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## Champagne Club! FALL 2018

Welcome to the latest edition of the Caveau Champagne Club – a twice-yearly tutored tasting and exploration of some of the most fascinating sparkling wines on earth – **Grower Champagnes**.

This club functions just like our **Burgundy Club** (and if you're not already a member, you can sign-up here: <http://www.caveauselections.com/sign-up-form>). Also, check-out our new **"House Wine" Clubs** if you're interested in a regular supply of yummy Burgundy at around \$20 per bottle!

The wines in each 6-bottle shipment have been specifically selected to help educate and illustrate – each shipment is essentially a Champagne seminar-in-a-box. You can use all of this to stage your own tasting seminar at home, or of course you can just drink the wines one by one. **With this shipment, I highly recommend tasting the pairs of wines from the same producer side-by-side - it makes for a very illustrative and educational experience.**



## Two by One

In this shipment, we'll explore the winemaking styles of **three different producers**, and take a close look at **two different wines from each of them**. You'll be tasting wines from the **Montagne de Reims**, from the **Coteaux Sud d'Epernay**, and from the **Côte des Blancs** - so we'll also be able to examine the regional terroir differences as well as the individual winemaking practices.

It's quite true that wines are ultimately reflections of the personality and character of the people who make them. When you taste two wines side-by-side made by the same producer, the wines may be very different indeed, but you'll also likely notice a distinct family resemblance. So, we'll be taking a look at what goes into "winemaking styles", as well as the influence of history and geology on the resulting wines.

If you're new to the Club, or would like to brush up on how Champagne is made and what all those words on the labels mean, you'll find my **Champagne 101** tutorial on page 15, following our discussion of the wines in this shipment.

## Grower Champagne

We import exclusively, and this club features, **Grower Champagne**. Grower Champagnes are simply wines produced *100% from vineyards that are owned by the producer*. It may surprise you to learn that over 88% of Champagne is **Negociant Champagne** – meaning that the wines are made with grapes purchased from dozens to hundreds of different growers from throughout the region, and produced in huge factories.

The big names that you are likely familiar with – Moët et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Mumm, Taittinger, etc. – those are negociants. They produce millions of cases of wine, in an industrial fashion, from fruit grown mostly not by themselves, but by thousands of smaller growers across the 319 villages that make up the Champagne viticultural region.

Grower Champagnes, on the other hand, are made by small, family producers, growing grapes and making wines exclusively from their own vineyards. This is analogous to the small, family estates of Burgundy. The typical Grower Champagne producer makes fewer than 5,000 cases per year (in fact less than a dozen make more than 6,000 cases). There are over 6,500 of these small grower-producers in Champagne, *but fewer than 300 of them are available here in the U.S.*

## ***A few words on Grower & Negociant Champagne***

Yes, I am passionately **pro** Grower Champagne - but only the **good** ones. Not all “Farmer Fizz” is good - the vast majority of it just isn’t. In fact the worst quality Champagne you’re likely to ever encounter is probably a lower-echelon Grower bottling - some of which are downright awful. Conversely, not all Negociant Champagne is bad - some of it is flat-out marvelous. **Krug, Salon, Bollinger, Roederer, Jacquesson** and many others are *negoces* who produce some of the finest wines on the planet. **Clicquot, Moët**, and many of the other “big names”, however, do not.

As production volume increases it just gets so much harder to maintain a level of quality. Equally as important - a larger production volume makes it more difficult to produce wines with personality or character, and nearly impossible to make a wine that speaks of a sense of place (especially when the grapes are coming from several hundred different places!) That’s why I love and applaud the top larger producers who are making gloriously delicious wines. At the end of the day - great, average, and poor producers come in all sizes. **We specialize in the great smaller producers**, who we think are making some of the most exciting wines to be found anywhere.

## **A question of Style**

It is only very recently, as in the last 5-10 years, that the notion of **Terroir** has seriously entered the conversation when talking about Champagne. The world’s most famous sparkling wine has historically been all about **winemaking** - technique, “House-Style”, and the “Art of Blending”. We’ve been told for centuries that where the grapes came from was not a primary concern, it was all about the skill of the winemaker that made the difference.

Now we have hundreds of examples of wonderful Champagnes that are first and foremost a representation of precisely **where** they come from, and this has been the biggest leap forward since Champagne first became a sparkling wine in the late 1700s. That said, there are of course still human winemakers involved - and a wine of true terroir expression will also bear the mark of he or she who made it.

Just as in Burgundy, where we often find vast differences in wines made from the same vineyard, but by different producers, we can see that it’s the **combination** of terroir and winemaking style/skill that ultimately makes the difference. **Farming practices** are certainly another significant part of the equation, with the focus on yield-management and the reduction or elimination of toxic chemicals in the vineyards a huge part of the quantum leap Champagne has made in the last 20 years.

***Most people aren't aware of this, but most of what you really need to know about a Champagne is not indicated on the label. Labeling information is getting better and better, but a lot of the labels continue to leave out what should be vital information – the grapes used, base vintage, date of disgorgement, dosage level, etc. I'm on a mission for full transparency in Champagne labeling, and things are definitely moving in the right direction. For centuries the Négociants did not want you to know what was in the bottle, as they claimed it didn't matter! Today's consumer knows better, and is demanding more information, and things are indeed improving. In the meantime, we'll always provide the most complete information available on every wine we import, and go even deeper into it for the wines that we select for the Club.***

So let's get into the wines in this shipment!

## **Champagne F. Cossy**



*Sophie, in her vines in Jouy-lès-Reims*

**Sophie Cossy** is one of Champagnes brightest success stories in recent times, and what a story it is. Ten years ago her father Francis passed away suddenly and prematurely, and Sophie was forced to abandon her nascent business career and jump right into farming the family vineyards and making the wines. She was 25, and had worked a bit with her dad in her youth, but had never envisioned being a winemaker. With her mom Geneviève handling the books, Sophie dove in took the helm.

Sophie was not well supported by the winemaking community. In fact she was actively and sometimes aggressively discouraged. Often being subjected to the likes of “this is not a job for girls” - it only made her more determined to succeed.

Sophie turned out to be a force of nature, and a very talented winemaker. In the face of much negativity she forged on, honing her craft and learning the nuances of her vines. She slowly and steadily began making a name for herself and her wines across Europe, and then in Asia, and we started working with her in the US in 2010. Her hard work and dedication received the ultimate validation when she was deservedly awarded the trophy for **Champagne's Winemaker of the Year in 2016** - all those years of an uphill battle had finally paid off.

The Cossy estate is based in the 1er Cru village of Jouy-lès-Reims - just a few minutes outside of the center of Reims, and dates to 1764. They started bottling under their own label in the 1950s, in addition to managing the Cooperative winemaking facility for their village and the neighboring hamlet of Pargny-lès-Reims.

Sophie's wines all clearly have a graceful, feminine touch. They are all from her estate vineyards within a kilometer or two of the winery, so they're all from essentially the same terroir. Let's take a look at a couple of them and see what makes them what they are...

### 1. Champagne F. Cossy - "Éclat" Brut \$32

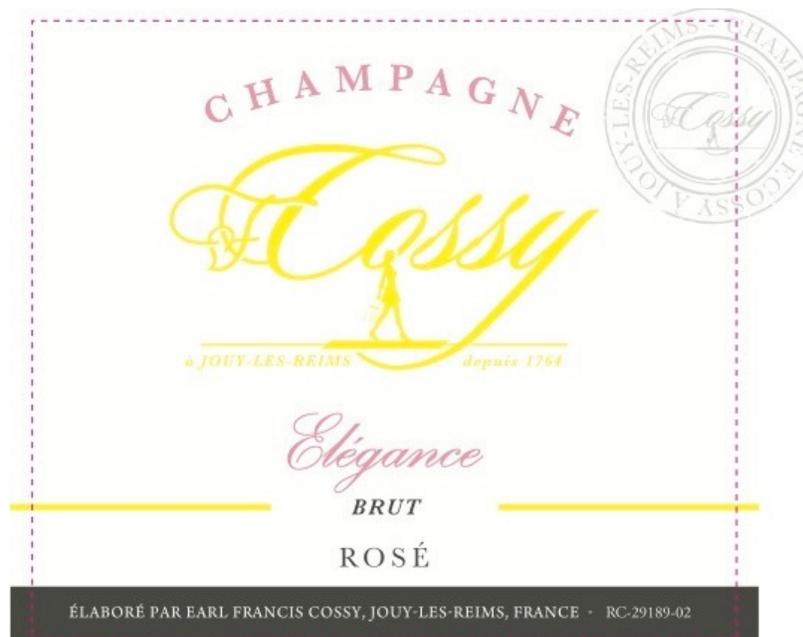
The Cossy family tradition was to make Champagnes with equal proportions of the three main Champagne grapes - Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Pinot Meunier. Sophie continued down this path - not only out of tradition, but also informed by the fact that her vines are in a section of the Montagne de Reims known as the "Petite Montagne", one of the few spots in Champagne where all three grapes perform equally well.

While keeping the same philosophical base that her parents and grandparents had used, she tweaked the winemaking to make wines that she felt were a true reflection of what *she* wanted to drink. The family's wines had been very "traditional", and were fairly formulaic and lacking in personality. Anyone who has ever met Sophie knows that her wines could never be bland or traditional!

The Cuvée "Éclat" (Translates as "shine" or "glow") is her basic non-vintage offering, and the wine she spends the most time on. Her philosophy - "If your entry-level wine isn't excellent - why would anyone want to try your more expensive wines?" - makes perfect sense to me.

The biggest change from her father's era was a lowering of the dosage - the sugar addition that determines the wine's overall dryness or sweetness, as well as being the one factor that can dramatically alter a Champagne's overall style and direction. In her dad's era they systematically used 12 grams of sugar per liter for the NV Brut - Sophie has reduced that by 33%.

- Based on the 2014 harvest, with 25% reserve wines from 2013 & 2012 in the mix
- One-third each of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier, all from the family estate
- Aged for over three years in bottle on the lees
- Disgorged December 2017
- Dosage - 8 grams per liter.
- Only the first pressing (known as the “cuvée” in Champagne) is used - the 2nd and 3rd pressings are sold off to the negociants



## 2. Champagne F. Cossy - Cuvée Éléance Rosé \$36

A lot of Rosé Champagne has traditionally been on the sweet and wimpy side - often lacking in substance and character. Sophie set out to change that by lowering the dosage, and starting with a base wine that had more depth of flavor and structure - specifically by increasing the percentage of Pinot Noir in the blend. From the same terroir that produces the Éclat, she fashions a wine of elegance and finesse, with impressive length and underlying depth of flavor. This is not the Pink Champagne served at chain hotel Sunday Brunch buffets - this is a serious wine (and seriously delicious!)

- Based on 2014, with 20% 2013 reserve wines
- 60% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinot Meunier, and 10% Chardonnay
- Bottled in spring 2015
- 9 grams dosage
- Disgorged December, 2017



*Sophie in her tasting lab*



*In the cellar with Gaetan Gillet in Avize*

## Champagne MOST

We introduced you to young winemaker **Gaëtan Gillet (gay-uh-tawn zhee-lay)** a year ago in the spring '17 Club collection, and we're excited to have two of his bottlings in the package this time. Gaëtan became Champagne's youngest winemaker ever when he produced his first wine in 2010 at the age of 22, and has gone on to create a micro-domaine of Grand Cru parcels in the best sectors of the Côte des Blancs. Perhaps no one believes more strongly in the concept of terroir - in the years to come he'll be releasing some 15 different single-vineyard Champagnes. He also believes fervently in holding his wines a long time in the cellar before release - he'd prefer to keep them on the lees for seven years or more before disgorgement, to allow for the fullest development of flavors and textures.

The brand **Champagne MOST** is the designation for wines he's made from grapes purchased from neighbors. In the coming years he'll be releasing the first of his estate wines under the **Champagne Maladries** label - "*les Maladries*" being the name of the vineyard parcel on which his winery facility sits. (He purchased and renovated the old Mumm facility in Avize, and has been producing his wines there as of the 2017 vintage. There's a house on the property as well, which he has also renovated and recently moved into with his girlfriend Anne-Sophie - the marketing director at Salon.)

Gaëtan is a purist, who wants nothing in the winery to get in the way of what the vineyard has produced. He thinks of his wines as having been grown, rather than made.

### 3. Champagne MOST – “Origine”

\$42

This is in fact the first wine he ever made, and what a way to start indeed! Subsequent to this one, all of his wines have been Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs, so it's fascinating to see his take on a Pinot-Chardonnay blend - something we'll likely never see from him again.

Gaëtan financed this production with money he made renting out rooms in the old Avize Town Hall - a building he bought and lived in and renovated while attending winemaking school. None of this wine has ever been exported previously - it's been sold in France only, primarily in Paris at the massive Christmas Market on the Champs Elysées.

- 100% from the 2010 vintage
- 65% 1er Cru Chardonnay from Villeneuve
- 35% 1er Cru Pinot Noir & Meunier from Cumières
- Bottled in July, 2011
- Disgorged June 2017 – 6 years on the lees
- Dosage – 2 g/l

With a mere 2 grams dosage, this is technically an Extra-Brut, though you'd not be likely to guess so when tasting blind. There's an abundance of ripe, fresh fruit on display, owing to the Pinot from Cumières - typically one of the warmest and earliest-ripening sites in Champagne.

The Pinot Noir and Meunier also add weight and additional layers of fruit. The citrus-spectrum from the Chardonnay dominates, but the Pinots definitely bring a bit of “heft”. It's beautifully long, quite intense, and layered with fresh brioche and bread dough aromas that make this a fascinating first effort. Only 400 cases were produced.



#### 4. Champagne Most – Cuvée Subtil (soob-teel)

\$55

This is the wine we included in the Spring '17 Club package, though it's a different disgorgement. The wine in the '17 package was disgorged in July 2016, and this version in November '17, so it has an additional 17 months of aging on the lees. (If you still happen to have your bottle from a year ago, it would be fascinating to taste these two versions side-by-side, a great illustration of what added time on the lees brings to the finished wine.)

This shows the same laser-beam purity of the previous version, but a more refined minerality. The limestone and chalk acidity that comes from the vineyards of Mesnil-sur-Oger and Oger can be very aggressive when the wines are younger - which is why wines like *Krug's Clos du Mesnil* and *Salon* are typically released 9 or more years after the vintage.

- 100% from the 2010 harvest
- 100% Grand Cru Chardonnay from Mesnil-sur-Oger and Oger
- Primary fermentation in used Burgundy barrels
- Over 6 years on the lees in bottle prior to disgorgement
- Dosage 2g/l - Disgorged November 2017
- Only 200 cases produced

*Subtil* is French for “subtle”, and there is indeed an amazing range of subtleties happening in this gorgeous wine. The flavors are predominantly lemon-lime, but look beyond the front line and you'll find some stone fruit (white peaches, nectarines), orange peel, and a distinct salinity that brings to mind a whiff of fresh ocean air. Powerful yet refined, very pure and precise, this is an astounding effort from a young winemaker - we're lucky to be in on this one early!



## Champagne Laherte Frères (la-airt - the “h” is silent)

We’ve had the privilege of featuring many of the Laherte wines in Club packages over the years, and this pairing is particularly exciting. Here we get to compare two wines that are from the same vintage, with the same winemaking protocol and philosophy, but from two different grapes. You may recall that in our Spring Club package earlier this year we discussed at some length the different grapes in Champagne. Here we have two very illustrative examples, one from pure Pinot Meunier and one entirely from Pinot Noir.

7th-generation winemaker Aurélien Laherte is at the forefront of the new wave Champagne producers, having joined his father Thierry in 2002 and taken full control of the estate over the last five years. Aurélien is a massive force in promoting Champagne as a wine of terroir. In his home village of Chavot-Courcourt, he's identified 27 different types of terroir. He farms 45 different small parcels there, all biodynamically, and presses and vinifies each of them separately. The results have become some of the most respected wines in the region as well as lusted-after cult favorites world-wide.



*Tasting with Aurélien Laherte in Chavot*

## 5. Champagne Laherte Frères - Vignes d'Autrefois 2013 \$56

The name means “vines from another time” - and indeed these are old Pinot Meunier vines planted in 1947 and 1953, a number of which are own-rooted (meaning they are on their original French roots, and not grafted to phylloxera-resistant American rootstock. There are very few of these vines left anywhere in France.)

Old-school conventional wisdom in Champagne said that Meunier was not interesting enough to stand alone, and was often ghettoized as just a “blending grape”. The new school of Champagne vigneron that has exploded in the last 15-20 years has de-bunked this myth entirely - there are many dozens, if not hundreds of 100% Meunier Champagnes on the market now that are earning rave reviews and getting more popular by the minute. Meunier brings a unique dimension to the wines - especially floral scents and savory spices & herbal flavors that are never found in Chardonnay or Pinot Noir.

- 100% from the 2013 vintage
- Vinified entirely in used Burgundy barrels
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Disgorged November 2017
- Dosage 2.5 grams per liter

This is an astounding example of Pinot Meunier - showcasing everything the variety can be when planted in the right place, farmed meticulously, and made by a master artisan. Laherte makes some 12 different wines every year, and many critics have zeroed in on this one as their favorite. A great depth of flavor, with flowers on the nose that follow through on the perfumed and creamy-textured palate. The wine opens up on the palate like a kaleidoscope, constantly changing to show different facets of its immensely complex personality.



## 6. Champagne Laherte Frères - Longues Voyes 2013 \$56

And now, 100% Pinot Noir, from the newest addition to the Laherte arsenal - an old-vine parcel on the “Petite Montagne”, the western edge of the Montagne de Reims, home to Champagne’s most prized Pinot Noir. The name means “long rows” - the geography of the site dictated long south-facing rows to maximize the sun exposure.

- This is 100% from the 2013 harvest
- 100% Pinot Noir, fermented in used Burgundy barrels
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Disgorged November 2017
- Dosage 2.5 grams per liter

So here we have the exact same winemaking, but an entirely different grape. Taste them side-by-side, and you’ll see the night-and-day difference. Where the Meunier is flowers, the Pinot Noir is cherries and berries. Where the Meunier is spices and herbs, the Pinot Noir is richness of fruit. Where the Meunier is light and airy, the Pinot Noir is denser and more concentrated.

I’m so excited to be able to show you both of these beauties, and thankful to Aurélien for giving us a special allocation so we can include these in the Club. Less than 250 cases of each are produced.



# Next shipment in the Spring...

Thanks for joining us on our exploration of the great wines of Champagne! Watch your email for information on our next Caveau Champagne Club shipment coming in the spring, and for pre-arrival offerings on all the yummy Bubblics headed your way throughout the year. All the latest information is always available on our website: [www.caveauselections.com](http://www.caveauselections.com)

## Refer a Friend and we'll hook you up!

You are our best ambassadors! If you have friends or colleagues that would be interested in joining any of our clubs, please send them our way - [just send them this link](#) to our sign-up page, and have them mention your name. If you refer someone that joins a club, we'll gift you a bottle of our exclusive **Caveau Extra-Brut Champagne** (which we'll include gratis with your next club package.) Thanks in advance!

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- If you have any questions about your Club membership

*Launched in 2005, **Caveau Selections** is owned and operated by Martha & Scott Wright, the founders and former owners of top Oregon Pinot Noir producer Scott Paul Wines. Scott has been drinking and studying the wines and regions of Burgundy and Champagne since the 1970s, and visiting regularly since the 1980s. He leads annual Insiders' Tours of both Burgundy and Champagne, and teaches seminars here and abroad. Email [Scott@caveauselections.com](mailto:Scott@caveauselections.com) for more information.*

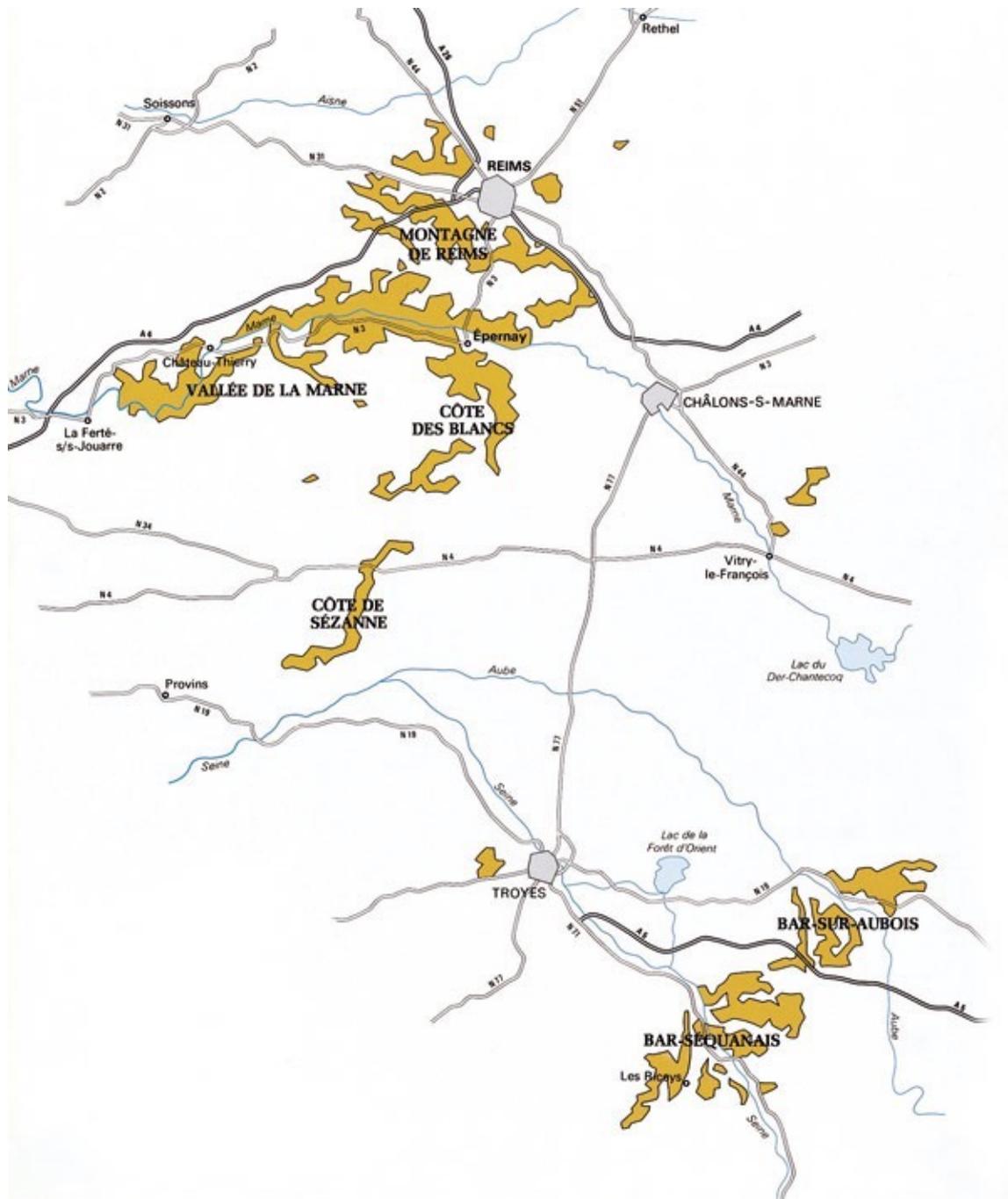
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**Read on for our complete Champagne 101 tutorial...**

# Champagne 101

- Champagne is the largest AOC (**A**ppellation d'**O**rigine **C**ontrôlée) in France. It covers a whopping 76,000 acres of vineyards, across 319 small villages and towns. Only wine made from this delimited area can be called Champagne. Sparkling wine made from other regions in France carries the appellation *Crémant*.
- There are nearly 20,000 vineyard owners in Champagne. Only about 5,000 of them produce wine from the grapes they grow. The other 15,000 sell all of their grapes to the large negociant houses.
- There are five distinct sub-regions of Champagne:
- **Montagne de Reims** – Encompasses several villages surrounding the city of Reims (pronounced “Rance”). Pinot Noir is the predominant grape grown here, but there is significant Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier as well.
- **Vallée de la Marne** – Many villages strung along the Marne river, which cuts across Champagne from East to West. The largest percentage of acreage is planted to Pinot Meunier.
- **Côte des Blancs** – As the name suggests, this is white grape territory. Virtually everything in this sub-region is Chardonnay.
- **Côte de Sezanne** – A region on the rise. All three grapes are grown here.
- **The Aube (or the Côte des Bar)** – An area on the rise, with a new generation of quality-focused growers emerging. This is where much of the most exciting, cutting-edge Champagne is coming from.  
The first three regions listed above account for the vast majority of Champagne production, though the Côte de Sezanne and the Aube are growing rapidly.

Below is a map with a good overview of the entirety of the Champagne appellation.



- **Vineyard classification** is radically different in Champagne than in Burgundy. In Burgundy, it is each individual piece of vineyard land that is classified. In Champagne, the *entire village* is classified – every vineyard within the boundaries of a village is given the same classification (though in fact certain sites within the village are clearly better than others, so this is a seriously imperfect system).

- Each village was historically given a numerical rating, on a scale of 100 percentage points. Champagne village ratings are as follows:
- **Grand Cru** – Villages rated 100%
- **Premier Cru** – Villages rated 90-99%
- **Deuxième Cru** - Villages rated 80-89%

There are only 17 Grand Cru villages. The most familiar names among them would be *Bouzy*, *Ambonnay*, *Oger*, and *le Mesnil-sur-Oger*.

The percentage points refer to the price paid for grapes from each village by the negociants. Say the top-line price for a ton of Pinot Noir is set at \$4,000 for this vintage. If you were selling grapes from a vineyard in a Grand Cru village, you would receive 100% of that price, the full \$4,000. If you were selling grapes from a Premier Cru village rated at 95%, you would receive 95% of the top price, or \$3,800 in this case. **(This system has been officially discontinued, but in practice things remain pretty much the same.)**

There are three main grape varieties grown in Champagne:

**Pinot Noir** – which accounts for 37.5% of all plantings

**Chardonnay** – which accounts for 27.5%

**Pinot Meunier** – which accounts for 35%

- Additionally, there are four “other” grapes allowed in Champagne, but they are rarely seen today. They are – *Fromenteau*, *Petit Meslier*, *Arbanne*, and *Pinot Blanc*
- Pinot Meunier is a grape little seen outside of Champagne. It is extremely valuable as a blending grape, and adds lovely aromatics and light-bodied fruit to the wines, but was not often used on its own, neither in Champagne nor in still wine.
- Most Champagne is a blend of two or more of the varieties, though some are made from only one of the grape varieties.
- There are **four** main categories of wine in Champagne –

- **“Champagne”** – made from a blend of two or three of the grape varieties, using both colors – i.e. Chardonnay and at least one of the two Pinot varieties
- **“Blanc de Blancs”** – made exclusively from white grapes – i.e. 100% Chardonnay
- **“Blanc de Noirs”** – made exclusively from the red (also known as “black”) grapes, either singly or a combination of the two.
- **“Rosé”** – made from any combination of two or three of the varieties. The pink color is obtained either by blending in a portion of red still-wine, or by letting a portion of the juice macerate with the skins of red grapes.
- But it’s all “white”! Yes, it is. It’s import to remember that the juice from all wine grapes is clear – it is only if you let the skins soak together with the juice that one gets any color from the “red” wine grapes. For Champagne, the Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes are treated just like the Chardonnay, in that the juice is pressed out immediately, and the juice is never in contact with the skins. Hence, “white” wine from red grapes.
- In addition to the four main categories of Champagne listed above, there is another classification based on the amount of residual sugar in the wine. (We’ll explain in detail later the mechanics of this. For now just know that at the end of the winemaking process, varying amounts of sugar are added to most Champagnes.)
- The Seven Levels of Sweetness (or **Dryness**, as the case may be):
- **Brut Nature** (Also known as Brut Zero, Ultra Brut, or Non-Dosé) – less than 3 grams per liter
- **Extra Brut** – Less than 6 grams/liter
- **Brut** – Less than 12 grams/liter
- **Extra-sec** – 12-20 grams/liter
- **Sec** – 17-35 grams/liter

- **Demi-sec** – 33-50 grams/liter
- **Doux** – 50+ grams/liter

In addition to all of the above classifications and categories, Champagnes also fall into one of the two following designations –

**VINTAGE** – A vintage Champagne is primarily, and sometimes entirely, from grapes grown in only one year. The appellation laws require a vintage-dated wine to be a minimum of 85% from the stated vintage – the other 15% can be from one or more other vintages. A producer may produce a vintage wine from whatever vintages he or she wishes – though most will not make vintage wine in the lesser quality years. It is up to the individual producer to decide whether a vintage wine will be produced in a given year. Vintage wines must age a minimum of three years prior to release. Only 10-15% of all Champagne is vintage-dated.

**NON-VINTAGE** – 85-90% of all Champagne is non-vintage, meaning that the wine is a blend from grapes grown in two or more years. It is often said that the essence of non-vintage Champagne is the art of blending – using many different components and building blocks to arrive at a consistent flavor profile and character (or lack thereof).

## History

Before we dive into the winemaking process, let's take a look at a little history.

- Champagne hasn't always been a sparkling wine! Until the late 1600s, Champagne was exclusively a still red wine, made from the Pinot Noir grape. (Thus making Champagne a major competitor to Burgundy. The two regions were in fact bitter enemies throughout the centuries.)
- *Dom Perignon*, the monk widely credited for "inventing" Champagne (and now a brand-name used by Moët et Chandon for their luxury brand), was actually charged with the mission to "stop the bubbles" from happening in the wines! He was the cellar master at the Abbey of Hautvillers in the late 1600s, when the monks grew tired of losing 15-25% of their wines every year to unwanted fermentations that were occurring in the bottle. (The bottles were literally exploding in the cellars.) Instead of "stopping" the bubbles, Dom Perignon figured out how to control the process. His biggest contributions were coming up with the use of corks to close the bottles, which replaced the hemp-rag shoved into the bottle neck with a plug of wood, and he championed the art of blending – different grapes and villages, to make the most harmonious cuvée.

# Méthode Champenois

The *Méthode Champenois* is the intricate, expensive, time-intensive and labor intensive process by which all Champagne is made. There are of course many others ways to make sparkling wine – but none of them produce results with anywhere near the quality of this method. It was arrived at by trial and error, like all winemaking practices over the centuries. The main point of difference from any other method is that wine produced this way *undergoes a second alcoholic fermentation in the bottle* – thus each bottle is its own unique fermentation vessel. Here's a step-by-step look at the process...

All grapes are harvested by hand – picking machines are not allowed. The grapes are pressed as soon as possible after picking. The press is filled with whole bunches of grapes, and the clear juice is pressed out directly into tanks

The juice from the first pressing, the best quality juice, is in Champagne lingo called the *Cuvée*. Most grower Champagnes use only this top quality juice. Lesser quality juice from the 2nd pressing is called the *Taille*, and is often used by the large negociants in their mass-market bottlings. A third pressing produces an even lower quality juice that is called the *2ème Taille* – and is only used in the French equivalent of André's Cold Duck.

**Débourbage.** The juice is chilled to about 38 degrees, and allowed to settle for a day or two, in order to clarify the juice and to separate the juice from any solids

The clear juice is then transferred into temperature controlled tanks for fermentation. Most grower Champagne is allowed to ferment using only the wild, indigenous yeasts, while most negociant Champagne is inoculated with cultured, commercial yeast. A cool fermentation (at 65-68 degrees) ensues, lasting 3-10 days. (A very tiny amount of Champagne is fermented in oak barrels – only a small percentage of producers employ this technique.)

Champagne grapes at harvest rarely exceed 10-11% potential alcohol due to the extremely cool climate in which they're grown. If the grapes were harvested at lower potential alcohol levels, the producer may chaptalize – add sugar to the juice during fermentation – to bring the alcohol level up to 10.5-11% when fermentation completes.

After the primary alcoholic fermentation, malolactic fermentation is allowed to happen in most cases. Malolactic fermentation is a naturally occurring process that converts the sharp, crisp malic acid – the acid that's in apples, into the softer lactic acid – the acid that's in milk. Some producers choose to block the

malolactic fermentation, preferring to keep their wines higher in acidity.

When the malolactic fermentation is complete, you then have a very acidic and not so pleasant tasting base wine, called the **Vin Clair**. At this stage it tastes green, harsh, and fairly astringent. It is hard to believe that it will one day be transformed into the delightful beauty that we know as Champagne!

Next comes the **assemblage** – the blending of different *Vins Clairs*, selecting how much Chardonnay, or Pinot Noir, or Pinot Meunier to use in the blend (the different grapes are pressed and fermented separately), how much wine from this vintage, how much from previous vintages, etc.

Then the final blend is put into bottles. A calculation is made as to how much sugar needs to be added to bring the alcohol level to 12%-12.5% after the next fermentation.

Now the **Liqueur de Tirage** is added to the bottled wine. This is a blend of sugar, yeast, and wine. The bottle is closed with a crown cap – like on a bottle of beer or Coke. The bottles are then laid on their sides – **sur lattes** – in a cool (50-55F) cellar, and the second fermentation occurs in the bottle – a process that is simply the yeasts eating the sugar, which produces CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohol. This second fermentation, called the **Prise de Mousse**, will take about three months. The alcohol level will rise to about 12% after this fermentation.



### Stacking the bottles sur-lattes for fermentation

When the second fermentation is finished, a sticky sludge of dead yeast cells will have dropped out of the liquid and attached itself to the walls of the bottle.

The process called **Rémouage**, or Riddling is next – slowly and methodically turning the bottles several times per day and tilting them at increasing angles, so eventually the bottles are fully upside down, and all of the yeast sediment has moved and settled onto the inside of the crown cap. Done by hand, this process takes 8-12 weeks. Mechanical gyro- pallettes can now do the riddling in about 7 days – and most negociants do all of their riddling mechanically these days. Many growers still do it by hand, or at the very least for their top of the line bottlings and all of their magnums and large formats.



Riddling by hand



Riddling by gyro-palette



Dead yeast in the bottle neck near the end of remouage

Once the yeast sediment has finally all moved onto the cap, the bottles are stored on their heads – *sur pointes* – and aged for a minimum of 12 more months for non-vintage Champagne, or about 30 months minimum for the vintage stuff.

The producers may choose to age their wines much longer than the minimum. The longer the wine ages on its lees – the yeast sediment – the more richness and flavor development will occur. Some top bottlings are aged 10+ years before release. When the decision has been made to release the wine, first the yeasty sludge needs to be removed from the bottle. But how do you do that?

It's an ingenious process called *Dégorgement* – or Disgorging. The bottles are placed neck-down for just a minute or so into a solution of freezing brine. This freezes the yeast sediment along with the first inch or so of liquid in the neck. And turns it into a firm, slushy pellet.



**The frozen pellet, just prior to disgorging**

Then the crown cap is removed. And the slushy pellet (along with a few drops of wine) is forced out of the bottle by the pressure of the CO2 gas in the wine.

Then, immediately after the ejection of the pellet, the **Liqueur d'Expédition** is added – otherwise known as the **Dosage**. This is the slurry of Brandy or wine and Cane Sugar that determines the level of sweetness in the Champagne – as detailed above in the Seven Levels of Sweetness.

And finally the Champagne is corked, the wire cage is applied to make sure the cork stays in, and the bottle is foiled, labeled, boxed, and readied for shipment.

The disgorging, addition of the Liqueur d'Expédition, and the corking-foiling-labeling process is all done at the same time on an automated line, ensuring consistency from bottle to bottle. (Consistency used to be a huge problem in the past, when all of these processes were carried out by hand, a practice that continued until the 1970s.)

The finished product is a bottle that contains between 40 million and 250 million bubbles – the product of all the CO2 gas trapped in the wine from the in-bottle fermentation. When the cork is popped, the bubbles are released (and the party has begun)!

Other than that, it's a pretty simple process!