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## Champagne Club! Spring 2017

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 <http://www.caveauselections.com/burgundy-club/>)

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!



**Champagne, where the vines grow directly into the chalk**

## The Full Spectrum of Champagne

This shipment is a veritable **sampler-pack** of what's new and exciting in the world of Grower Champagne right now - a little bit of everything! Great examples of Blanc de Blancs, Blanc de Noirs, Rosé, and vintage Champagnes - a great way to get a good overall view of the broad spectrum of the world's most famous wine region.

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 11, following our discussion of the wines in 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, and produced in huge factories.

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!**"

## The Wines

So let's explore six different wines from Champagne, each a representative of a different style or subset of Champagne. The one thing they have in common is that they're made in tiny quantities - the largest production in this group tops out at a whopping 400 cases, the smallest a mere 100 cases. You won't be finding these in your neighborhood shops!

Most people aren't aware of this, but much of what you need to know about a Champagne is not indicated on the label. Labeling information is getting better and better in Champagne, 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 to the wines! We'll start with a gorgeous **Brut Rosé**...



*The 11th-century church in Chavot, outside of Épernay*

## 1. **Caveau Brut Rosé**

**CLUB PRICE \$35**

It was almost exactly two years ago we were able to realize a life-long dream and release our first very own Champagne, the **Caveau Extra-Brut** (and there's a bottle of that one in this package too!) Now, we're excited to announce the arrival of the newest member of the family - **Caveau Brut Rosé!**

Once again we've collaborated with **Sophie Cossy** (who was just named Champagne's Winemaker of the Year), working in her vineyards and winery in the tiny hamlet of *Jouy-lès-Reims* to craft our idea of an elegant, ethereal Rosé Champagne that we want to drink every day. (It's not just for breakfast anymore...)

- 80% from the 2013 harvest, 20% reserve wines from 2012 & 2011
- Base wine is 60% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinot Meunier & 10% Chardonnay
- 20% Red still wine from the Pinots was added to the final blend before going into bottle for the 2nd fermentation.
- Primary fermentation in tank
- 36 months on the lees in bottle prior to disgorgement
- Clay and limestone soils over solid chalk sub-soil
- Dosage 8g/l - Disgorged June 2016
- 100 cases produced

We started with basically the same base blend as our 2013-base Caveau Extra-Brut (which won't be released for another couple of years), and then added in a small amount of **Coteaux Champenois** (the red wine from the Pinots). So that makes this a **Rosé d'Assemblage** - the color coming from the red wine in the blend, rather than a **Rosé de Saignier** - where the color comes from leaving the juice in contact with the skins for a short period of time.

The result is an elegant, ethereal Brut Rosé - brimming with scents of wild strawberries, and citrus notes that bring freshness and energy. On the palate it's all fresh berries and a hint of white flowers. Yum! We're proud to put our name on this one, and so excited to share it with you! We'll be doing another disgorgement for fall '17 release, so you'll be able to get your hands on more than one bottle if you like it.



## 2. **Caveau Extra-Brut**

**CLUB PRICE \$39.50**

What was a fantasy became a reality for us in the spring of 2015 with the release of our first Champagne. I was seduced by the magic of Champagne by a bottle of 1961 Krug back in the early 70s, and had for a long time harbored a desire to try my hand at making Champagne. After 15 years of making Pinot Noir in Oregon, the opportunity finally arose through our partnership with Sophie Cossy.

We've previously sold this wine only on pre-arrival in 6 & 12-bottle increments. Many Club members have not had the chance to try it yet, so we decided to include it in the package this time. This bottling is the 2nd release of our Caveau Extra-Brut, and we're thrilled to be able to share it with you!

- All from Cossy estate parcels on the slopes of Jouy-lès-Reims and neighboring Pargny-lès-Reims
- 35% Pinot Noir, 40% Pinot Meunier, 25% Chardonnay
- Base vintage is 2010, with a touch of reserve wine from 2009 in the mix
- Primary fermentation in steel tanks
- Five years on the lees in bottle
- 2.4 grams dosage
- Disgorged March, 2016
- 200 cases produced

I love low-dosage and no-dosage Champagnes - if they're well made and have the inherent fruit ripeness to fully express flavors without much or any sugar adjustment. There's a crispness and elegance to them that I find captivating. Precise citrus flavors, floral aromas, and a purity that keeps you coming back for another glass. This is what I want to drink all the time (and in fact I do!)



*Tasting at the winery with Sophie Cossy*

### 3. **Cuvée Duo Blanc de Blancs** – Champagne Marc Chauvet **CLUB PRICE \$54**

**Blanc de Blancs** means “White from Whites” - which in Champagne means it's made exclusively from the Chardonnay grape. We did an entire study on Blanc de Blancs a few Club packages ago, and I'm excited to have this great example to include this time around.

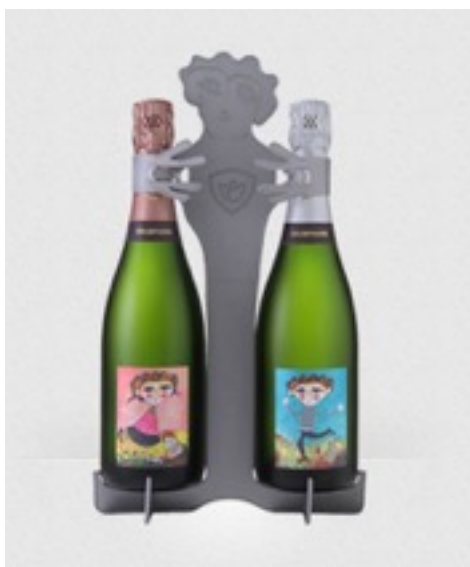
Winemaker Clotilde Chauvet and her brother Nicolas run the family estate, which dates back to 1529. The name **Cuvée Duo** refers to the two different front labels Chauvet uses for this wine - some of you have the “girl” label, while some have the “boy” version. The wine inside is the same - only the label image differs. These images are from paintings which hang in the Chauvet tasting room in Rilly-la-Montagne.

They've only made this wine twice - the first was in the 2006 vintage, and now this version that they made in 2010. It's the only Blanc de Blancs they've ever made, and it's the only wine in their lineup that ever sees any oak barrels at any time in its life.

- 100% from the 2010 vintage

- Fermented in stainless steel tank
- Aged in neutral Burgundy barrels for 6 months
- Disgorged January 12, 2016 – over 5 years on the lees
- Dosage – 9 g/l
- 225 cases produced

This is a big, powerful Chardonnay-based Champers - nothing delicate or shy about it. Citrus and brioche dominate the nose and the palate, with nice aromas of white flowers and a faint touch of vanilla in the mix as well. Try this with some nice slices of prosciutto or a triple-cream cheese...



#### 4. **Les Longues Voyes** – Laherte Frères

**CLUB PRICE \$56**

7th-generation vigneron **Aurélien Laherte** (lah-airt) is now firmly in charge at the family estate, which dates to 1889. He farms Biodynamically, and is squarely on the cutting edge of new-school Champagne – i.e. Champagne that clearly shows where it was grown, without make-up or artifice of any kind. He now has a total of 25 acres of vines spread over 10 villages and some 70+ small parcels. The bulk of the holdings are in the home village of Chavot, a key site in the sub-region of the Marne Valley known as the “Coteaux Sud d’Épernay” (which simply means the hillside slopes south of Épernay.)



**Les Longues Voyes** (the long rows) is a new cuvée for Laherte - this is in fact the first release ever of this wine

- 100% from the 2012 vintage
- 100% Pinot Noir, from parcels new to the estate on the Montagne de Reims
- Fermented in used Burgundy barrels, minimum 4 years old
- Malolactic fermentation was blocked
- Aged for 18 months in barrel post-fermentation
- Another 18 months on the lees in bottle
- Extra-Brut - Dosage 3.5 g/l – Disgorged November 2016
- 249 cases produced

The Montagne de Reims is the Champagne sub-region where Pinot Noir performs at its best, and Aurélien has captured both the power and precision that this terroir can produce. This is a great example of “new school” Champagne - single variety, single terroir, single vintage - a focus on delivering what the vineyard **land** has to say, rather than winemaking to a predetermined formula.

Rich, muscular, robust - yet refined and elegant at the same time. Beautifully balanced - this is a stellar addition to the already remarkable Laherte lineup.





## 5. Millésime 2006 – Laherte Frères

**CLUB PRICE \$58**

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 has 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 Coteaux 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. The nearly 10 years in the bottle have brought this wine into its next phase - where the aromatics move into the mushrooms and truffles arena. Yes, please!



*Aurélien Laherte in his vines on the slopes of Chavot*

## 6. Vieilles Vignes 2008 - F. Cossy

CLUB PRICE \$46

**Sophie Cossy** and I collaborated on the *Caveau Extra-Brut* and *Brut Rosé*, but this one's all her own. At the end of 2016 Sophie was awarded the prestigious **Winemaker of the Year** trophy in Champagne - which means she is no longer "under the radar", and I'm very glad we found her before everyone else knew about her! Sophie took over the estate 10 years ago when her father passed away suddenly, and she rose to the occasion quickly and with great talent in evidence. The *Vieilles Vignes* (old vines) bottling is from a selection of her family's oldest parcels, dating to the 1960s.

- A classic blend of one-third each Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and Chardonnay
- Tank fermented
- 8 years on the lees in bottle
- Disgorged November 2016, dosage 8.5 g/l
- 265 cases produced

This is another lovely example of a Champagne that has moved into its 2nd stage of life - there is still plenty of primary fruit to be found, but the aromas have moved on to a place that only time can bring. This is personally my favorite level of evolution - when Champagne is at its most complex. Younger, you get more vibrancy and fruit, but the layers of scents and flavors are limited compared to this. Older, too much of the fruit and power fades, and you're left with just secondary and tertiary aromas and little if any fruit (though those can be amazingly beautiful - I had a gorgeous magnum of '61 Krug recently that was absolutely stunning.) Enjoy!

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

Please let us know if we need to make any changes to your account. Email us at [hellocaveau@gmail.com](mailto:hellocaveau@gmail.com) or call us at 503-679-6233 if:

- You have a new or updated credit card
- You have a change of billing or shipping address
- You want to change your order from “ship” to “pick-up”, or vice-versa
- 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](mailto:Scott@caveauselections.com) for more information.*

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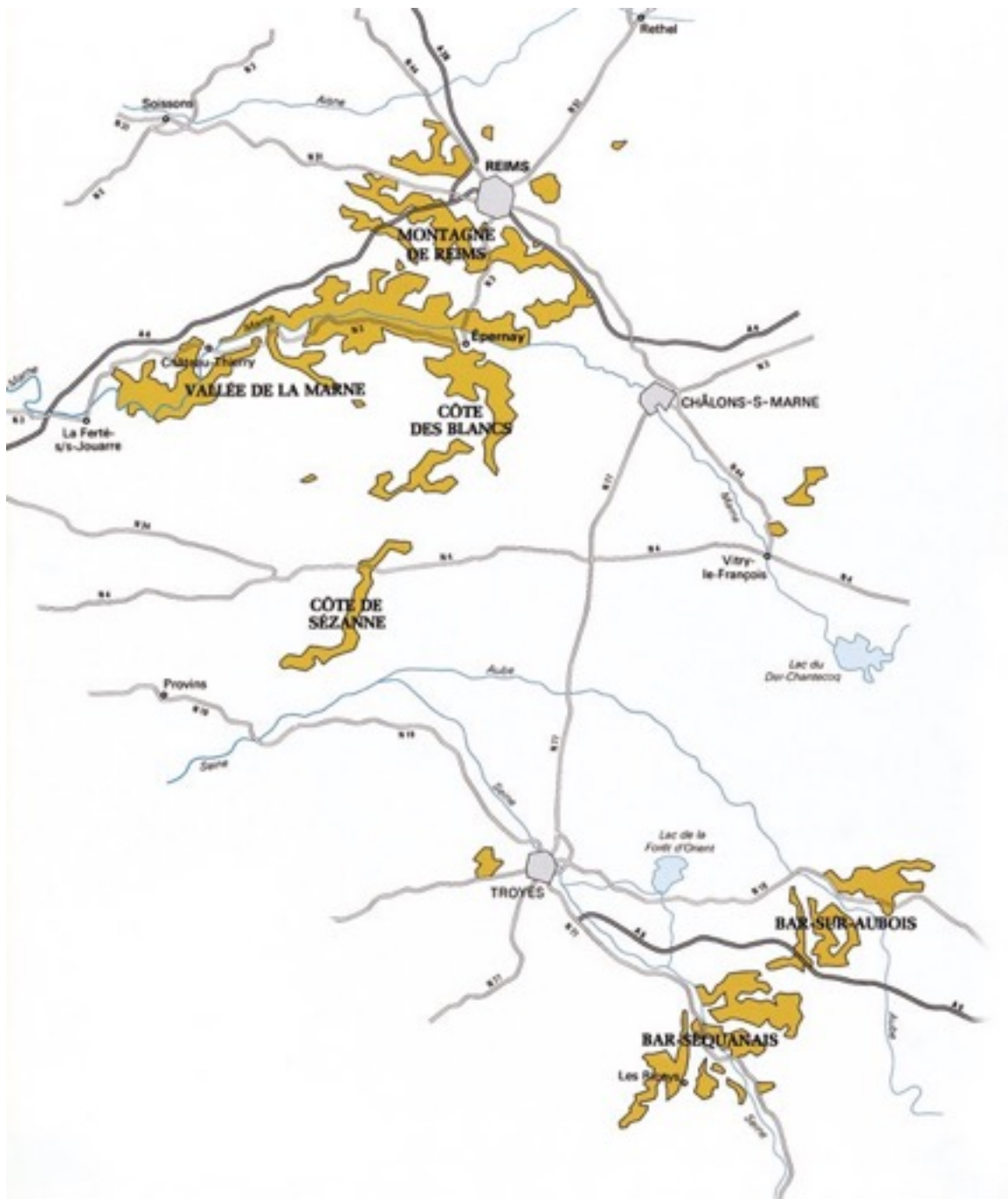
**503-679-6233**

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

# 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 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 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!