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Champagne Club! SPRING 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. Whichever path you choose – there's lots of good bubbly in your future!



A Study in Blanc de Blancs

This shipment is **an exploration of Blanc de Blancs - Champagnes made only from White grapes, which in over 99% of cases is Chardonnay.** (Very rarely a Blanc de Blancs could include, or be made entirely from, Pinot Blanc.)

Chardonnay accounts for about a third of all grapes grown in the region, and is used in nearly two-thirds of all Champagnes. It does wonderful things in blends with Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, but it's at its best and brightest when on its own. We'll explore different examples of Blanc de Blancs Champagnes - different sub-regions, different terroir, and different winemaking styles.

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 17, 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 nearly 5,000 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

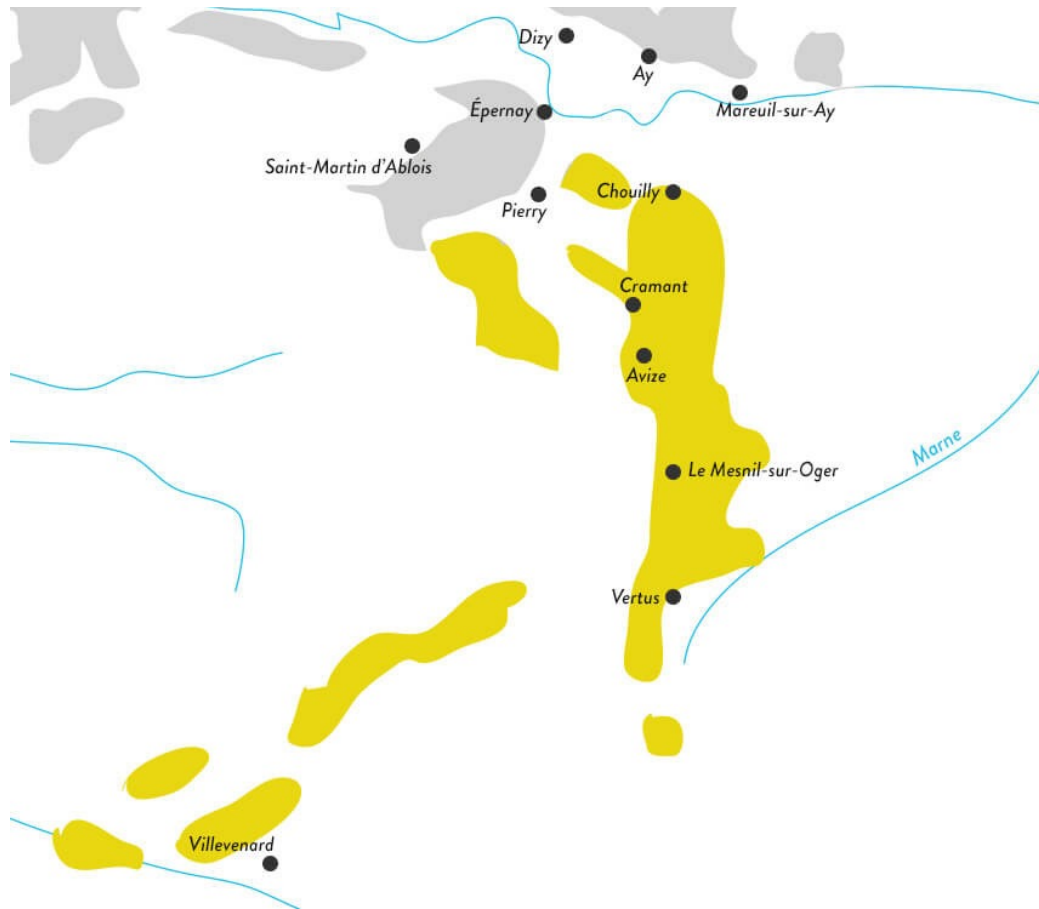
Yes, I am passionately **pro** Grower Champagne - but only the **good** ones. Not all “Farmer Fizz” is good - the vast majority of it just isn't. In fact the worst quality Champagne you're likely to ever encounter is probably a lower-echelon Grower bottling - some of which are downright awful. Conversely, 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 guys**, who we think are making some of the most exciting wines to be found anywhere.

Chardonnay in Champagne

The grape that makes White Burgundies so magnificent also plays a huge role in Champagne. It accounts for just under one-third of the vineyard acreage across the 319 villages that comprise the Champagne region, and you will find it planted just about everywhere except for the Aube, which is virtually all Pinot Noir (with one notable exception, below.) While it performs well just about anywhere it's planted, it achieves its apogee in the vineyards of the Grand Cru villages of the **Côte des Blancs**.

Chardonnay has been grown in Champagne for as far back as there are records, though it was known under many other names throughout history, and has only been routinely called Chardonnay by the locals since the early 1900s. It's a naturally high-yielding variety, and unlike Pinot Noir, Chardonnay can produce excellent quality at higher yields. That said - there's a limit. Some growers, when selling their grapes to the negociants, have a tendency to over-crop - resulting in diluted flavors and lack of concentration. Those same growers will tend to reduce their yields significantly in the vineyard parcels they're keeping for their own production. Yet another reason to avoid a lot of mass-produced Champagne.



Avize, Cramant, Oger and Mesnil-sur-Oger are the names of the villages that make Blanc de Blancs fans weak in the knees. Here, in the villages running in a line to the south of Épernay, is where Chardonnay with distinct and unique minerality is grown, and where some of Champagne's most sought-after bottlings are born. (**Krug's Clos du Mesnil** and **Salon** are 100% from Mesnil-sur-Oger, and are considered to be the premier examples.) Another hot-spot for Chardonnay happens to be in the Aube - the village of **Montgueux**, just outside of Troyes.

In general, Chardonnay brings flavors and aromas of apples, the lemon-lime end of the citrus scale, and a strong sense of limestone-chalk minerality, and can run the gamut from ethereal and elegant to rich and powerful - all depending on where it was grown and the style of the producer.

The Blanc de Blancs Revolution

With the explosion of Grower Champagne over the last 10-15 years, the game has changed. While the big-name negociants still control the business as a whole, the emergence of hundreds of quality-oriented small grower-producers has taken over the headlines. Champagne is just plain sexy to begin with, but the small growers have the “cool” factor and are just plain sexier. (Not necessarily better, of course.)

Interestingly, the heart of the Blanc de Blancs world - the villages of the famous Côte des Blancs - was later to the Grower-Champagne game than the rest of the sub-regions of Champagne. Why? As is the answer to most questions - “**follow the money**”. The grapes from the Grand Cru villages of the Côte des Blancs are so prized and so sought-after that they command a massively high price in the market. If you can sell your grapes for so much money, there is little incentive to take on all the risk and expense of making and bottling and selling your own wine. The scenario one hears repeatedly on the Côte des Blancs is that if you are fortunate enough to own just 2 hectares (5 acres) of Grand Cru vines - an amount of land that would allow you to farm it by yourself and your spouse or offspring, with no employees - you can sell your grapes to the negoces and then pocket, after expenses, a very tidy six-figure income for what is essentially part-time work. So - most of the growers in the Côte des Blancs were content to sell their grapes and make a nice living, and reluctant to dive into the murky waters of trying to build their own brand.

Fortunately for us, with the change of generations we’re now seeing more small Blanc de Blancs growers starting to keep their grapes and make their own wine, often with stunning results. It’s a huge risk for them, and a huge investment in infrastructure and equipment. For the best of them, it will ultimately pay off in a big way, but it’s a much delayed return compared to the easy money they were used to. I’m excited to see what’s happening on the Côte des Blancs, and happy to have some great examples to share with you in this package, along with other Blanc de Blancs from the other sub-regions as well.

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 Negociants 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 to the wines!

1. Champagne Laherte Frères - **Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature**

\$44

One of the acknowledged leaders in the Grower-Champagne world, the young and dynamic **Aurélien Laherte** represents the 7th generation of the family to farm their lands on what is known as the *Coteaux Sud d'Épernay*. Just south of the town of Épernay, it's not the Marne Valley, it's not the Côte des Blancs, but geographically and stylistically smack in the middle of the two. The soils here consist of a softer, more friable chalk than in the Côte des Blancs, and there's some clay in the top-soil as well. Thus the Chardonnay here is generally richer and rounder than in the Côte des Blancs, but as you can see in this example it does not lack for minerality in any way.



- 50% from 2015 harvest
- 50% reserve wines from 2014 & 2013 that has been held in barrel
- From multiple parcels in Chavot and Épernay, avg. vine age 35 yrs.
- Primary fermentation in used Burgundy barrels and large oak Foudres
- 6 months élevage in wood on fine lees before bottling.

- 14 months aging in bottle
- Disgorged April 2017 - Zero Dosage (Brut Nature)

One of the rare Champagnes that is perfectly balanced without any dosage, I've always thought of this wine as a poster-child for minerality. But it's a minerality that is more obvious and less austere than a Côte des Blancs minerality, as there's more inherent fruit richness to wrap around all the limestone and salinity. Incredibly clean, fresh and bright - it shows pure flavors of citrus and apples and the acidity is nicely in balance, but it's mostly an expression of where it was grown. This could not have come from anyplace else, and that to me is one of the key marks of an exceptional wine.

2. Champagne Paul Launois - Composition

\$36



I'm thrilled to introduce you to one of the future stars of the Côte des Blancs. **Julien Launois** (lawn-wah) and his wife **Sarah** took over the old Jean-Pierre Launois estate in Mesnil-sur-Oger from his father, and re-named it for their 5 year-old son Paul. They have 4.5 hectares (just over 11 acres) of spectacularly well-situated Grand Cru vines. For generations the family sold all of their fruit to the local cooperative (in fact Julien's father and grandfather were both long-term Presidents of the co-op.) It was a shock to the village when Julien left the co-op and decided to make wine on his own.

His first new project was to produce some ground-breaking single-barrel Champagnes from the 2016 vintage, one of which we purchased and offered to you by the case last fall (which sold out immediately.)

Now, we have the first release under the new **Paul Launois** label, and it's a beautiful introduction to the magical terroir of Mesnil-sur-Oger. Two of Champagne's most legendary wines are from here - **Salon**, and **Krug's Clos du Mesnil**. The terroir here produces wines that are marked by prominent acidity and a piercing chalkiness, and the minerality is stark and bold. Wines from the other Côte des Blancs villages can be a bit more generous and less austere in their youth. The greatest wines from Mesnil often require 10+ years in the bottle before release to begin to show what they're all about. Mesnil wines have a lot of richness and depth, but those are characteristics that are revealed more slowly over time.

For this wine, Julien was able to go into his father's reserve wines and blend some 2013 and 2011 to arrive at the cuvée he's named **Composition**. I was fortunate to be invited to the estate for the dosage trial for this wine - Julien and Sarah and I tasted blind through seven different versions of the same wine, ranging from zero dosage to 8 grams per liter of added sugar. Always a fascinating exercise, in the end we all agreed that a scant half-gram per liter was what was needed to pull the wine together to show its best.

There's a lovely floral note on the nose, followed by clean, rich citrus fruits, and a long and utterly delicious finish. This is an ethereal, elegant style of Blanc de Blancs, and it's mind-blowingly good for the money.

- A blend of 2013 & 2011 reserve wines
- Vinified in stainless-steel tank
- Bottled in spring 2015
- .5 grams dosage
- Disgorged November, 2017



3. Pertois-Moriset – Les Quatres Terroirs

\$44

Just a few years back, when I'd ask my Champagne winemakers and friends for recommendations on who was making exciting wines on the Côte des Blancs - they literally had no suggestions. With most people still selling all their grapes for big bucks, there just weren't a lot of options. Then, in the last year or two, they've started confidently passing on some interesting places to look.

And so, another exciting new addition to the Caveau family! **Pertois-Moriset** (pair-twah mor-ee-say) has been around as a brand since 1951, but frankly did not do much to distinguish itself despite their impressive vineyard holdings (45.69 acres in total, of which a whopping 29.64 acres are Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs in Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Cramant and Chouilly.) The wines were fine - kind of old-school and middle-of-the-road. Then, the founder's granddaughter **Cécile** and her husband **Vincent Bauchet** took over the estate. They made a serious commitment and poured massive resources into the project, sparing no expense in the quest of quality and excellence. A new press center, two new vinification cellars, a new barrel cellar, an enormous new bottle cellar. Most importantly, they doubled the workforce in the vineyards, reduced the yields, and stopped using herbicides.



Tasting with Vincent Bauchet at Pertois-Moriset

The new regime at Pertois-Moriset is producing a gorgeous range of wines including blends, single village, and single-vineyard wines. I've chosen **Les Quatres Terroirs** for this club package, as it's a great example of a true cross-section of the Grand Cru villages of the Côte des Blancs. As the name suggests, it's from a combination of Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Cramant and Chouilly, covering both the northern and southern halves of the Côte des Blancs.

- 75% from the 2014 vintage, with 25% reserve wines from 2013 & 2012
- Vinified in tank and large oak Foudres
- Bottled in July, 2015
- Disgorged June 2017 – 2 years on the lees
- Dosage – 3 g/l

The full spectrum of Côte des Blancs greatness is on display here, with warmth and richness from Cramant and Chouilly balanced by the saline minerals and intense limestone of Mesnil and Oger. It all works together beautifully. The overall impression is that of minerality, harmony, and finesse.



4. F. Cossy – 2011 l'Instant

\$59

Long-time members should be very familiar with the lovely wines made by **Sophie Cossy** (above) - they've become staples of the Caveau program over the years (and she's our partner in the Champagnes we produce together under the **Caveau** label.)

It's not often she makes a Blanc de Blancs, however. In fact this is only her second version ever - the previous one was a 2006. Her vineyards are all on the "Petite Montagne" section of the Montagne de Reims, a unique sub-sub-region that is a rare spot that does equally well with all three main Champagne grape varieties. Very few folks there make much Blanc de Blancs however, as most of the wines have traditionally been three-grape blends.

The 2006 version (a previous Club selection a few shipments ago) was a Brut Nature. Dosage trials for the 2011 edition showed that 6 grams was the sweet-spot, so this is technically an Extra-Brut.



- 100% from the 2011 vintage
- Fermented in once-used Burgundy barrels and large oak Foudres
- 5 years on the lees in bottle
- Dosage 6 g/l – Disgorged June 2017
- 83 cases produced

Lemon-lime fruit and minerality? Yes, of course, but it's a very different minerality than the Côte des Blancs. Taste this side-by-side with the Launois or the Pertois-Moriset - it's a world of difference. Lighter and airier, more ethereal, with more fruit sweetness in evidence. Elegant and refined like all of Sophie's wines, but a very distinct expression of a Blanc de Blancs, from the terroir of the adjoining villages of Jouy-lès-Reims, Pargny-lès-Reims and Ville-Dommange.

5. Vincent Couche - Chardonnay de Montgueux

\$45

You've come to know the wines of **Vincent Couche** over the years as well. He's the progressive, Biodynamic vigneron down in the Aube - Champagne's southernmost sector. "They" said you can't farm organically, much less Biodynamically in Champagne - it's "too cold" and "too wet". "They" still believe that to be true, while Vincent has been making gorgeous wines that way since 2003. What do "they" know?



There is virtually no Chardonnay in the Aube, save for one little pocket in the village of Montgueux, just outside the city of Troyes. It's a unique piece of land, just 514 acres in all, where Chardonnay (and a small bit off Pinot Noir) is planted on a chalky, south-facing hillside. It's a warm spot in a cool area - just the kind of thing Chardonnay likes immensely.

Montgueux Chardonnay is prized for its ripeness and richness, and most of it is sold to the big houses because they love what it adds to their blends. It's a bigger, bolder expression of Chardonnay. If Mesnil-sur-Oger is the Montrachet of Champagne, Montgueux is the Bâtard-Montrachet. More power, more "fat". Couche has about 7.5 acres in Montgueux - most of the Chardonnay goes into his many blends, but he keeps a small portion separate to showcase the magnificent terroir. He holds the Blanc de Blancs in bottle on the lees an extraordinarily long time before disgorging - in this case over 7 years

- 100% from 2010 harvest, vinified in tank (25%) and barrel (75%)
- Dosage 3 grams/liter
- Disgorged November 2017. Only 150 cases produced

Not a shy wine, to be sure. This is a big boy, but it's not about power, it's about texture, tension, vinosity and richness - and unmistakable minerality on top of everything. In a word, pure joy!

6. Marc Chauvet - Cuvée Duo

\$54

The Chauvets are the first Champagne producer we started working with. We go back a ways with **Clotilde and Nicolas Chauvet**, the umpteenth generation of the family to grow grapes and make wine in Rilly-la-Montagne (they've been at it since 1529!) The Montagne de Reims is reputed to be the best place to grow Pinot Noir in Champagne, and that is certainly valid. However in the string of north-facing villages of Ludes, Chigny-les-Roses & Rilly-la-Montagne we have a rare terroir that is suited for all three major Champagne grapes. There is not a lot of Blanc de Blancs produced there, but they are generally quite distinctive when you come across one.



Brother-Sister duo Nicolas and Clotilde Chauvet

Like Cossy, this is only the 2nd time Chauvet has made a Blanc de Blancs. Their first was also a 2006, and now this beauty from the 2011 vintage. The name **Cuvée Duo** refers to the two different **labels** that are used for this wine - one is a painting of a young girl, and the other a young boy - but the wine in the bottle is the same. It's just a 50-50 chance as to which one you get. If you get the opportunity to visit Chauvet, you'll see the original paintings hanging in their tasting room. Here's the "girl" version -



The Chauvet style is to always block the malolactic fermentation in all of their wines, so they retain the crisp, apple-acidity of the malic acid, rather than the creamier milky-acidity of lactic acid. Because the acidity in the Chauvet wines is thus inherently sharper, the dosage levels are always a bit higher - the sugar addition takes the edge off of the acidity and balances out the wine, rounding off the edges a bit.

- This is 100% from the 2011 harvest
- Fermented in stainless-steel tank, but then aged for several months in used Burgundy barrels
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Over five years on the lees in bottle
- Disgorged June 2017, dosage 9 g/l
- 200 cases produced

So here we have another one that's completely different from all the others. Wow! Zing-y green-apples plus fresh bread dough and toasted brioche, lemon curd, a touch of apricot, and a lively, persistent finish that is clean and fresh, fresh, fresh. A truly lovely bottle, no matter which front label you get!



Next shipment in the Fall...

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 fall, and for pre-arrival offerings on all the yummy Bubbly headed your way throughout the year. All the latest information is always available on our website: www.caveauselections.com

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- If you have a new or updated credit card
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- If you want to change your order from “ship” to “pick-up”, or vice-versa
- 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. He is available to teach private seminars and conduct tutored tastings for your group – email Scott@caveauselections.com for more information.*

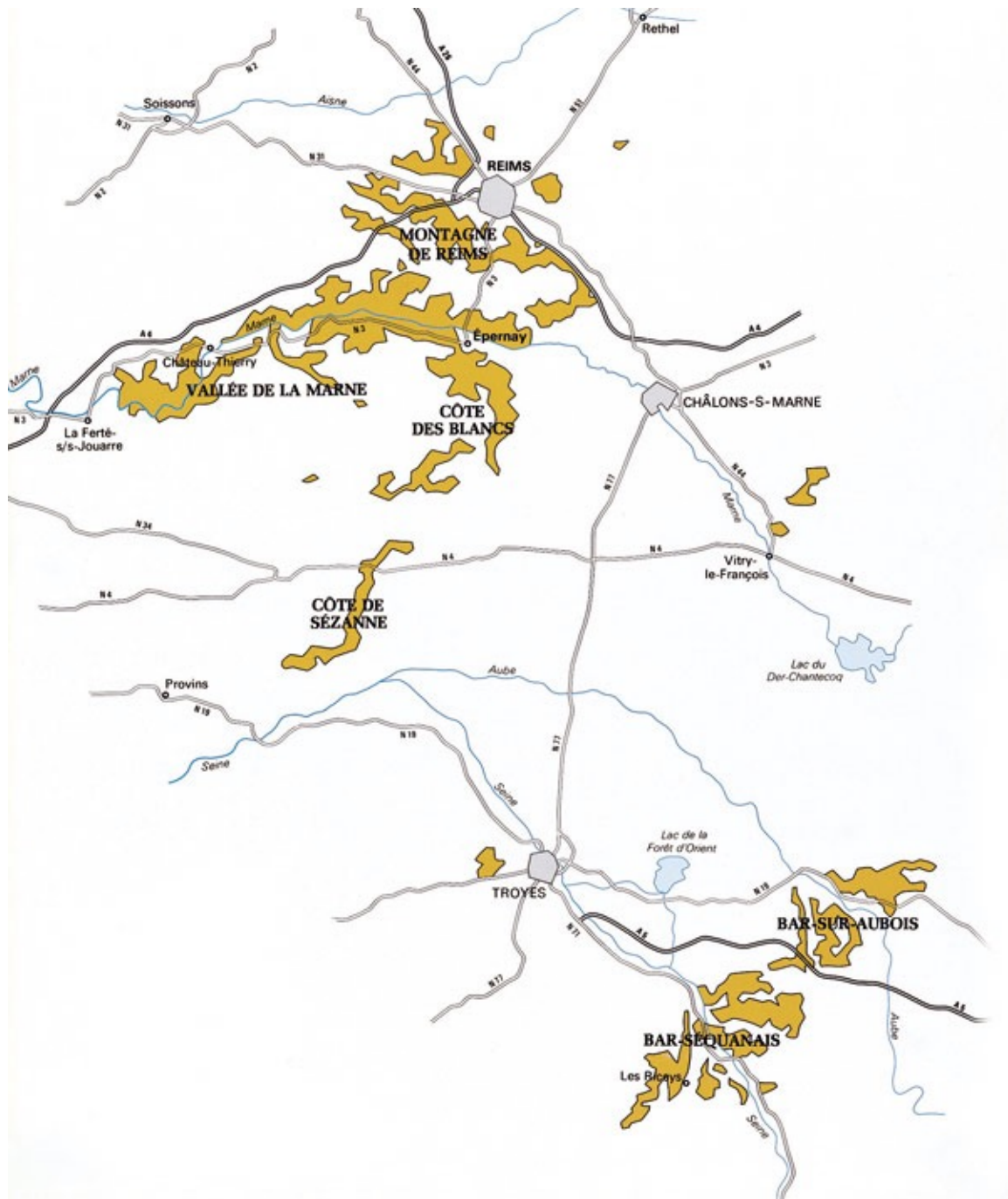
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Read on for our complete Champagne 101 tutorial on the following pages...

Champagne 101

- Champagne is the largest AOC (**A**ppellation d'**O**rigin **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 is 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, Brut Sauvage) – 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 approx. 12% 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 CO₂ 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!