



## Champagne Club! Spring 2015

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, call us at 503-679-6233*). 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 and enjoy them. Whichever path you choose – there's lots of good bubbly in your future!



*The village of Cumières, in the Vallée de la Marne*

## Terroir

This shipment is a study in **terroir** – that elusive term that takes into account all of the factors that make a wine from a specific place taste and smell differently from one made someplace else, even if that someplace else is just yards away. Soils, sub-soils, exposition, angle of slope, wind patterns – these are just a few of the elements that make up terroir.

Until very recently, terroir was not part of the discussion when it came to Champagne. The Champagne business is dominated by the large negociant producers (explained below) – they make 88% of the wine in the region. They've spent the last 200 years or more promoting the idea that “brand” or “house style” is what's important in Champagne, not “where” the grapes were grown. This is because their wines are made from grapes from hundreds of different vineyards across the vast Champagne appellation, and the resulting wines are pretty much guaranteed not to taste like they came from anywhere specific.

The winemakers in Champagne have always known, even at the largest producers, that there are indeed distinct expressions of terroir in the region. They've known for centuries that Chardonnay from the village of Mesnil-sur-Oger is hugely different from Chardonnay in the village of Oger just next door, and that the Chardonnay from the Montagne de Reims or Vallée de la Marne is another thing entirely, for example. They just never talked about it much, as it was always “the blend” that was important, not the specifics. And there's nothing wrong with this, of course. Champagne has always operated under a different paradigm than Burgundy, for example, where the focus is on wines made from micro-parcels rather than regional blends

That conversation has changed radically in the last 10-15 years, with the emergence and rapid growth of Grower Champagnes – which can often be made from single villages or even single vineyards. Now that we've got it in front of us in black and white (or pale gold and sparkles, to be precise) – there are a lot of Champagnes available to us that are specifically made to be an expression of the terroir of a specific place.

For our first exploration of terroir in Champagne, we'll start with some broader strokes. We'll be tasting bottles from four major sub-regions of Champagne – the Montagne de Reims, the “Petite Montagne”, the Vallée de la Marne, and the Aube – to get a general overview of the larger, regional differences in terroir. In future shipments it would be fun to slice it and dice it even more precisely – perhaps 6 wines from different parts of the same village, or something on that order.

For those of you new to the club, or if you just want to brush up, we'll review the Champagne basics first. If you're already up to speed on all that, feel free to skip ahead to all the info specific to this shipment...

# Grower Champagne

We import exclusively, and this club features exclusively, **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.

The big names that you are likely familiar with – Moët et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Mumm, Roederer, 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 250 of them are available here in the U.S.!*

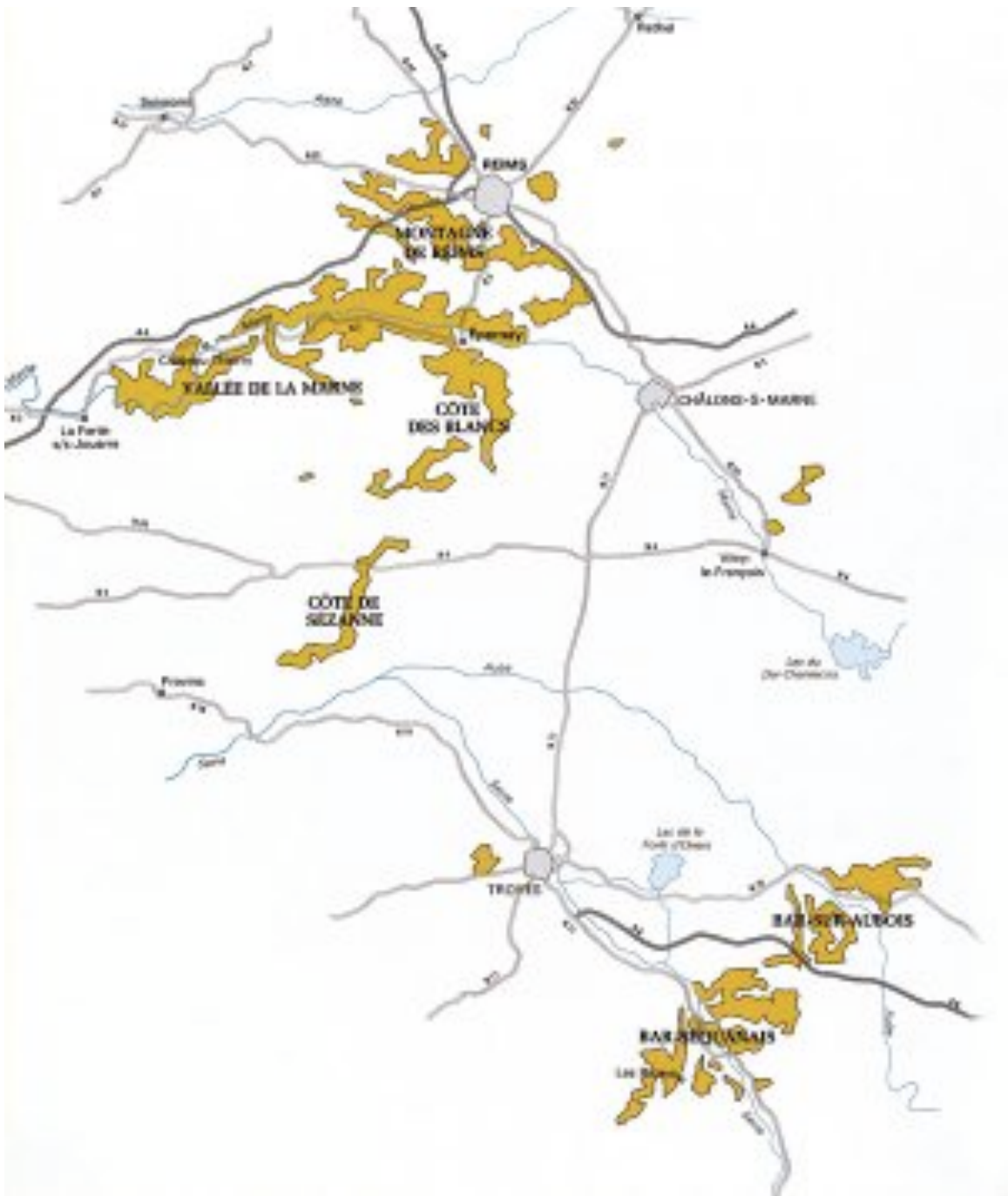
Most negociant Champagne is mass-produced, often over-priced, and can be quite lacking in character. (A very small portion of it however, is outstanding, and in fact can be among the best in all of Champagne.) Negociant Champagne is hugely successful, and is certainly the world's most celebrated wine. Unfortunately, most of it just isn't very good. They produce 88% of the wine, but own only 12% of the vineyards. Their production methods are designed to bring the wines down to a lowest common denominator. Hence our motto – "**Friends don't let friends drink negociant Champagne!**"



# 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 is 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.

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:
    - **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 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- palletes 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!



## An introduction to Terroir in Champagne

As discussed at the beginning of this document, the notion of terroir in Champagne is a relatively recent discussion. Terroir has always been present in the wines of Champagne, of course, but in a very broad, regional sense. The 319 villages that make up the Champagne appellation together have a unique terroir – that’s why sparkling wines made anywhere else in the world never taste quite like Champagne. So most people are already somewhat familiar with the terroir of Champagne, at least in the broader, regional sense.

What we’ll try to do now is break it down one step further, and take a look at the terroir of four sub-regions in Champagne, and explore what each of them have to bring to the party.

### **The Montagne de Reims** (pronounced “rance”, rhymes with pants)

Most likely the best-known sector of Champagne, the Montagne de Reims sprawls out to the west and south from the city of Reims, and encompasses hundreds of different terroirs within its borders. This is predominant grape here is Pinot Noir, though a good amount of Chardonnay is present as well. There is some Meunier too, but its presence is relatively insignificant.

Pinot Noir from the northern part of the appellation in villages like Verzy and Verzenay tends to be bright and mineral-driven, while the same grape grown in the southern villages of Bouzy and Ambonnay is rich, powerful, full-throttle, totally at the other end of the spectrum. (Bouzy is one of the only villages where top quality **Coteaux Champenois** - Pinot Noir vinified as a still wine, like in Burgundy – is regularly produced.)

Chardonnay throughout the Montagne can be quite excellent, but it never has the minerality and precision found in Chardonnay from the major villages in the Côte des Blancs. These differences are mostly soil-based, of course, with more clay mixed in with the chalk on the Montagne, versus the intense limestone and chalk mix on the Côte.

Now armed with this basic overview, let’s take a look at two different wines that are entirely from grapes grown on the Montagne de Reims.

1. Special Club 2009 – **Champagne Forget-Chemin**

**\$58 CLUB Price \$49**

Thierry Forget's estate is based in the village of Ludes, in the heart of the northern sector of the Montagne de Reims. He owns over 60 parcels of vines in some 11 different villages, mostly on the Montagne, with a few parcels in other sectors. Despite the relative lack of Pinot Meunier in the area, his holdings consist of about 70% Pinot Meunier, with the balance equally split between Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Forget-Chemin (for-zhay sh-man) was one of the original members of Champagne's "Special Club", a group of 25 top small grower-producers. If a member believes they have produced something of exceptional quality, they can submit it for review to the rest of the members. If agreement is unanimous, the wine can be released under the Special Club name and label. Members often only produce a Special Club bottling a few times per decade.

- 47% Pinot Noir (Mailly), 23% Chardonnay (Ludes), 30% Pinot Meunier (Taissy)
- Dosage 8 grams/liter
- Five years on the lees prior to disgorgement in December 2014

So what we have here is a good look at the terroir of the northern, cooler part of the Montagne de Reims. Most of these parcels face North (not uncommon in Champagne.) The Pinot Noir from the village of Ludes tend to make very refined, elegant wines, as does the Meunier from Taissy, with the Chardonnay from Ludes adding depth of fruit. The result is a lighter bodied Champagne with excellent intensity of flavor, and beautifully developed aromatics from the extended time on the lees.

I would suggest tasting this wine side-by-side with the next one, for a comparison of different aspects of the terroir of the Montagne de Reims.



**Thierry Forget**



2. 2006 Special Club – **Champagne Marc Chauvet**    **\$61.50 CLUB PRICE \$52**

The sister-brother team of Clotilde and Nicolas Chauvet (show-vay) are at the helm of this family estate, which has been growing and making Champagne since 1529. They are based in the village of Rilly-la-Montagne, which is about 2km west of Ludes (with the tiny village of Chigny-les-Roses between the two.) They are on the same north-facing slope as Ludes, on essentially the same soils and sub-soils. Rilly-la-Montagne is somewhat more exposed than Ludes, with more cool winds hitting the vineyards from all directions.

The Chauvet fruit is 100% from their 30+ acres of holdings in Rilly-la-Montagne, so in this wine we get a pure look at the terroir of the village as a whole.

- 75% Chardonnay, 25% Pinot Noir
- Dosage 9 grams/liter
- Eight years on the lees prior to disgorgement in November 2014

The Chauvets have always preferred to keep a bright, crisp edge to their wines, so they systematically block the malo-lactic fermentation, which leaves the malic acid in the finished wine. This accentuates the elegant and ethereal style that tends to come from this part of the Montagne. The character of the fruit is very typical of the village – refined and graceful, while the 8 years on the bottle adds richness and depth that combine to make this a distinctly delicious example.





## The Petite Montagne

While technically a part of the Montagne de Reims, the area known as the Petite Montagne is distinctly different and is usually referred to separately when one speaks of the terroirs or Champagne. These villages are directly west of the city of Reims, just a couple of strip-malls away from the city center, and the vines are on rolling hillsides that can face east, north, or south.

The Petite Montagne probably deserves to be better known, but is held back by its relatively small size and lack of famous Grand Cru villages. The potential quality here is excellent, though we're just really starting to see it rather recently. Most of the grapes from this region were historically sold to the large Négociants, in fact most still are, so the wines from here were buried in large blends. Now with some quality-oriented small grower-producers keeping their own fruit and making the wine themselves, we're starting to see how good it really is.

It is cooler here than most other parts of the Montagne, which explains why Pinot Meunier does well here. The old books always cite the Petite Montagne as a top source for Meunier, especially the tiny villages of Jouy-lès-Reims and its even tinier neighbor Pargny-lès-Reims. All three grapes seem to do well here, and all excel at producing Champagnes that are of a distinctly floral, elegant and ethereal style.

### 3. NV Brut “Eclat” – **Champagne F. Cossy**

**\$40.50 CLUB PRICE \$34**

Sophie Cossy (co-SEE), now 31, took over the family estate when her father unexpectedly passed away six years ago. Sophie and her mom, Genevieve, are two strong, talented women. Based on the quality of the wines, their popularity is swiftly on the rise.

All of their vineyard holdings, 25 acres in all, are in the adjacent villages of Jouy-lès-Reims and Pargny-lès-Reims, so their wines are a true expression of the terroir of this sector of the Petite Montagne.

- One-third each of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay
- 85% from the 2012 vintage, 15% reserve wines from 2011
- Dosage 9.5 grams/liter
- Disgorged November 2014

While not a single-vineyard wine, this certainly qualifies as a single-terroir wine. There is no discernable difference between the two villages – it is essentially one terroir with an arbitrary borderline running through the middle.

The Meunier from here displays lovely floral notes, with some herbal scents as well, and adds a touch of creamy texture to the mid-palate. From the Pinot Noir we tend to see some bright red-fruit notes, leaning toward wild strawberries, rather than the heavier fruit notes typical of Pinot Noir from warmer parts of the region. The Chardonnay I find to be a cross between the minerality of the Côte des Blancs and the richness of the Montagne.



**Sophie Cossy**



## The Vallée de la Marne

The Vallée de la Marne stretches out along both sides of the Marne river, which runs east-west through the heart of Champagne. This region comprises the coolest sectors of Champagne, which is why Pinot Meunier is the most widely planted grape here. (Meunier, as the locals refer to it, doesn't need much heat, and it is frost resistant – thus a perfect match for the cool climates and sandy-chalky soils in the valley.)

It's a vast, and not terribly homogenous region, with dozens if not hundreds of distinct terroirs scattered throughout the river valley. It is nearly impossible to generalize about the Vallée de la Marne – every couple of kilometers in any direction and you're in a whole different world, viticulturally. Vineyards are on slopes facing every possible direction, at various elevations, and lord knows how many subtle variations in soils.

For our illustration here, we'll focus on a sub-section of the Vallée de la Marne known as the **Côte Sud d'Épernay** – a cluster of small villages in the hills just south of the city of Épernay. These villages form a sort of bridge, connecting the Vallée de la Marne and the Côte des Blancs.

#### 4. Grand Millésime 2006 – **Laherte Frères**

\$66 **CLUB PRICE \$56**

Aurélien Laherte (la-airt) is a 7th-generation vigneron, working alongside his father Thierry. The Laherte family owns 25 acres of vines, spread out over an astonishing 75 different parcels in ten villages – but the core of their holdings are in the Côte Sud d'Épernay – specifically in their home village of Chavot-Courcourt.

The Lahertes are some of the most progressive vintners in all of Champagne, and are among the first wave of producers to truly focus on wines of terroir. They produce a dozen different Champagnes, all of which are meant to be, first and foremost, expressions of place rather than a style. Aurélien's been featured in Time magazine as one of the cutting-edge mavericks of Champagne, and one of its brightest rising stars.

- 85% Chardonnay from **Chavot**, 15% Pinot Meunier from Chavot and the neighboring villages of **Mancy** and **Vaudancourt**
- From the estate's oldest vines, parcels planted in the 1930s and 1950s
- First fermentation was in barrel, including 40% new (not a common practice in Champagne)
- Dosage 2.5 grams/liter
- 8 years on the lees

100% from the heart of the Côte Sud d'Épernay, the vineyards are all within a mile or so of each other. This wine is a very pure expression of this particular terroir. These grapes are grown on steep hillsides, on very thin soils, with roots growing directly into layers and layers of ancient limestone.

There is such a distinct minerality to the wines from here – you can literally smell and sometimes feel the limestone in the wines. The Chardonnay is bright and fresh and clean, the Meunier herbal and soft. The bright malic acidity is buffered by the richness of barrel fermentation, resulting in a wine of restrained power and great flavor intensity.



*In the cellar with **Thierry Laherte***



## **The Aube (also referred to as The Côte des Bar)**

If the Aube seems like a world apart from the rest of Champagne, that's because it is. From Reims to the heart of the Aube is about a 2+ hour drive, with most of that time spent whizzing by wheat fields rather than vineyards.

It is here in the southernmost part of Champagne the much of the most exciting winemaking is happening. This activity is all very recent. The area boasted thousands of acres of vineyards throughout history, and was a major subject in the « Great Champagne War » in the early 20th century – over whether or not the Aube should be included in the Champagne appellation (it finally won inclusion.) Prior to 1927, grapes from this region were sold to either Champagne houses or producers in Burgundy – whoever would pay the highest price! From '27 on, they were only allowed to sell grapes to Champagne producers.

Over the course of the two World Wars, much of the Champagne region was destroyed – the Aube especially so. Most of the vineyards in the region were not replanted until the 1970s or 80s, and much of what had been planted historically has still not been returned to vineyard use.

Being some 200 Kilometers (about 125 miles) south of Reims, it's significantly warmer in the Aube, thus the grapes have the opportunity to get a bit riper. This serves well the new generation of producers who are picking their grapes at higher level of ripeness, and not relying on added sugar (chaptalization) to make their wines.

It's a vast area with a kaleidoscope of different terroirs, but in general nearly everyone grows Pinot Noir, and hardly anyone grows Meunier. There are pockets of Chardonnay, but overall this is Pinot Noir country. Pinot in the Aube generally achieves good ripeness, and brings a roundness, richness, and vinosity to the Champagnes. In the southern reaches of the Aube, the soil and bedrock are the same as in Chablis, i.e. Kimmeridgian limestone (the Chablis appellation begins just a couple miles away from the limits of the Aube.) This can bring great minerality to the wines – picture Pinot Noir grown on Chablis' soils and you get a good idea.

5. NV Extra-Brut – **Champagne Vincent Couche** \$44.50 **CLUB PRICE \$38**

Vincent Couche (koosh) is a leader of the Biodynamic movement in Champagne (a system of farming without the use of chemicals, pesticides, herbicides, and working in harmony with the natural energies of the universe.) His vineyards are now all certified Biodynamic, and he is the first ever in Champagne to produce a Biodynamically certified wine (without the addition of any SO<sub>2</sub> in the winemaking process. A bottle of that wine, *Cuvée Chloé*, was in your last club package.)

The NV Extra-Brut represents the the largest share of Couche's production. He does not make a Brut – all of his wines receive 6 grams or less of dosage. In terms of terroir this wine brings together two very different parts of the Aube – the Pinot Noir is from his holdings in the tiny village of Buxeuil, where the winery is based. The Chardonnay is from his plots in Montgeux – about an hour's drive away, just outside the city of Troyes (a highly recommended stop when touring Champagne). Montgeux is one of the only places in the Aube where Chardonnay flourishes – there's a minerality to Montgeux Chardonnay that rivals the Côte des Blancs.

- 63% Pinot Noir, 37% Chardonnay
- Based on 2008 vintage, with reserve wines from '05, '06 & '07
- First fermentation part in tank, and part in neutral barrels (47%)
- Malolactic fermentation partially blocked
- 6 grams dosage

For years this has been one of my go-to Champagnes at home – it never fails to please, the value is excellent, and it's flat-out delicious with food or on its own. The ripe Pinot Noir from Buxeuil coupled with the crisp and minerally Chardonnay from Mongeux make for a captivating blend. The somewhat « weightier » and warmer terroir of the Aube is very much in evidence here – with a different style of fruit richness than one tends to find in the cooler Vallée de la Marne, for example.



***Vincent Couche, in his vineyards in Buxeuil***

6. Dentelles et Crinolines – **Champagne Pierre Brigandat**      \$50 CLUB \$42

Now we head down to the southernmost tip of the Aube, in the village of Channes. (It's more of a hamlet, actually, just a few houses/wineries on either side of a road, and that's the extent of it!)

Here, we are on the Kimmeridgian limestone, the same terroir as Chablis, which is literally just down the road. Bertrand Brigandat's (bree-gawn-da) father Pierre was one of the first to re-plant vines down here, starting in 1965. All of their holdings are on one wide south-facing hillside above town.

All of the other Brigandat wines are 100% Pinot Noir - this is the only one to include any Chardonnay (they have just one small plot of the white grape.) The name **Dentelles & Crinolines** means « lace and petticoats » - a reference to the combination of delicacy and structure found in the wine. The limestone soils bring a lovely minerality, most noticeably through the Chardonnay, and the richness of the Pinot Noir provides the fruit and the structure.

- 70% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay
- 100% from 2007 – this is in fact a vintage Champagne, though it is not labeled as such
- Seven years on the lees
- Disgorged September 2014
- Dosage 6 grams per liter

Less than 250 cases were produced of this wonderful wine. It is drinking beautifully now, but you could certainly cellar it for another 3-5 years. A great wine with which to conclude our mini-tour through some of the fascinating terroirs of Champagne !





## 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 Bubbliies headed your way throughout the year. All the latest information is always available on our website: [www.caveauselections.com](http://www.caveauselections.com)