

WINE News

The wines of Champagne sparkle like none other. In this issue: special bottles, big bottles, icons, gadgets and more.



APRIL 13, 2015 FEATURES

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The Great Wines of Champagne

By Gary Westby

Very few wine regions can match the top-to-bottom quality of Champagne. Whether you are drinking old vintages or a good quality grower's non-vintage, it is pretty hard to find real Champagne that is not of good quality in the U.S. In this newsletter we will focus on getting the maximum quality for your dollar, and to that end we'll be covering a few subjects: Glassware is critical to the enjoyment of Champagne, and Shaun has written a piece on page 4 on the glass that will get you to the next level of enjoyment without breaking your budget. Size also matters

in Champagne, since each bottle enjoys its own discrete fermentation, and Kyle has written an article on magnums on page 4, and picked a few favorites from our selection. If you have the people, the small premium paid on a magnum is some of the wisest money a Champagne lover can spend! Don't miss Mari's list of special occasion bottles that still deliver great value, starting on this page, and my feature on Aube superstar Brison on page 3. The 2008 vintage from Brison may be the best value in vintage Champagne we have ever offered!

Mari's Champagnes for Special Occasions

Marguet "Cuvée Reserve" Brut Champagne (750ml \$34.99; 1.5L \$66.99) Consisting of entirely Grand Cru fruit from the Montagne de Reims, the Marguet Cuvée Reserve Brut Champagne is the epitome of beauty meets brawn. Even though the cuvée is dominated by 65% Pinot Noir, the crisp, fresh Chardonnay fruit maintains the balance, keeping the rich, toasty notes from overwhelming this elegant and bright cuvée. Ripe citrus and baked apple aromatics are accompanied by ample amounts of toast and richness on the palate, making this versatile little bottle of bubbly a must-have for any special occasion on a budget. 91 points RP.

Krug "Grande Cuvée" Brut Champagne (750ml \$149.99; 1.5L \$399.00) Customers constantly ask me what my favorite Champagnes are, and I always tell them that each bottle is like a child to me—you can't possibly ask a mom to pick a favorite. But it's a well-known secret that Krug has always been a special little "baby" for me. Krug is hands-down my go-to tête de cuvée. While priced for those extra-special occasions or a moment when you want to splurge, the Grand Cuvée over-delivers and never disappoints. The grandeur of this cuvée is apparent immediately. Aromas of marzipan, Asian spice, white flowers and Meyer lemon

are a mere tease of what this cuvée possesses. The complexity on the nose is followed by a harmonious balance on the palate between the maturity of the oak-fermented reserve wines in juxtaposition with the focused, delineated acidity that comes from suppressing malolactic fermentation. Gorgeous now, even better with age, the Grand Cuvée is a must! 95 points WS.

(continued on page 3)





Dom Pérignon: Champagne's Most Iconic Brand

By Gary Westby

This March I was invited to a once-in-a-lifetime tasting with Richard Geoffroy, the chef de cave of Dom Pérignon. Although Dom Pérignon is a cuvée of Moët & Chandon, the winemaking team is separate, and it is handled as its own brand by the owners, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH).

Dom Pérignon is always a roughly equal blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that varies a bit from vintage to vintage, and is sourced from Grand and Premier Cru sites across Champagne; about 21 different villages in all. The wine is a tribute to Dom Pérignon, a Benedictine monk who revolutionized the blending process in Champagne. LVMH owns his old abbey now, and has done a fantastic job of restoring it. Richard Geoffroy, who has been in charge of the wine's legacy since 1990, is a hard man to catch—in 25 trips to Champagne I've never met with him there. I had to go Carmel to catch up with him!

He put on a spectacular vertical tasting as part of the launch of the new "Plénitude" range, which replaces the old "Oenotheque" releases in their product line. These library releases have impeccable provenance, having been stored in the deep chalk cellars under Epernay where they were first made. They classify the wines into "P1," which is the regular release, at 8-10 years old (the 2004 is current, the 2005 right around the corner); "P2," aged an extra 6-10 years; and "P3," aged for 20 or more years. Geoffroy feels that the current release of "P1" is ready to drink, but offers mostly fresh flavors, while the "P2" is developing the tertiary characteristics of aged Champagne and the "P3" offerings are fully mature, but capable of holding. It is worth noting that these older wines are exactly the same Dom Pérignon as the original releases, the only difference being they have been aged longer on the lees and have received a lighter dosage upon disgorgement.

We have pricing for everything that is being made available direct from Epernay, but the quantities are extremely limited—many of these are limited to just two or three bottles! If the one you want is sold out, please reach out to me at garywestby@klwines.com, and I will do my best to get you what you need.

We started the morning with the **2004 Dom Pérignon Brut Champagne (\$149.99)**, which showed the fresh linearity of the vintage as well as the classic yeasty stamp of the brand. Geoffroy said that 2004 was a harvest that was "naturally prone to harmony." We moved on to the crazy 2003—surely it was a miracle under such difficult circumstances to make a Dom Pérignon.

We then had the 2002 vintage, which was on song, with both tremendous richness and great length. Next, the **1998 Dom Pérignon P2 Brut Champagne (\$349.00)** was incredibly impressive; the drastically lower dosage had lightened up the body of this still very leesy, powerful wine. We then tried the 1996 from an old "Oenotheque" bottling, which paradoxically had ultra high acid linearity tied to buttery brioche.

The **1990 "P3" (750ml \$749.00; 1.5L \$1,999.00)** was a classic with great fresh fruit still in a state of perfect preservation, but with a nutty depth that only time can bring. The **1975 (1.5L \$2,199.00)** was smoky and evolved while the **1973 (1.5L \$4,599.00)** (my birth year!) had a spectacular hazelnut and chalk finish that really inspired me. He saved the best for last: a 1966 "P3" Magnum that was disgorged in 2004. This Champagne had Montrachet-like scale and complexity, with elements of earth, subtle toast and maraschino cherry. It was completely evolved and still had plenty of freshness. I won't ever forget it!

1990 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (\$749.00)

1982 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (\$1,299.00)

1976 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (\$2,099.00)

1975 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (\$2,199.00)

1970 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (\$2,199.00)

1990 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (1.5L \$1,999.00)

1985 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (1.5L \$2,899.00)

1978 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (1.5L \$3,899.00)

1973 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Champagne (1.5L \$4,599.00)

1995 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Rosé Champagne (\$799.00)

1988 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Rosé Champagne (1.5L \$3,199.00)

1985 Dom Pérignon "P3" Brut Rosé Champagne (1.5L \$3,699.00)

Introducing Champagne Louise Brison

By Gary Westby

There is a lot of excitement in sommelier circles for grower Champagne these days, particularly from the Aube department.

This excitement turns to frenzy for producers who are small, organic and work with oak barrels. Of course, all of these Champagnes come in through boutique importers, are on strict allocation and are very, very expensive. Champagne Louise Brison has all of the attributes above, except for the price and the path to market. We buy from owner Francis Brulez direct, and can offer you his wines at a spectacular price.

The Brison family (pictured on our cover: Francis and Delphine Brulez) farms thirty two and one half acres in the village of Noe les Mallets, in the center of the Aube department. They use organic practices in the vineyard and they never use pesticides; all of the rot protection is natural and weeds are controlled by good old-fashioned tilling of the soil. They grow Pinot Noir and an unusually high percentage of Chardonnay for this frost-prone region of Champagne, as they are lucky enough to have all hillside vineyards, facing south-south-east.

In the winery, they almost never chaptalize, as the grapes are ripe enough due to the good exposition of their vineyards. They do not inoculate their wines for malolactic fermentation, preferring to keep the wines fresher by preserving the acid. When the malo starts naturally, they do not try to stop it, however. About half of the wine they make is aged in neutral oak barrels that are old enough to have almost all of the wood flavor already leached out.

The West Coast dock strike has slowed down all of our containers, so there is a good chance that this newsletter is in your hands before the wine has arrived. If that is the case, we'll have them set up so you can pre-order them, and we'll be able to give you an ETA online or over the phone. This is what we have:

2008 Louise Brison Vintage Brut Champagne (\$29.99) This 2008 is one of the best I have tasted from this fantastic vintage. Brison vintage is composed half of Chardonnay that is vinified and matured in oak barrels, and half of Pinot Noir that is done in stainless steel vats. It has

a bright, light straw color with a top-notch bead of compact streamers. The nose is expressive, with aromas of toasted baguette and subtle white fruit. In the mouth, the texture is creamy and supple, but the wine does not lose its focus or its high-toned 2008 refreshment. This tastes great now, but the patient will be rewarded with a noble wine—it has the concentration to keep for a very, very long time!

2007 Louise Brison “Tendresse” Brut Blanc de Blancs (\$49.99)

We only managed to get 36 bottles of this all Chardonnay, all barrel-fermented beauty. It is very rare to see pure Chardonnay from the Aube, as the spring starts earlier in this southern part of Champagne, and this variety buds early. Unfortunately, late spring frost is all too common here, destroying most of the Chardonnay. Luckily the hillside vineyards protect the Brison's Chardonnay, but there still is not much to be had! This silky, round blanc de blancs has beautiful pear fruit and nutty intrigue. A rare bottle!

2008 Vintage Cuvée Germain Brulez Brut (1.5L \$99.00) The Brulez family only offers their top cuvée in magnum, as they, like every Champenois that I have ever met, believe this to be the very best format for Champagne. As Kyle explains in his article on magnums on page 4, they have many advantages over 750ml bottles. The Brulez's are one of a very few that insist that their best stuff only be sold in this size. We only received 18 of these half Pinot, half Chardonnay masterpieces. The wine is entirely barrel fermented and has the power that one would expect from the oak and the great vintage. It has plenty of brioche, dark cherry fruit and a near endless, high acid finish.

If you are a Champagne Club member, you will also be treated to his spectacular **Louise Brison “L'Impertinente” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$39.99)** when our next container lands. It is made by maceration, with 100% of the skins in contact with 100% of the juice. While many rosé Champagnes made in this style are dark and heavy tasting, this wine is bright, full of subtle red fruit and vivacious refreshment. My wife Cinnamon and I enjoyed this with Chinese scallion pancakes (cong you bing) and it was a fantastic pairing!

Mari's Special Occasion Champagnes

(continued from page 1)

Ariston Aspase “Cepages d'Antan” Brut Champagne (\$99.99) How can you put a price on tasting rare, almost extinct varietals from Champagne like Petit Meslier, Arbane and Blanc Vrai (Pinot Blanc)? Especially when they taste as amazing as the Ariston Aspase Cepages d'Antan! When first popped, the nose is quite subtle and delicate. After a little time in the glass, the Pinot Blanc begins to dominate with aromas of white nectarine, star fruit and orange blossoms. With even more time in the glass, the native varietals begin to express themselves with

strong notes of chalky minerality and a hint of savory herb. Top this off with a strikingly long finish of limestone chalk and you have a Champagne that is unlike anything you'll find on most wine store shelves.

Laurent Perrier “Cuvée Rosé” Brut Rosé Champagne (\$67.99) Stylistically, Laurent Perrier is one of my favorite Grand Marques. I gravitate toward their bright, vibrant house style and that's exactly what you get in the Laurent Perrier “Cuvée Rosé” Brut Rosé Champagne. While the rosé is 100%

Pinot Noir and macerated with full skin contact, this rosé is surprisingly lifted and understated for receiving such a heavy-handed treatment. The nose and palate are loaded with copious amounts of red berry fruit with ripe strawberries taking center stage supported by a backdrop of clean minerality. The refreshingly tart finish of cranberries and pomegranate make this rosé the perfect accompaniment to any special occasion. 96 points CG.

—Mari Keilman

Gadgets for the Champagne Lover

By Shaun Green

Gary brings us fantastic Champagnes right and left, from grower producers to big name houses, but Champagne is more fun still with the proper gadgets and accessories. We adults need our toys too, and I have a couple of big winners for you Champagne aficionados.

Firstly, you need the right glassware. Philippe Jamesse, sommelier for the Michelin two star Le Parc Les Crayères, has developed the best Champagne glassware we've encountered. Flutes and coupes are pretty to look at, but I've yet to hear a Champagne producer say they prefer these. Coupes allow far too much dissipation of aroma and effervescence, and flutes focus more on the visuals. The **Lehmann "Jamesse Reference" Grand Champagne Glass (\$11.99)** is an elegant glass which is finely tuned to allow Champagne to show off its layers of complexity. The delicate stem has the perfect hand feel, and the bowl broadens gently outward as it rises, opening up enough to release aromatics, tapering in slightly to the rim, allowing a precise focus at the nose. This serious Champagne stem is one of the best ways to experience every aspect of the wine. Crafted by Lehmann Glass of Reims, this beautiful stem is also stunning to look at. In the hand or on the table the elegance of line

and delicate, clear glass enhance all aspects of Champagne enjoyment. Can you guess what we used at our last Champagne tent event? Same glass as we used for our annual company party—The Jamesse Reference!

Secondly, Le Creuset offers a great tool for uncorking your favorite bubbly. For those of you not feeling safe around a saber, here is the next best (and much easier) way to impress your friends. The **Le Creuset Champagne Star SW-100L Star (\$17.99)** is shaped to fit exactly into the four creases left by the cage once it has been removed. The star slips easily over the cork for precise grip and easy removal. Once you use one, you might never open another bottle without it—it's simple, precise and does a wonderful job.

I hope these tips will help you enjoy the wonderful world of Champagne even more! Santé!



Why Size Matters in Champagne

By Kyle Kurani

In the Champagne world, often overwrought with fancy imagery and faux status, sometimes you're paying for glitz. But when you buy a magnum of bubbles, you are paying for honest-to-goodness better bubbles. Magnums of Champagne are better and far more practical than it seems at first glance. In a look-at-me world, magnums are perfectly balanced at the confluence of image and quality.

Magnum format is usually priced just a touch higher than two regular sized bottles. Worth the extra scratch, you ask? You bet. The higher quality starts right from the beginning, because there is more surface area, it gets much better contact with the yeast cells during the second fermentation (the part that makes the bubbles), and often takes four extra weeks to finish. That extra time gives you more of those decadent notes of fresh baked brioche, hazelnut, and spice that are ever-alluring in a great bottle. Also, wineries usually hold back their magnums an extra year past their regular sized bottles, giving you a wine that is more complex and far better integrated—a year of practically free rent.

Any time you have four or more people over, a maggie really ought to be the bottle of choice for your gathering. A regular, 750 bottle for four people only leaves you thirsty, and how often do you open that second bottle anyway? Not only will you be serving higher quality wine, you'll be adding ambience and an air of delightful celebration to the occasion.

A few of my favorites:

Franck Bonville Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Champagne (1.5L \$69.99) and **Launois "Cuvée Reserve" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (1.5L \$74.99)**, both 100% Grand Cru Chardonnay, are both the picture of elegance and grace, full of beautiful minerality, pure orchard fruit, and perfect for everything from a cheese and charcuterie plate to sushi. They are like picking between favorite kids; I'll leave it up to you to decide.

Michel Loriot "Authentic" Brut Champagne (1.5L \$65.99) Previously called "Cuvée Reserve," this is a walk on the exotic side of life; 100% Pinot Meunier, full of golden pear and baking spice, amazing with anything Parmesan cheese related, from risotto to thinly shaved on toast.

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