

Champagne

10 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Sparkling and in demand.

Grapes: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier.

Little by little the rest of the world is coming round to the French point of view, that champagne is not just any old fizzy wine, but a place - and a very special place at that. The Champagne region an hour's drive east of Paris is one of France's most comfortably confident, devoted to producing one particular luxury product. The Champenois - the inhabitants of Reims, Épernay and the villages which dot the rolling countryside that looks like, and once was, a continuation of the English South Downs - know that only they can produce the world's pre- eminent sparkling wine. It is the combination of being as far north as vines can be grown commercially in France; a high proportion of chalky soils which encourage the roots to burrow as far as a regular but by no means generous supply of water; no shortage of cool, dark, humid cellars; and a head start in the public relations game of establishing champagne as *the* wine of celebration and glamour that makes Champagne unique. This uniqueness has fuelled the Champenois' energetic vendetta against those who use their precious C- word to describe products other than their own. American producers may still call any wine that fizzes 'champagne' as long as there is also a clear indication of the wine's true geographical origin, but most of the rest of the wine- producing world has been brought to heel by the Champagne lawyers. Worldwide demand for Champagne is growing so insistently that there are moves afoot to push back the traditionally defined vineyard limits.

Unexpectedly for a wine that is quintessentially light and white, champagne is made from predominantly black grapes. Less than 30 per cent of Champagne's 34,000 ha (84,000 acres) of neat, low, rows of densely planted vines are light- skinned Chardonnay, the white burgundy grape. The red burgundy grape Pinot Noir is planted on almost 40 per cent of Champagne's infertile vineyard soils. The region's third main variety, with about a third of the vineyard, is Pinot Meunier, a fruitier, earlier- maturing relative of Pinot Noir. Only Pinot Meunier will ripen reliably throughout the region, which is why it is by far the most commonly planted variety in the cooler vineyards of the Marne valley and the outlying Aisne vineyards to the north. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay need particularly well favoured sites and in general the Chardonnay vine thrives best on the south- and east- facing chalky slopes of the Côte des Blancs south of Épernay, while Pinot Noir grows mainly on the lower slopes of the wooded Montagne de Reims between Reims and Épernay, as well as being a speciality of the slightly warmer Aube vineyards in the far south of Champagne.

All of the 319 Champagne villages are graded for their grape- growing potential between 80% and 100%, those 17 earning 100% qualifying as Grands Crus. Of these, Ay, Bouzy and Sillery are some of the best known for black grapes and Avize, Cramant and Le Mesnil for Chardonnay.

White wine can be made from dark- skinned grapes only if they are pressed very gently indeed, and the best juice is generally that which flows first from Champagne's super- delicate wine presses. There are strict limits on how much juice can be squeezed out of a given weight of grapes, but the cheapest champagnes are usually made from the hardest pressed grapes so that they can taste astringent (and, especially when made from grapes grown in the more marginal areas and given a minimum of bottle age, unattractively acid).

The Champagne region also produces markedly acid, dry still wines, most of them included in the **Coteaux Champenois** appellation, which may be white or, in very ripe vintages, lightish red such as the unforgettably named Bouzy Rouge. **Rosé des Riceys** is a local still pink speciality.

Growers v houses

Although most non- French champagne drinkers associate champagne with a handful of what are essentially brand names - Bollinger, various Heidsiecks, Moët & Chandon, Mumm, Perrier Jouët, Pol Roger, Veuve Clicquot, etc. - in fact 90% of all the raw material for champagne, the grapes themselves, is grown by more than 19,000 smallholders, whose average vineyard is just 2 ha or 5 acres. Grape prices are higher in Champagne than anywhere else in the world, selling for more than hothouse grapes in some vintages.

This far from the equator, spring frosts and poor weather at flowering threaten each year's crop, with no regard for the state of the the champagne market. The fact that Champagne's total harvest can be enough to fill 338 million bottles, or may be less than a third of this, adds considerable spice to the relationship between the vine growers and the wine producers, the houses or *maisons* of Champagne, including all the well- known names.

Although most growers sell their fruit directly either to a co- operative or to one of the big houses, an increasing number of growers produce their own champagne, which is particularly popular on the French market. It varies enormously in quality, some demonstrating cottage industry at its worst, others representing fine examples of their particular local conditions. So- called 'grower Champagnes' are becoming more popular on export markets as well.

The big houses argue that only by using a wide variety of different base wines, often bought in from all over the region, can a good champagne be produced year in and year out, and it is certainly true that grower champagnes tend to vary far more from year to year than those of the houses, whose function is to maintain a house style whatever the individual year's conditions.

As well as the famous houses, some extremely successful champagne producers specialise in producing 'buyer's own brand', or BOB, champagnes to the individual specifications (and price) of, for example, a supermarket or hotel chain.

The art of blending

Champagne is quite unlike any other fine wine, apart from sherry and port, in that its existence is predicated on the need to blend. This is mainly because this far from the equator, the character of each vintage can vary so much, from the lean, hardly ripe grapes of years such as 2001 to years such as 1989 or 2003 in which hot weather produced particularly ripe base wines unsuitably low in acid.

With the exceptions of Blanc de Blancs and Blanc de Noirs (see below) all champagnes are more or less judicious blends of all three grape varieties, in which Meunier gives youthful exuberance, Pinot Noir gives body, and Chardonnay gives a backbone. Growers' champagnes may not embody geographical blending, but the houses' champagnes (about three in every four bottles) are made from blends, or *cuvées*, painstakingly assembled from scores and sometimes hundreds of different vineyards. (One or two single- vineyard champagnes such as Krug's Clos de Mesnil and Cattier's Clos du Moulin are aberrant exceptions to the Champenois dedication to blending.)

This process of blending the base wines into a well- balanced *cuvée* that will be bottled and encouraged to re- ferment, producing carbon dioxide (see [sparkling wine- making](#)), takes place every winter after the harvest. The tasters' most important job is to assemble the all- important non- vintage blend, which must represent the house style and replicate as closely as possible its predecessors (although over the years houses sometimes allow their style to evolve with fashion or availability of grapes). To even out the differences in both quality and quantity between the years, the young wine is typically rounded out with up to 20 per cent of 'reserve wines', still wines kept in store from previous vintages.

There is one school of thought in Champagne that vintage champagne, champagne carrying a vintage year and made exclusively from grapes grown in that year, is rather poor form, an arriviste style that tends to cream off the best grapes and diminish the quality of the non- vintage, 'proper' champagne.

And the proliferation of luxury, prestige, or de luxe *cuvées* since Moët's hugely successful Dom Pérignon was launched in 1937 has tended to cream off the finest produce of the top- rated villages in the best years.

By spring, all of these blends have been assembled and bottled, along with some yeast and sugar, and stacked horizontally by the thousand in the famous cellars of Champagne.

The character of champagne

Anyone who has tasted the relatively rare still wines of the Champagne region, sold under the name Coteaux Champenois, will immediately understand the extent to which the champagne- making process can transform the thin, acid, lightweight wines which the region's vineyards produce into noble, creamy, deep- flavoured essences of sophistication. Like base wines for distillation into cognac, the best sort of base wines for sparkling wine are those that are high in acidity and relatively neutral. Champagne may get its defining bubbles as a by- product of a second fermentation in sealed bottles, and its useful extra degree or two of alcohol as a direct result of the same process, but it, possibly more than any other sparkling wine, owes its nuances of flavour, its savoury definition, to the time the bottles spend simply lying quietly in the dank cellars of Champagne, many of them ancient limestone quarries known as *crayères* (from the French word *craye*, meaning 'chalk', the same root as for 'crayon'). The longer the wine remains in contact with the unappetising- looking sediment of dead yeast lees which gathers on the underbelly of the bottle, the more character will be imparted to the final wine, and the fuller and richer it tastes. Research shows that this process has a perceptible effect on the wine after about 18 months' contact, and then an even greater one after about five years. It is a shame therefore that the current legal minimum for ageing non- vintage and vintage champagne on the lees is 15 months and three years respectively, so that the cheapest champagne will hardly have benefited from any flavour development as a result of lees contact. Serious champagne producers, however, allow their non- vintage blends at least two years on lees and vintage champagnes are generally released after at least six years. In terms of rounding out champagne's leaner characters, bottle ageing is a great substitute for some of the sugar traditionally added just before final bottling, called the [dosage](#), although champagne's naturally high acidity can bear a great deal of added sugar before any real sweetness can be tasted.

Some favourite producers

Billecart Salmon, Bollinger, Dom Pérignon, Fleury, Henri Giraud, Gosset, Charles Heidsieck, Larmandier- Brunier, Pol Roger, Louis Roederer, Salon, Taittinger, Vilmart.

Different styles

Non- vintage: The basic emissary of every champagne producer, representing more than 80 per cent of the region's output, based substantially on a single vintage, typically about three years old. Wildly variable in quality.

Vintage: A more expensive blend made exclusively from grapes grown in that year, typically released at about six years old but usually reliably superior and capable of ageing for more than a decade.

Prestige, de luxe, or luxury cuvée: The top of the range, often packaged in a fancy bottle, usually vintage dated, almost always exorbitantly priced. The best, such as Dom Pérignon, Krug, Roederer Cristal and Taittinger Comtes de Champagne, are almost worth it.

Blanc de Blancs: Made exclusively from Chardonnay grapes; good examples can age very well.

Rosé: Variable in both colour and quality and usually made by blending still red and still white wines before the fermentation in bottle. Often fruitier and slightly sweeter than average.

Demi-sec or Rich: Champagnes sweeter than the normal **Brut** or (slightly less dry) **Sec**. Some champagnes such as any with the word **Zero** in their name are bone dry and have no dosage added to them.

See also [Understanding champagne labels](#).

For more information on this region see the [CIVC site](#).