

Which are the best NV champagnes today?

24 Mar 2005 by JR

1 Apr: Note the excellent price for Roederer just added to the list at the bottom of this article, and see my [tasting notes](#) for more than 80 NV champagnes.

As the French wine trade staggers from one humiliating export statistic to another, one sort of wine provides a glorious exception to the relentless downward trend: champagne. For those of us who care about individuality in wine this is bad news in a way. Champagne's continuing success seems to indicate that the way forward for the French wine trade is to establish large-volume brands, for no segment of the wine business is anything like as heavily branded as champagne. And it is a curious fact that as the world's wine consumers have become increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated, most champagne producers have resolutely ignored this fact.

While the rest of the wine trade has laboured to satisfy the wine buff's desire to know which side of the hill the grapes were grown on, the really successful champagne producers just buy in loads of raw ingredients, blend them together and sell the result without even, in most cases, putting a date on the bottle to give the end consumer any idea of the age or background of the wine. The mass market, it would seem, simply seeks a recognisable and carefully marketed name. The parallels with the perfume and luxury goods business are inescapable and it is no accident that the world's most successful champagne grouping by far, controlling the reputation of such names as Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Dom Pérignon, Krug, Ruinart and Mercier, is part of the LVMH group.

But the picture is not all grim for wine lovers. The vast majority of all champagne is non vintage, a blend made up mainly of the produce of one fairly recent year topped up with some older wines. And on the basis of last week's big annual champagne tasting in London, the basic quality of champagne-making is as high as I have known it. This is just as well since most current non vintage blends are based on the execrable 2001 harvest, plagued by dilution and underripeness – a very different kettle of fish from 2002. At least, 2001 was the most common answer when I asked scores of champagne salesmen last week which vintage their non vintage blend was based on, but some admitted they did not know while others, including Masters of Wine, pored over labels, bottles and corks looking for clues and muttering "they're so secretive about these codes, you know". (The shape of a champagne cork, incidentally, is no guide to the age of the wine, just to how long since it was disgorged and corked for shipment.)

But why, I wonder, are so many of the big champagne producers so secretive about their non vintage blends? Whenever I have tasted in smaller outfits' cellars, they volunteer the pedigree of each wine. Would it not help those selling these wines to be absolutely sure of the age and provenance of their stock?

Houses such as Bollinger, Bruno Paillard, Philipponnat and Jacques Selosse give the date on which the wine was disgorged on their labels but with a few honourable exceptions such as Charles Heidsieck which gives the original bottling date when the blend was '*mis en cave*' (always the year after the main ingredient was harvested), we are kept in the dark about the origins of this, one of the most expensive wines most people buy. The house of Jacquesson has gone one admirable step further from the traditional practice of trying to make each year's non vintage blend as similar to the last as possible by deliberately creating a new blend every year to make the finest expression of the ingredients available, thus arguably earning themselves a reputation as making champagne for wine enthusiasts. This is in stark contrast to the washing powder principle so prevalent elsewhere in Champagne. But who am I to complain about the rest when they so evidently profit from this approach?

I took the opportunity to taste the great majority of the non vintage blends that you are likely to come across at the moment and, by adding other significant wines tasted in the Champagne region last November, have managed to come up with about 80 tasting notes on NV champagnes alone. I found some very delicious wines indeed – and enormous variation in prices that seems to this palate to bear far too little relation to the variation in quality. Many of the big houses have raised prices recently and there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the best value in champagne is to be found chez the best individual growers rather than the most familiar names. The conventional argument from the brand owners has been that, with their massive blending vats, they can offer consistency whereas the small growers' produce varies wildly in quality from year to year. But this argument seems rather weak to me. Good growers often save the best ingredients for themselves and sell the rest to the big bottlers.

Despite the importance of champagne in the UK market, Britain's wine importers, unlike their counterparts in the US where the likes of Terry Theise or Michael Skurnik have an admirable roster of them, have been much slower to seek out exciting growers' champagnes. I am happy to report that things seem to be changing however. Reflecting the increase in small, independent wine importers in the UK on which I reported a few weeks ago, Larmandier-Bernier champagnes are imported by Vine Trail of Bristol; A Margaine and J P Marniquet by Great Gaddesden Wines; Marguet-Bonnerave by Wines Unlimited of Worcester Park; and Camille Savès by Walkers Wines of Harmer Hill, Shropshire, although minimum orders from such merchants are generally 12 assorted bottles. You can buy Egly Ouriet and E Barnaut by the single bottle from Lea & Sandeman, the biodynamic Fleury from Waitrose and Pierre Gimonnet from Oddbins however, and Seckford imports Diebolt-Vallois.

Of course champagne comes in as many different styles as, say, still wines made from the champagne grapes Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The British have traditionally gone for full bodied, mature champagne while the French admire zesty, brisk, wake-up call champagne. Champagne can be delicate or forceful, soft or aggressive, suitable as an aperitif or better drunk with food. I have tried to sketch the character of the following, my favourite NV champagnes listed in approximately descending order of preference with my favourites first. Prices are generally £25-35 unless otherwise stated.

Pierre Moncuit Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Le Mesnil

Classic all-Chardonnay cool customer. Very elegant indeed.

£15.50 until 31 March H & H Bancroft

Henriot Souverain Pur Chardonnay

Fragrant, smoky, evolved and very fine.

£22.95 Hicks & Don (if bought by the dozen)

R de Ruinart

Pungent, mineral, satisfying, long and complex.

£24.99 Uncorked of London EC2

Billecart Salmon Brut Réserve

Flirtatious, dynamic, very fine.

£22.99 Uncorked of London EC2

Vilmart Grand Cellier

Very dry, delicate and Chardonnay-dominated.

£26ish Gauntleys of Nottingham

Charles Heidsieck Mis en Cave 2001

Very positive and complete. Vintage champagne quality.

Louis Roederer Brut Premier

Bursting with health. Super-bracing and dense.

£18.99 Magnum Fine Wines

Larmandier-Bernier Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru Vertus

Fresh, floral, gentle.

£17.50 Vine Trail

Laurent Perrier

Dense, correct, mineral with a lacy texture.

F Vauversin Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs

Savoury, deep and a great bargain.

£14.95 Wine Discoveries

J Dumangin Grande Reserve Premier Cru Chigny

Tight-knit, perfumed, intriguing.

£18.95 Yapp Bros of Mere

Jacquesson Cuvée No 729

Very French, flirtatious style of champagne.

Mayfair Cellars.

Pol Roger

Dense, compact and youthful.

£19.95 until 31 march H & H Bancroft

Pierre Gimmonet Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru Cuis

Very zesty, delicate, aperitif style.

£18.99 Oddbins

Marguet-Bonnerave Reserve Grand Cru Bouzy

Big and bold, for food – a warm embrace.

£15.40 Wines Unlimited of Worcester Park

Gatinois Grand Cru Ay

Big, bold, dry, Pinot-dominated.

£18.10 Haynes Hanson & Clark of London SW1

Camille Savès Carte Blanche Premier Cru Bouzy

Fine, fresh, quite delicate for a Pinot-based champagne.

£17.61 Walkers Wines of Harmer Hill 01939 290 959

Besserat de Bellefon Cuvée des Moines

Creamy, interesting and quite developed.

Alfred Gratien

Chunky, full bodied.

£21 The Wine Society

Philipponnat Royal Reserve

Dense and savoury.

See [tasting notes](#) for full tasting notes and scores on more than 80 champagnes including these.