

# Grower Champagne; a Holiday Primer

Year in and year out, I deal with wine geeks large and small, civil and uncivil, pleasant and piggish, both the quick and the slow, and the pedantic versus the agreeable. Each year their rutting madness and thirst for the arcane, the small production, the single vineyard and The Next Big Thing are incurable and unquenchable. Funny thing? Most people get to the champagne aisle in the wine store and their brain shuts off, rationality, scrutiny and good sense all go on holiday. There are champagnes other than Veuve Clicquot, Perrier Jouet and of course the ubiquitous Moet ~ consider this my Holiday call to “go out and look for the Union Label” and support the family farmers of Champagne.

Champagne is set up much like Burgundy on the Production end with negociants, cooperatives and growers. Properties are classified, more sensibly than either Burgundy or Bordeaux, based on geological and exposure parameters (things which actually influence vines & fruit). The only flaw is that entire communes (villages) are classified, not individual vineyards. By and large this system still holds up well and is an accurate guarantor of quality. A Grand Cru pedigree always shows.

These villages have soils that are as widely varied as any in the viticultural world, yet the Grand Marques (Labels such as Veuve, Moet/Dom, Roederer, Perrier Jouet) happily create a uniform house style, blending the same cookie cutter wine year after year, sourcing fruit from as many as 80 communes for their various cuvees—think of it thusly, why would you blend away Stag’s Leap Cabernet fruit with fruit from Lodi? The growers live with these vines year after year, and though they may sell large portions of their fruit to the Grand Marques, the fruit they set aside for themselves is subject to a much different treatment.

The Grand Marques insist that their fruit be pulled early to maintain acidity (this doesn’t make much sense in France’s northernmost appellation—but hey what do I know?) and when it comes time for dosage to create the bubbles, the amount of sugar used is high. This larger dosage adds fleshiness to the mouthfeel and palate. It also obscures the character of the base wine, which thanks to its early pick, is often acidic and lemony. (Feel free to test this theory by letting a bottle of any Grand Marques -Yellow Label, Mumm, Moet...take your pick- come to room temperature). The Appellation Controllee allows up a wine to have up to 15 grams per liter of sugar in the dosage and still be called Brut (this is actually a prevailing standard with the large houses). Dosage isn’t necessarily a bad thing, some is necessary, but it leads to abuses, covering up less than careful winemaking by the industrial producers such as the Grand Marques. This leads naturally to a discussion of blending, which is essential to the negociant trying to create that perfect innocuous palate profile. That said, why would you want to blend away the natural expressiveness of a wine or cover it up with an excessive dosage as they do? Growers will pull fruit much later for their own bottling. As a result, the fruit is closer to physiological ripeness creating a base wine that uses a much smaller or more harmonious dosage and is much more reflective of distinctive terroir and style.

Growers offer the very best value in all of Champagne and, believe it or not, the very best wines. Even the most basic Non Vintage offering from a grower will have Grand Cru fruit whereas with the corporate dinosaurs LVMH, Veuve, Perrier et al, one has to trade all the way up to the luxury cuvee to see such stuff, and even then, \$150+ dollars later one isn’t guaranteed any decent measure of that quality fruit. Why pay premium dollars for underripe wine to support an advertising budget and marketing goodies for the promotions department? Just say NO to negociant champagne. At this point after almost 3 years of working with grower champagnes, it is the growers that provide me with the most effervescent happiness. These wines are utterly compelling, idiosyncratic, fascinating and quite frankly, profoundly, deeply moving efforts; they are brilliant wines that just happen to have bubbles., and I couldn’t be more proud to offer them here.

## How to tell the difference on the label

Along the border of the label is the producer’s tax ID number (its very tiny, so look carefully) ; it will bear one of the three following prefixes, **NM** for negociants (Moet, Perrier Jouet, Veuve Clicquot), **CM** for Cooperatives (Nicholas Feuillate), and **RM** for Recoltant—Manipulant aka Grower/Producer. The Grower Producers also tell you more about vineyard sourcing, citing specific villages on the label and indicators of vineyard rating.

## Serving Tips ~ Cool not Cold

This isn’t sugary negociant trash. **THEY ARE NOT TO BE SERVED ICE COLD.** As consumers we’ve been trained to serve bubbles at sub zero temperatures. Cold masks flaws in white wine. Period. Grower champagnes should be chilled to a cool temp not a cold one. Allow the wine to open up ~ these grower bubbles actually develop aromas, depth, flavor, texture and power as they sit open and gradually rise to cool room temperatures. Remember, when we speak of cellar temp, the original reference point was some grubby French guy’s cool dirt root cellar that stayed 50 to 55 degrees. Treat these wines with deference, like all your other fine single vineyard bottling from all over the world.



LIBATION  
FINE WINES, DISTILLATES & OTHER FERMENTATIONS

# A Brief Explanation

I am often told I speak too quickly when I talk about wine, that I gloss right over and assume certain details are common knowledge and that no one ever has the opportunity to ask a question. Well, I do get excited. So, before you dive into the notes, here are a few details to help you decode the more technical phrases and terms.

Champagne is produced much like any wine, sort of. Grapes get picked, crushed and fermented. Yeast eats sugar, converts to alcohol and so on. This is called the *Vin Claire* - think of it as a base wine. Winemakers resort to a number of flavor and texture modifiers such as barrel fermenting that base wine in oak (used, new or neutral) or some form of toasted oak to create additional flavors and textures. These same winemakers might also resort to the use of Malo-lactic fermentation (the bacterial conversion of the fruit's primary malic acid to a softer form known as lactic) to create additional creaminess and richness in the finished wine. Let it suffice to say the average creative winemaker has a number of tools in the tool box.

Other factors that affect flavor involve the second fermentation that takes place when the winemaker adds the dosage. The French use a method called **Methode Champenoise**. The fermentation to create CO<sub>2</sub> takes place in individual bottles. The method used in other sparklers, such as most Prosecco from Italy and Cava from Spain, is called the **Charmat Bulk Process** or **Metodo Italiano**; here the dosage and ensuing fermentation to create CO<sub>2</sub> is done in large pressurized batches. The ensuing **mousse** (the foamy deliciousness in the glass) is much more aggressive in Prosecco and Cava than that produced by the Champenoise method.

The **Dosage** refers to the mixture of "Vin Claire", with yeast and an additional sugar source that is added to the bottled base wine. The dosage initiates another fermentation inside the bottle that creates, naturally, the CO<sub>2</sub> that gives creates the ultimate wine's effervescence. This dosage varies greatly from producer to producer. The industrial houses resort to larger doses of pure cane sugar or beet sugar whereas the growers and many coops use **Must** (the unfermented leftover pressings—seeds, pulp, skins and what not - left from the creation of the initial wine). The natural sugars of the Must create a much more harmonious integration of flavor than the coarser approach of non-grape sugars.

Once the dosage has been added, the wine is then left to rest. The bottles are **riddled** (that is rotated by hand or machine) where the rough lees (spent yeast cells) drift down to the neck of the bottle. This period of time is referred to as the wine being left "**en tirage**", that is, in contact with the dead yeast cells. As disgusting as this sounds, this additional lees contact creates richer flavors and textures.

When the decision is made to "**disgorge**" (remove the spent yeast), conscientious producers will offer a date of disgorgement on the back label. The **Date of Disgorgement** provides a good profile of what to expect; the rule of thumb? The closer you are to the actual date of disgorgement, the more lively, bright and citrusy the wine will be, it will have "nerve". The farther from the date of disgorgement you are, the more resolved and integrated the wine becomes, showing more notes of ginger, butterscotch and spices.

Remember, it has to come from Champagne to be called Champagne (there are a few exceptions). Hope this helps. Happy Drinking.

## Other Bubbles, Other Places



**Adami Prosecco Garbel 13 NV (\$15)** is a hell of a way to get a bubble fix. Adami is the qualitative leader in the region of Valdobbiadene where Prosecco is king and the head of the Producers Consortium. The base wine is left chilled and pressurized under a layer of nitrogen and "dosed" only when market demand requires, thus ensuring amazing lively freshness. This also gets a dollop of Chardonnay which gives it length and richness on the palate. The bead and mousse are fine and silky and show an almost french sensibility in the glass. Great value.

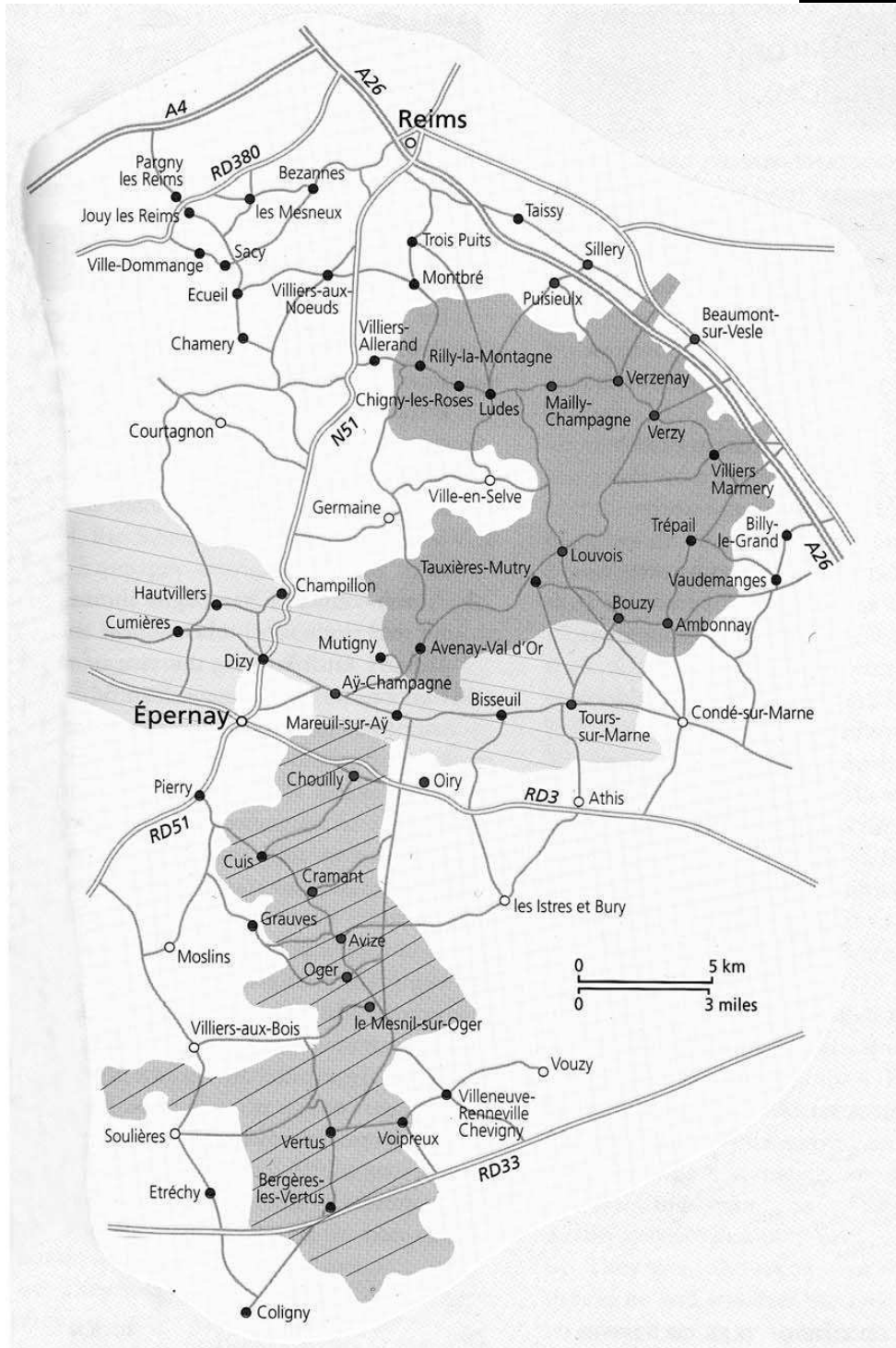


**Marques de Gelida Brut 2002 (\$17)** is produced from Chardonnay and a handful of Spanish varietals by a grower family in Northwestern Spain. Made Methode Champenoise (a rarity) the wine is left en tirage for 3 years before release. It is sophisticated stuff, lots of ginger, pear and butterscotch spice notes. If it had a French label, the price would be triple —



This is classically styled Champenoise produced Brut made from organic & biodynamic Chardonnay in Mendocino county. The production parameters are almost identical to the wines on the ensuing pages, with barrel aging and extended time en tirage. The **Jeriko Estate Brut 2005 (\$23)** is a ridiculous value for such classical styling; it shows ripe apple and citrus characters with a long bracing mineral tang. This will age exceptionally well, but why wait?

# Map of Champagne



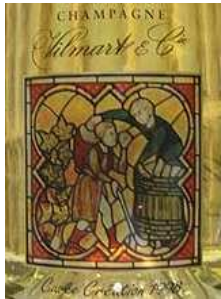
- Vineyard area: 11 hectares ~ Rilly-la-Montagne / Montagne de Reims
- Annual production: 8,750 cases
- Soil types: Clay-limestone
- Grape varieties: 60% Chardonnay, 36% Pinot Noir, 4% Pinot Meunier, oak aged, partial malolactic



**GRAND CELLIER (Code 916038 / \$69.99)** Not a regular N.V. (Non-Vintage) Brut, but rather a superior N.V. or, the least among the luxury-cuvées. **Stephen Tanzer Light straw. Smoky, lees-dominated bouquet offers suave pear, peach and tangerine qualities, along with a spicy minerality; this smells like a serious Puligny-Montrachet. Brisk orchard and citrus fruit flavors are impressively concentrated, with a snap of acidity brightening the long, pliant finish. Leaves traces of baking spices in its wake, adding to the impression of complexity. 92 pts**



**GRAND CELLIER D'OR 2001 (Code 916853 / \$99.99)** The regular vintage wine, majority Chardonnay, from older vines, half aged in large barrels and half in barrique (small french oak). **Stephen Tanzer ~ "Light yellow with an energetic bead. Exotic, cinnamon-accented citrus and pear aromas are impressively vibrant and focused. Racy, firm and concentrated, offering a blend of intensity and finesse, with pure citrus and pear flavors carrying through the finish. I like this wine's verve. 91 points** The palate is wonderfully expansive right now with a silky butter-scotch, spice and cream note. It seems to have hit a particularly brilliant phase



**CUVÉE CRÉATION 1998 (Code 916041 / \$107.99)** This cuvée is from 40-year vines in two parcels: Chardonnay (typically around 70%) from the town of Blanc Voie and Pinot Noir from Basses Greves, previously this wine had the most new wood in the range, it now is done in 2-3 year old barriques. **Stephen Tanzer ~ "Medium yellow. Intensely smoky, energetic bouquet evokes ripe peach, honeyed pear, buttered toast and a wild cherry skin quality. Round and fleshy, offering deep but precise apple and pear flavors and bracing citrus zest bite. Really expands across the palate while maintaining energy and focus. " 92 pts**



**COEUR DE CUVÉE 1999 (Code 916042 / \$121.99)** From the very oldest vines (all above 50 yrs.), 100% barrel aged, 80% Chardonnay & 20% Pinot Noir. There is some confusion about the age of the barrels used. Vilmart's approach is to let the vintage decide. Some oak will be new, some won't. **Stephen Tanzer ~ "Light gold with a vigorous mousse. Exotically perfumed, complex bouquet evokes smoky pit fruits and cured meat. There's an intensely leesy, nutty character here that reminds me of a Jura wine. Broad and fleshy, offering palate-staining peach pit, honeyed pear and preserved lemon flavors. Impressively concentrated, luscious and cream Champagne with a singular personality " 93 pts**

## Pierre Gimmonet

- Vineyard area: 4 hectares, village of Cuis
- Annual production: 17,500 cases
- Soil type: Chalk
- Grape varieties: 100% Chardonnay, Mostly Grand Cru, some Premiere Cru, some other varieties are purchased.



**GIMMONET "PARADOXE" BRUT, 2002 (Code 916037 / \$97.99)**

From selected parcels chosen for vine-age and acidity, disgorged 1/08. 2002 is a great vintage **Stephen Tanzer ~ "Yellow-gold. Deeply scented nose displays ripe pear, apple, beeswax, honey and truffle. Apricot and peach flavors are refreshingly bitter, with a suave smoky quality gaining strength on the finish. I like this wine's density and understated energy." 91 pts** Personally, I've tasted this twice, it also shows terrific red fruit vivacity. Very opulent and open knit now, showing lots of sweet red fruit characters. Immediate pleasure that gains with room temperature.



- Vineyard area: 5.5 hectares / Primarily Cotes de Blanc ~ Village of Oger
- Annual production: 7,100 cases
- Soil types: 27 inches of vegetative earth with a chalky subsoil
- Grape varieties: 100% Chardonnay

**JEAN MILAN "CARTE BLANCHE" BRUT, N.V. (CODE 914719 / \$59.99)** 3 years en tirage (2004, some 2005), vinified in wood ~ Love this stuff. Shows terrific richness and power, plenty of fresh gingersnap, baking spice and ripe apple pear fruit with precise underlying minerality. Truly great blanc de blanc.

**JEAN MILAN "SELECTION TERRES DE NOËL" BRUT, 2002 (CODE 916036 / \$89.99)** 5 years en tirage, vinified in wood Stephen Tanzer ~ "Bright straw. Spiced pear and quince aromas are underscored by dusty minerality and citrus zest. Intense citrus and orchard fruit flavors offer serious depth and cut, with a crackling mineral quality extending through the finish. I love the clarity here. " 92 pts



## Chartogne Taillet

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares / Village of Merfy
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Soil types: Chalk with sandstone
- Grape varieties: 50% Pinot Noir, 10% Pinot Meunier, 40% Chardonnay



**CHARTOGNE TAILLET "CUVEE ST ANNE" NV. (CODE 915286 / \$44.99)** (50/50 Pinot Noir + Chardonnay) Stainless steel ferment, partial malolactic ~ the latest release is drinking beautifully. Lots of gingerbread, brioche, baked apples, spice and razor sharp acidity. **From the Wine News, "Fresh croissant aromas with notes of vanilla, honey and pecan. Very creamy and buttery mix of beer barrel and ripe peach flavors with a hint of autolysis at the right moment. This vinous dream continues in the finish with apple butter, honey and lightly toasted flavors that impart a silky texture" (I couldn't agree more) 95 points**

## Geoffroy

- Vineyard area: 13 hectares / Villages of Cumières, Hautvillers, Damery and Fleury-la-Rivière in the Vallée de la Marne.
- Annual production: 10,800 cases
- Soil types: Limestone, clay-limestone, clay-flint
- Grape varieties: 42% Pinot Noir, 39% Pinot Meunier, 19% Chardonnay



**RENÉ GEOFFROY MILLÉSIME, 1999. (CODE 916043 / \$95.99)** (50/50 Pinot Noir + Chardonnay) Vinified in wood, 6 years en tirage. Stephen Tanzer ~ "Light gold. Strikingly complex, expansive bouquet of dried peach, pear, tangerine, marzipan, white truffle, smoked meat and minerals. This smells like a great Chassagne. Deep and round, with powerful, smoky flavors of orchard and pit fruits sharpened and lifted by harmonious acidity. Expands exponentially on the finish, showing a deep, buttery, smoky character that's utterly enthralling. There's as much depth, power and complexity here as in many grand cru white Burgundies for which you could easily pay twice as much. " 93 pts



- Vineyard area: 8 hectares ~ Montagne de Reims / Verzenay
- Annual production: 3,750 cases
- Soil typ: Cretaceous Chalk, Limestone
- Grape varieties: 78% Pinot Noir, 22% Chardonnay ~ No malolactic, all Grand Cru

**PEHU SIMONET BRUT ROSE NV.(CODE 916040 / \$69.99)**

Stephen Tanzer ~ "Light pink. Sharply focused citrus and redcurrant aromas offer impressive clarity and thrust. Racy, clean and deep in citrus flavors, slowly revealing a deeper red berry quality with air. Finishes firm and dry, with excellent cut. This is my favorite style of pink Champagne. " 91 pts

# H Billiot



- Vineyard area: 5 hectares ~ Village of Ambonnay
- Annual production: 3,750 cases
- Soil type: Limestone
- Grape varieties: 75% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay / all Grand Cru

**H BILLIOT BRUT 2002.(CODE 916039 / \$78.99)**

Stephen Tanzer ~ "Light yellow. Explosively perfumed nose offers an exotic array of orchard and pit fruit aromas complemented by toasty lees, cherry pit and dried flowers. Fleshy peach and nectarine flavors deliver depth as well as freshness, with a bright mineral bite on the finish adding verve. Really stains the palate and possesses the balance and precision to repay cellaring " 92 pts This has hit a brilliant window with a shameless display of peaches and spice with a long honeyed finish.

# Jean Lallement

- Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares ~ Villages of Verzenay and Verzy
- Annual production: 1,700 cases
- Soil type: Limestone
- Grape varieties: 80% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay, All Grand Cru, full Malolactic fermentation. Blue Label Cuvee Reserve is now all 2002 vintage, 5 years en tirage. Green Label is a blend of 2003, 2004. 3 ~ 4 years en tirage.



**JEAN LALLEMENT BRUT, N.V. (CODE 914355 / \$52.99)**

From the Wine News, "Peanut brittle and honey aromas. Pure and juicy with nectar-like flavors of peach, apple butter, cream and banana. Lengthy, exceedingly rich finish with brown spice and caramel. \$56" 94 points This is the wine that "woke me up" to the glories of grower champagne.



**JEAN LALLEMENT "RÉSERVE" BRUT, N.V.(CODE 915284 / \$75.99)**

From Wine Spectator, "Powerful, wielding its whole-grain bread, nut and graphite aromas and flavors with aplomb. Open rather than dense, despite its weight, richness and well-integrated structure. Fine length leaves you wanting more. " 93 points This wine is a powerhouse, ungodly perfect in its dimensions, it will actually reward cellaring.

