des Blancs and is home to the best Chardonnay grapes in the entire Champagne

appellation. The winery remains family run by eighth-generation Séverine and Bernard Launois, who work as a team to create fantastic wines. From their vineyards, Launois creates beautiful, terroir-driven Champagne that's elegant, complex and best of all, affordable.

Launois "Cuvée Réserve" Grand Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99) Made from 100% Chardonnay from Grand Cru vineyards, the Cuvée Réserve offers everything you'd want in a Champagne



at an amazing price. Bright aromatics of green apple, lemon, and melon fruit jump from the glass. It also has the classic Mesnil minerality on the palate, with racy acidity and a touch of toast. Try it for yourself, and you'll understand why it's our top-selling direct-import Champagne!

Launois "Quartz" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$39.99)

This is a huge staff favorite from Launois, and for good reason. The fruit comes from a single vineyard called Chettilons, and in order to showcase the unique terroir, it is made with less pressure than normal. Typically, Launois Champagnes are made with six atmospheres, but Quartz is made with only four. The nose expresses melon, citrus, and white peach aromatics. The palate is quite focused, with salinity and bright acidity making this a wonderful aperitif.

Launois Brut Rosé Champagne (\$39.99)

We weren't always able to get the Launois rosé, but when we finally did it became one of the favorites in our grower-producer lineup. This is the outlier in their Blanc de Blancs lineup of wines; it is 100% Pinot Noir from their estate vineyard in Sézanne south of Côte des Blancs. This lovely Champagne offers tons of red fruit, chalky minerality, a full-body, and long finish. This bottle of bubbles doesn't stick around for long, so get it while you can!



Le Brun de Neuville: The Jewel of Bethon

By Scott Beckerley

I can personally tell you that in the late winter, the commune of Bethon in the Côte de Sézanne region of Champagne is very cold and windswept. The views, as in most of Champagne, are gorgeous. The naming of Bethon is Celtic in origin and means “birch.” I don’t recall seeing any birch trees, but they could be there somewhere. Bethon, like pretty much every village in Champagne, has a church as its central point. There is a festival for St. Vincent, the patron saint



Gary Westby takes a break from note-taking with Justine Boxler and Agathe Bellanger from the export department of Le Brun de Neuville, overlooking the vineyards in March 2020.

of wine growers, in January (usually), for all 292 residents. The area around the village itself consists of 195 hectares, planted to 92.6% Chardonnay, 6.7% Pinot Noir, .6% Pinot Meunier, and .1% “other” varieties. It is here that Champagne Le Brun de Neuville is located, in a state-of-the-art facility. They own 150 hectares of land and vineyards in seven villages. Chardonnay does exceptionally well here due to a deep bed of chalk, which

is deeper in some places than in the famous Côte des Blancs. The majority of the plantings face southwest for optimal sun exposure, which results in harvest taking place two- to two-and-a-half weeks earlier than in the Côte des Blancs.

Le Brun de Neuville was founded in 1963 by André Vandier and Mrs. de Reviers, along with 26 passionate winegrowers. The winery’s original name was “La Crayere” and was later changed to Le Brun de Neuville in honor of Madame Le Brun, who owned Château de Bethon in the mid-19th century. Today, 170 winegrowers form the Le Brun de Neuville family. Le Brun de Neuville uses no herbicides, and the goal is for the entire region to be free of them by 2025. The winery itself uses only 30% of the grapes it harvests, while 70% are sold to the large houses. Much attention is given to plowed vs. unplowed soils, malolactic vs. non-malolactic fermentation, and spontaneous fermentation. When Gary and I were there early last year, we had the great fortune to taste vin clair that had or lacked all of these traits, as well as wines produced from different soils, wines made with natural yeasts, wines aged in oak or stainless steel, and solera samples. The latter were my favorite and a very special treat. Rich, creamy and nutty!

Luckily, in time for Valentine’s Day, we have recently received a shipment from Le Brun de Neuville. Last year, we featured some of their wines in our annual Valentine’s Day Champagne tasting. They were all very well-received by staff and customers alike. In SF, I had a quartet of Swedes who were positively ga-ga over them. My peeps! Now, on to the selections.

The returning champion from last year is the wonderful **2008 Le Brun de Neuville “Grand Vintage” Brut Champagne (\$49.99)**. I know that 2008s are a no-brainer, but this one is still very special. A blend of 96% Chardonnay and 4% Pinot Noir, aged eight years on the lees and fermented in stainless steel to retain its amazing acidity and cleanliness, this shows apple tart and lemon mousse flavors, with racy minerality and chalkiness. The dosage is a lighter 8 grams per liter. What sets this effort apart is its delicacy and lightness. As with nearly all other 2008 efforts, this one will age extremely well in the cellar.

There are two brand-new arrivals that we have never had before. Number one of our “first timers” is the **Le Brun de Neuville “La Croisée des Chemins” Extra Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**, which celebrates the Chardonnay of this house. It is a blend of 70% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir. It replaces the Authentique Brut, with which many of you are familiar. It has a 2014 base wine and is relatively rich, with yellow (and slight green) apple fruit, and toasted almond flavors. A generous nuttiness and bright acidity lead to a long, lingering finish. This is a superb effort for very little money. **94 WE**

The second of these “newbies” is the **Le Brun de Neuville “Autolyse Noirs et Blancs” Brut Champagne (\$59.99)**. Unusual in that it is 80% Pinot Noir and 20% Chardonnay, it spends an amazing 11 years on the lees — hence, the name. The base wine is from 2007. Toasty and creamy, with baked apples and toffee notes, the wine is very rich, with notes of caramel, brioche, and a slight cakey quality. The Chardonnay adds just a hint of quince. I so need to buy this bottling. These Champagnes are a great way to get the year started and to put a little bit of enjoyment into your life. Don’t miss out!



Champagne Direct: Get Closer to Small Estates

By Gary Westby

As many of you reading these pages know, we have been importing Champagne directly from small producers for 20 years now. I am still surprised by the incredible diversity of terroir and style in this little region northeast of Paris, and know that even with another 20 years of exploration to come, I will not get close to seeing it all. Featured on this page, each of three Champagnes carries the name of the man who made the wine with his own hands.

And, I believe that this human-scale of production is one of the most important qualities that our Direct Import program brings to our Champagne-loving customers. While it's true that cutting out the export brokers, import companies, and distributors also saves our customers a lot of money, I think that our ability to bring in small quantities from small estates is where the magic is in our selection.

We start in the very middle of Champagne, just five minutes south of Épernay, in the sleepy village of Monthelon, with the **Alexandre Le Brun "Tradition" Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**. Alexandre has the smallest production of any of the producers we bring in. He only has 7.5 acres, and sells two-thirds of that as juice to Bollinger. This cuvée is the only one he makes that is more than a single press load, and is composed of a third each of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Meunier. This wine is kept for more than four years on the lees and has 30% reserves from past vintages. It reminds me of nut bread on the nose, with doughy aromas framed by subtle dried fruit and toasted almond intrigue. In the mouth it has great texture, but also virile refreshment, as the fruit comes from one of the coldest places in this already cold region.

Pierre Gonet is from the famous Gonet Champagne family of Mesnil, but uses his estate vines in the Grand Valley of the Marne to produce his **Pierre Mineral Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**. It is composed of 60% Pinot Noir,



Alexander Le Brun—his cellars are from the 1600s, but his sweatshirt is from K&L's 2019 tent event.



Pierre Gonet, owner and winemaker of Pierre Mineral, at his winery with his dog.



Louis Brochet in his barrel room.



d'Écueil. The nose of this profoundly deep Champagne reminded me of panettone Christmas bread, with subtle dried apricot framing the buttery brioche notes. Louis has managed the Champagne miracle here—a zero dosage Champagne with richness, something both deeply complex and nearly vanishingly elegant.

A toast to you!

30% Chardonnay, and 10% Meunier, and is aged for three years on the lees. This is a favorite of the Beffa family, and I always have to make sure to keep enough extra around for Clyde and Trey. I love this Champagne for its combination of red cherry Pinot Noir savor, sourdough bread notes, and clean Meyer lemon finish. It makes a great aperitif.

We only received 36 bottles of the **Louis Brochet "Réserve Perpétuelle" Brut Nature Champagne (\$89.99)** as it is the smallest production wine in Louis' range. It all comes from his estate in Écueil on the Mountain of Reims, one of the prettiest parts of the Champagne region. It's made entirely from reserves that are blended together in a solera style, and while this wine sees just three years of aging on the lees, it is composed of a little bit of every year from 2010 to 2016. It is made exclusively from old vine Pinot Noir, from a massal selection that his grandmother isolated and they call Pinot



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