

WINE News

*Quality for price in Champagne:
we've mastered the trick.*



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Our Treat: Direct Import Champagne

By Gary Westby

Every year, the big house Champagne prices go up. This is not a big complaint, as the inflation in these prices is nothing compared to the skyrocketing cost of Napa Cabernet. But at the same time, I wonder why they go up every year. When the dollar loses value to the euro, the distributors cite the exchange rate; the rest of the time, they quote the rising prices for grapes. I am sharing this observation with you because K&L customers have an alternative to paying high prices: our direct import program. In these pages, we'll look at four producers, two new and two that we have carried for years, that offer incredible (and I hope continually stable) value for money. Le Gallais, a producer new to our portfolio, grows their entire production inside one of Champagne's

rare clos, and yet their Cuvée du Manoir is only \$34.99. Scotty will tell you all about it in his article. I will introduce Damien Hugot, a super talented 25th generation grower with ancient vineyards in Chouilly and Cramant. His Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs also sells for just \$34.99. Elsa, who is new to the Champagne team, writes about Fallet-Dart, whose vintage wines are as long-lived and collectable as they are affordable. On the back page, Diana writes about Launois, which she visited this spring, and whose Reserve bottling we have sold for \$34.99 for 11 years. K&L customers have drunk nearly 50,000 bottles of this wine! Who wants to join me in drinking more Champagne?

The **Franck Bonville Grand Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99)** has been the same low price for six years. This all-Chardonnay Champagne is composed of 50% reserve wines from a perpetual blend that Olivier Bonville keeps in tank. It is a refreshing, mineral style but also has quite a bit of nice richness because of the generous use of reserves. It is one of our top cuvées for repeat business. **90 WS**



We have been selling the **Michel Arnould "Reserve" Brut Verzenay Champagne (\$32.99)** at this price for eight years, and I can't think of a producer that we carry that has as many die-hard fans. When we run out, I get into big trouble! This Champagne, composed of 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay, has subtle toast, big Pinot power, a fine bead, and a dry finish. **90 DC**



I am not allowed to have favorite Champagnes, but I have drunk more **Ariston Aspasie Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne (\$34.99)** than any other cuvée in our selection. This is great single vineyard stuff from the precipitously steep, east-facing Goût d'Or site in Brouillet. And it has been at this same price for over a decade! It is creamy and bright at the same time, and is very easy to drink too much of!



A Clos Encounter: Introducing Champagne Le Gallais

By Scott Beckerley

A few years ago when I was in Épernay with Gary Westby, we drove out to the lovely village of Boursault. We parked next to the village church, just in time to have the church bells go off (and we jumped about 10 feet into the air). We saw Château de Boursault down the road and walked toward it for our appointment.

I have to admit that I was seriously impressed by the beauty of this place. Years before, at the Launois family home, moat included, I was also impressed, but this place was even more breathtaking. I was also hoping that the Champagnes would be equally impressive. More on that, later. Now, for a little history. The estate was actually built by the renowned Madame Veuve Clicquot, in 1843. Madame's great, great-granddaughter sold the estate in 1913, and later it was purchased by Hachod Fringhian, great-grandfather of Charlotte Morgain Le Gallais, who currently runs the operation with her father.

The family's 10 acres of vineyards are situated within a clos, which is a rare, walled-in vineyard, above the Marne Valley. Since the wine cellar is also located inside the clos, the hand-picked fruit stays fresh after a very brief trip to be processed during harvest.

Le Gallais practices sustainable farming, and states that they have used no insecticides since 1991. They've managed this by careful cultivation of their population of beneficial bugs, like ladybugs, within the clos, and other practices; while careful cultivation of the soil itself helps to enhance the health of the vines.

At long last, we have received our first shipment of these wonderful Champagnes, and we are very excited to bring them to you. I have tasted the entire lineup twice in the last couple of weeks—once with my coworkers in the San Francisco store, and once with Gary, Diana,

and Elsa during our annual “Champagne Summit,” where we try current and upcoming releases in preparation for the holiday season. Usually, it's about 60 Champagnes in one day. Not exactly a tough job! Midway through this meeting we tried the Le Gallais wines. Everyone enjoyed them immensely.

The first one that we tried is the flagship **Le Gallais Cuvée du Manoir Brut Champagne (\$34.99)**. This blend of 45% Pinot Noir, 45% Pinot Meunier, and 10% Chardonnay is aged for a minimum four years on the lees and has a very low six grams of sugar per liter. This was one of the San Francisco staff favorites, largely due to the chalky undertones. It has solid flavors of baked, golden apple fruit, and toasted nuttiness. The finish is lingering, and as noted above, chalky. The wine has good richness and is easy to drink.



Hervé Le Gallais with his Landrover.

We followed that up with the **Le Gallais “La Grande Vigne” Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne (\$49.99)**. The fruit here comes from older vines that are located on east-facing slopes. This particular bottling is all from the 2013 vintage, though it is not labeled as such. It starts out nice and spicy, with blanc de blancs cleanliness and minerality, then segues into a richer sensation, accented with citrus, white stone fruit, and pastry dough notes. It has a very long and lingering finish.

Third in the tasting was my personal favorite, the **2009 Le Gallais Vintage Brut Champagne (\$64.99)**. This bottling is a fifty-fifty blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, something that a lot of my customers (and co-workers) love. To make it even more attractive, the 2009 also has an extremely low dosage of four grams per liter. It is also entirely made from old vine fruit. It is relatively rich, with dark yellow fruits and baking spices (thank you for that, Pinot Meunier). There are mid-palate flavors of baked caramel and nutmeg. As with the other Le Gallais bubbly, there are also chalky undertones and a wonderfully long finish.

The last Le Gallais that we sampled was the **Le Gallais “Rosé des Poètes” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$59.99)**. This is also a fifty-fifty blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, and like the Blanc de Blancs, also all vintage. In this case it is 2014, though not marked as such. It is rosé de saignée. This bottling was not without a bit of controversy, as it is definitely a main course brut rosé. Vinous, with dark cherry fruit and black raspberries. There is also that clean, chalky palate, and brightness at the finish. This is an unusual, and very delicious brut rosé!



Charlotte and Hervé Le Gallais in the Clos Boursault.

Damien Hugot: Another Side of Blanc de Blancs

By Gary Westby

I am very pleased to introduce one of our newest direct import producers, **Damien Hugot**. His ancestors are among the few Huguenot families not to have fled from France during the seventeenth century, and they have ancient ties to their land. His family has been growing grapes in the Champagne region for 25 generations.

Tucked away in the bottom corner of Épernay, next to his vineyards in the Grand Cru of Chouilly, Damien Hugot is making a different kind of blanc de blancs. These are wines of weight and richness. They are decadent, but still have great minerality. If the wines of producers like Launois and Bonville can be likened to Chablis, Damien's wines can be likened to Meursault. The extra *gras* in them comes from the special terroir of the northern Côte des Blancs Grand Crus and the vine age. His vineyards are almost exclusively in Chouilly and Cramant, the two Grand Crus closest to Épernay in



Damien Hugot and his vines.

the Côte des Blancs. These are the highest, steepest villages of the five Grand Crus in this sub-region, and tend to make the most generous and richest wines because of the extra sun that they receive during the growing season. More importantly, Damien has an incredible number of ancient vines, with many dating back to the fifties, and some planted as early as the thirties. These old massal selections ripen later than the modern clones but give wines of unparalleled depth and richness. At the same time, the deep root systems extract the maximum chalk character.

Damien Hugot Brut Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru (\$34.99)

This is entirely 2015, although not declared as a vintage. This warm harvest adds even more lush texture to this opulent blanc de blancs. If you like a bready, rich style that still finishes dry and chalky, it is not to be missed, especially at this fantastic direct import price.

His Damien Hugot Brut Rosé Champagne (\$39.99)

is almost entirely Grand Cru Chardonnay, but utilizes a tiny plot of old Meunier planted by his grandfather between Chavot and Monthelon for its color and flavor. This elegant rosé has great, haunting red fruit, and is one of the cleanest in the store.



Unmistakably Fallet-Dart: Serious Quality, Fantastic Value

By Elsa Baez

Fallet-Dart produces some of the most complex and elegantly structured Champagnes I have ever tasted. Bottles are held for at least three years before being disgorged, and they are allowed to rest for at least six months before shipping. This provides more time for the wine to evolve into something magnificent. Patience is definitely a virtue here.

The Fallet family's winegrowing tradition dates back to at least 1610, while their "walled" vineyard, Clos du Mont, has its origins in the eighth century—but lost three of its walls in the Great War of the twentieth. The Fallet-Dart brand was founded in 1970.

Fallet-Dart "Grande Sélection" Brut Champagne (\$34.99) This ages seven years on the lees, and it shows in the round mouthfeel and small, delicate bubbles. The beautiful, leesy and toasty aromatics are balanced with an acid backbone; flavors of Granny Smith apples appear mid-palate, and lemon citrus zest on the finish. This Champagne is a great value at this price.

Fallet-Dart "Clos du Mont" Brut Champagne (\$79.99) There are only 5,000 Clos du Mont bottles produced, and it is not released every year. Although not labeled as such, this bottling is from 2004, and highlights the growing year very nicely with brioche and light fruit (think cranberries) on



the nose, and ripe, concentrated fruit on the palate. Bright, with hints of savory, mineral undertones and a nice clean finish, this is one of the most serious Champagnes we carry. I insist that anyone who enjoys Champagne give this one a try.

Fallet-Dart "Cuvée de Réserve" Brut Champagne (\$29.99)

A blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, this cuvée is aged four years *sur lie*, and shows a richer, toastier style, with a backbone of brightness and freshness. Round and full-bodied, this Champagne is not only top quality, but a fantastic value as one of our direct imports.

Fallet-Dart 2012 Vintage Brut Champagne (\$39.99)

Albeit with lower yields due to hail, frost, and disease earlier in the season, the grapes had a chance to recover in August when the weather changed dramatically for the better. Grapes matured perfectly, and with a good amount of acidity, making 2012 an exceptional vintage. This bottling encapsulates this vintage beautifully with aromas of toasted sourdough and Granny Smith apples, and finishes with ripe fruit firmed up by a backbone of acidity. Fizzy bubbles and hints of wet stone linger on the long finish. I opened this bottle with coworkers one evening, and we agreed: this is unmistakably Fallet-Dart Champagne.



Champagne Launois: Quality and Provenance for a Song

By Diana Turk

Walk into any K&L store looking for a Champagne recommendation, and chances are, you're going to leave with a bottle (or a case!) of Launois. Our best-selling direct imports, the wines of Launois feature nearly everything that makes Champagne spectacular: delicate bead;



A delightful collection of obsolescent oenological objects: The Champagne museum at Launois.

quality and provenance. Even the bottle—an elegantly rounded shape meant to mimic the earliest Champagne vessels—is gorgeous, and unique to the house.

My visit to Launois in March cemented my appreciation for their exceptionally crafted product. The house, though stately, is nestled among the vineyards in Mesnil-sur-Oger, and the tour featured a trip through their cellar-turned-museum: an eccentric, exhaustive collection of Champagne history, ranging from ancient vine-pruning tools to massive manual presses, early labels, and even art made from wire cages of old bottles. The care and intense dedication that Bernard Launois put into the space is apparent, and it made me realize that the reason Launois is such an incredible

a steely core of bracing, age-worthy acidity; estate-grown Grand Cru Chardonnay from the legendary village of Mesnil; chalky minerality; years spent on lees. And the price is unbelievably reasonable considering the



Chillin' with Bernard Launois.

Champagne is because there is heart and expertise behind it. Combined with Séverine's savvy decision-making and winemaking prowess, Launois is an unstoppable, elegant alternative to the Grande Marques.

Their offerings are nuanced and surprisingly varied, considering that the entire lineup—minus a very limited 100% Pinot Noir rosé—is blanc de blancs. The Séverine and Dorine allocations are barrel-fermented, the Quartz is bottled at a lower pressure than is traditional, and the longer-aged Veuve Clemence shows those coveted, toasty brioche notes. There are even vintage Special Club releases. I overheard a fellow staff member commenting, "The only problem with Launois is that I haven't found one I don't like." That, and there never seems to be enough of it. Customers may think we're giving them the hard sell when we caution that our supply will sell out quickly, but it's simply stating the truth. This is a small, family-owned and operated house, and its fans are many. Get a bottle while you can.

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

Crisp and linear, with an incredible, almost creamy, texture, the refined Launois Cuvée Réserve over-delivers every time. This Champagne is magical: Grand Cru Chardonnay from chalky soils shows minerality, but that racy backbone is balanced by moussy elegance. There's a sparkly acidity that will impress blanc des blancs connoisseurs while still pleasing a crowd. I've even paired it with weeknight takeout and it's been perfect. Do not miss this value-driven stunner.

Launois "Veuve Clemence" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$44.99)

My favorite for blending value and artistry, the Veuve Clemence gets nearly five years of aging on the lees (versus the Reserve's three) and is sourced from older vines. This is a powerful, almost vinous Champagne, with an added toastiness from the lees that you don't get from younger blanc de blancs. But fear not if you're a fan of brighter wines: Veuve Clemence dazzles with laser acidity and vivid lemon fruit, tempered by textured mouthfeel and a clean finish. It is absolutely worth the extra ten dollars to taste this beauty.



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