

WINE News

Whether you want to drink “the stars,” or explore Champagne from small growers and producers, we’ve got the bubbles.



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Champagne, for Any Season—Especially the Holiday Season

By Gary Westby

The holidays are the most exciting time of the year for Champagne, even among those of us who make a point of drinking it all year long. We all find more opportunities for gathering and celebrating with our friends and colleagues, and good Champagne adds a lot to these occasions. It is also the time of the year for sharing gifts, and few gifts are as fun as a bottle of Champagne.

This year we have a great selection of Champagne for you to enjoy and give as gifts. I am the most proud of our Direct Imports and our selections in the under-\$40 range, and I believe that these wines are some of the very best values in any category—red, white, sparkling or spirit—that we stock at K&L. Naturally, we also have top-shelf Champagne from the famous producers at very competitive prices.

I hope that you will join me this season in enjoying a great number of the wines in this newsletter. Don't forget a bottle or two for you while taking care of your gift list!



Champagne Highlights

Ariston Aspasie “Carte Blanche” Brut Champagne* (375ml \$15.99; 750ml \$27.99)

If you haven't tried this Champagne, you owe it to yourself to have a bottle. This all-estate blend of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Noir and 30% Pinot Meunier might be the best value in the store. Aged for five years on the lees, it has a great balance of high-class toast and refreshing minerality.

Alexandre Le Brun “Tradition” Brut Champagne* (\$39.99)

Alex Le Brun (pictured above) is a brand new producer for us, and with his operation comprising only seven acres, is the smallest of the small growers that we carry. Le Brun is a one-man show, doing everything from the vineyard work to the labeling. This wine is made from estate fruit from Monthelon, just south of Epernay, and is a blend of one-third each Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. This clean, expressive, perfectly balanced Champagne has a texture and bead that I normally would only expect from a much more expensive bottle, and the finish is super long. It won't last!



The 2003 Dom Pérignon Rosé—as luxurious as it gets.

2003 Dom Pérignon Brut Rosé Champagne (\$249.00)

We have one of the nation's best prices on the best offering in the whole Dom Pérignon portfolio, the rosé! Perfect for important gifts and special occasions. The super-ripe 2003 vintage gave Champagne some of the best red wine ever for making rosé. 95 points WS, 94 points RP.

FRANCK BONVILLE *A Diamond in the Côte des Blancs*

The Grand Crus of the Côte des Blancs are not usually a good place to look for value in Champagne. The vineyard land there is the most expensive in the world; a hectare sells for 1.5 to 2.5 million euros, and grape contracts sell at giant premiums. This is the area made famous by Champagnes like Salon, Krug, Clos du Mesnil and Taittinger's Comtes de Champagne. Its east-facing slopes are also home to the Chardonnay essential to nearly every famous house's top-end blend: Roederer's Cristal, Moët's Dom Pérignon, Veuve Clicquot's La Grande Dame, etc. It is also home to some of the best grower-produced wine in the region.

We started buying small growers' Champagne before it was fashionable. Because of our long-term, direct relationships with some great producers, I am happy to say that some of the best values on our shelves come from this most expensive region.

Champagne Franck Bonville is located in the heart of the Côte de Blancs in the village of Avize. His neighbors include now-famous growers like Agrapart and Jacques Selosse. His wines are among the most electric and vivacious in our stock, and before this year the staff bought most of our allocation. Our owner Clyde goes through magnums like they were half bottles!

Like all top-quality growers, the Bonvilles are using more and more organic techniques in the vineyard. They have been growing grapes since 1726, and making wine for sale since the 1920s. They have, like most of the producers I have met in Champagne, a wonderful tension in their family between the experience of the older generations and the pioneering spirit of the younger generation. Olivier Bonville was born in 1970 and has wonderfully fresh ideas for the family estate. His pet project is the Cuvée Les Belles Voyes, a single vineyard Champagne that is one of the best wines I have tasted anywhere.

The **Franck Bonville Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (375ml \$18.99; 750ml \$34.99; 1.5L \$69.99) might be the most exciting non-vintage Champagne in the store. Composed entirely of estate-grown Chardonnay from Avize, Cramant and Oger, this particular batch is based on the 2011 vintage. Because 2011 was a difficult harvest, Olivier decided only to make this wine, declassifying his prestige, vintage and Belles Voyes juice into this bottling. He then added an incredible 50% of older vintages to make a generous, balanced and long-finishing wine. I find this full of baguette aromas, with a creamy impression on the palate and a long, precise, chalky finish.



Olivier Bonville shows off the giant roots of his ancient Chardonnay vines in the Belles Voyes vineyard.

At the top of the range, the **Franck Bonville "Belles Voyes" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (750ml \$69.99; 1.5L \$139.00) is as good as Champagne gets. Produced from vines planted in the 1920s and 1930s and fermented "grandpa's way" in old French oak barrels, this Meursault-like Champagne is rich and taut at once, and it leaves me at a loss for words. He only makes 3,000 bottles, so it won't last! 91 points WS.

—Gary Westby



With owner Severine Launois in front of the winery in Mesnil.

LAUNOIS *A Champagne Lover's Must-Try*

Launois is the only Champagne that I have ever sold to a person from Champagne to take back to Champagne with them. Although their production is big for a grower (they own 90 acres), their wines are very sought-after in the region. Among their vineyards are some of the most perfect sites in the Côte des Blancs: gorgeous old vineyards located in the Grand Cru villages of Mesnil, Oger and Cramant. The Launois wines we list come from this portion of their extensive holdings.

As well as possessing remarkable vineyards, the Launois family also has tremendous ambition for perfecting their product. Most producers in Champagne are content to purchase commercial clones (identical grapevines selected for certain traits, such as high yield) from the local nurseries when they need to replant. At Launois they use the massal selection system, picking the best vines from their own property to propagate for replanting.

The **2005 Launois "Spécial Club" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (750ml \$59.99; 1.5L \$129.00) is sourced from two vineyard sites planted in the 1950s. This is as rich and decadent as Chardonnay gets in Champagne, with plenty of toasty flavor and bountiful texture. It is a must-try for any fan of Champagne!

The **Launois "Cuvée Réserve" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (750ml \$34.99; 1.5L \$74.99) is a rich, satisfying Champagne with great balancing acidity. It has a white Burgundy feel in the mouth and plenty of creamy, nutty flavors as well as a classic, long, zippy finish.

—Gary Westby

LOUIS ROEDERER *A Grower in Disguise*

K&L has hung its hat on seeking out Champagne's finest growers and small producers who offer high-quality, truly hand-crafted bubbles. Farming matters just as much as winemaking—the best winemaker in the world is still bound by the quality of the grapes he is working with, so when a big house takes a more hands-on approach, striving to create great Champagne that starts in their own vineyards, we get really excited about what they are doing.

Louis Roederer is the largest owner of biodynamic vineyards in Champagne. They believe that by having a hand on as much of the process as possible, from vine to bottle, they create a superior product. Instead of spending money on fancy packaging and branding that has absolutely nothing to do with the Champagne in the bottle, they put their effort into farming and ways to make better Champagne. They are so devoted to the process that in order to ensure the freshest and cleanest wines, their presses are no farther than 30 minutes away from any grape they are picking. All these efforts contribute to some of the best Champagne from any of the Grand Marque houses. We applaud this dedication, and more importantly, love drinking the results of Roederer's passion.

Louis Roederer "Brut Premier" Champagne (\$39.99) Rich and toasty, this wine is made with two-thirds estate-grown fruit. Peach and black cherry notes mingle with almond shortbread, flowing into a softly textured palate. Clean and fresh, showing both lush orchard fruit and crisp minerality. The quality of the house shines from start to finish. 92 points WE; 91 points ST and WS.

2008 Louis Roederer Brut Rosé Champagne (750ml \$64.99; 1.5L \$139.00) Simply one of the best rosés I have had this year. The 2008 is stunning, and very Roederer. It shows amazing depth, with notes of candied raspberry, exotic spice and blood orange up front, backed up with a weighty and mineral-driven mid-palate. A fantastic balance of power and elegance, with layers stacked upon layers of

ginger, chalk, lemon rind and dried blueberry. Incredible. 94 points WE and 93 points AG.

—Kyle Kurani



BRUNO MICHEL *Champagne for the Main Course*

With fall already upon us and cold weather fast approaching, one question we get asked on the sales floor over and over again is:

What wines pair well with fall-inspired foods, especially the big turkey dinner?

While the traditional pairings of Pinot Noir and white Burgundy roll easily off everyone's tongue, one of the greatest, most food-friendly of wines is often overlooked: Champagne. Perhaps it is neglected due to its celebratory nature, but it's those beautiful bubbles and texture that make it a harmonious match with food. Champagne's effervescence, high acidity, low alcohol and varying dosages (sugar levels) help it to effortlessly bridge different styles, flavors and textures within a single meal.



Bruno Michel has always been one of my "go-to" Direct Import producers when I'm looking for complexity, character and terroir in a Champagne, but I recently got a fresh new perspective on how well their cuvées pair with food, especially with autumnally inspired flavors. Bruno Michel pushes the boundaries of traditional practices in the use of both oak casks and stainless steel vats, and in incorporating an extremely high proportion of Pinot Meunier, which adds an extra dimension when pairing with food. The Bruno Michel cuvées can stand up to a variety of bolder flavors and more robust textures due to their inclusion of oak barrels and greater usage of Pinot Meunier.

The **Bruno Michel "Blanche" Brut Champagne*** (750ml \$34.99; 1.5L \$79.99) has amazing balance and elegance, and at such an extraordinary price! Incredibly rich yet elegant, with subtle layers of caramelized apple and citrus. The glycerol texture and approachable style lends itself perfectly to pairing with fall recipes such as beet and walnut salad or curried cauliflower soup.

Biscuity and lightly toasted from the all-old-barrel fermentation regimen, the **Bruno Michel Premier Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne*** (\$44.99) couldn't be more stylistically different from the Blanche. While the inclusion of barrel is evident on the nose, delicate aromatics of fresh apple and white florals, coupled with vibrant acidity on the palate, are a constant reminder that this cuvée is 100% Chardonnay. Butternut squash & Parmesan pizza or a pork tenderloin with caramelized apples would be the perfect accompaniment to this focused yet complex cuvée.

While most Champagne is too elegant and delicate to stand up to red meat, here's a barrel-fermented 100% Pinot Meunier that can hold up to much heartier cuts like rack of lamb or filet mignon. The **Bruno Michel "Les Roses" Brut Rosé Champagne*** (\$49.99) is a Burgundy lover's dream. This unique Champagne is full of gamey, savory, meaty yet potpourri-scented aromatics. For everyone who ever wanted an earthy, dried berry and leather-driven red wine with bubbles in it, you can stop looking!

—Mari Keilman

Two Sparkling Stars to Brighten Your Holidays

By Scott Beckerley

I know, I know: the “H” word, already. It *does* creep up quickly, doesn't it? We're here to help. As many of you know, Gary and I went to Champagne last spring. Before leaving, Gary asked me what Grand Marque houses I would like to visit, and it was a total no brainer: Billecart-Salmon and Pierre Paillard, two of my very favorite producers in Champagne.

Billecart-Salmon

We went to Billecart-Salmon in Mareuil-sur-Ay first. We were given a complete history of the house, the vineyard holdings, and the most extensive cellars that I have seen—I have about 10 pages of notes from our visit. I will say that Billecart-Salmon is one of the last family-owned and managed Grande Marque houses. The sixth generation is currently at the helm, and some of the family still lives at the winery.



Although many people consider the flagship wine of Billecart-Salmon to be their **Brut Rosé*** (\$74.99), I would like to direct your attention to some overlooked gems. The **1999 Billecart-Salmon “Cuvée Nicolas François Billecart” NFB Brut Champagne** (\$99.00) is simply exquisite. The blend of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay has been the same since 1964. One third of the wine is aged in oak barrels, and it has a very low dosage of three grams per liter. An orange and toffee nose leads to a bit of oak with some breathing time; caramel and coffee notes on the palate, with apple and orange fruit, and graceful, snappy acidity on a long finish. Even at this price, this wine is a great value! 96 points JS, 95 points WS. Another gem is the **NV Billecart-Salmon Brut Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru Champagne*** (\$74.99). This also has a low dosage at six grams per liter, with a nose of white fruits, green apples and citrus. Refined, with just a bit of rich honey in the background. Elegant and feminine, with ample yellow fruits on the finish and firm acidity. 92 points ST, *W&S* and *WS*.

The “workhorse” is the wonderful **NV Billecart-Salmon “Brut Reserve” Champagne*** (\$44.99). This wonderful blend of 40% Pinot Meunier, 30% Pinot Noir and 30% Chardonnay keeps with the Billecart tradition of high-quality wines with ample acidity. It has a stone fruit nose with bright green apples. The palate fleshes out nicely with some tropical notes, ginger and pear fruit. Simply delicious! 91 points *W&S* and *WE*. If you love big format bottles, do not miss the **Magnum 1.5 liter** (\$109.00) and the **Double Magnum 3.0 liter** (\$269.00). Be warned: the double magnums sell quickly. In San Francisco, they average a shelf time of 10 minutes to four hours!

Pierre Paillard

Another highlight of our trip was the great house of Pierre Paillard in Bouzy. As it was our first stop in the morning, I had a clear palate to thoroughly enjoy their wines, all of which are aged for a minimum of three years, and up to seven years for the vintage releases. All of the wines, with the exception of the Bouzy Rouge, are made in stainless steel to keep their lively, complex, and exceptional character intact.

The “basic” wine is the **NV Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Champagne*** (\$39.99), which has a 2009 base with 2008 reserve wine blended in. It's 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay with a low five grams per liter dosage. With a lovely nose of golden apples, crème fraiche and coconut, it's rich on the palate. The Pinot Noir dominates initially; baked apples and crème caramel are followed by a lingering finish where the citrus-infused flavors of the Chardonnay take over. A *great* bargain! 92 points *WS*. The **2004 Vintage Grand Cru Brut Champagne*** (\$59.99) is a 50-50 blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay with an uber-low dosage of 3.5 grams per liter. Aromas of yellow fruits and macaroon are followed by scents of citrus and lime. Delicate on the palate, with apple and pear fruit. The finish is long and not overly acidic. 91 points *ST*. The **NV Pierre Paillard “Acte 1” Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne*** (\$49.99) also has a dosage of 3.5 grams per liter. It has a very linear nose of apples, pear and sea salt that leads to scents of white flowers and white peaches. Fairly fleshy on the palate, with yellow fruits and fine acidity that, like the 2004 vintage Brut, is not overwhelming. Excellent balance and character. 90 points *WS*. Last, but not least, is the red wine for which this village is famous. The **2008 Pierre Paillard Bouzy Rouge Coteaux Champenois*** (\$34.99) is a much more substantial Bouzy Rouge than most people are used to. Done completely in oak for 12 months, in barrels that are 5-10 years old, it shows a fine nose of cranberries, dark cherries and just a hint of white pepper. It's fleshy on the palate, where it becomes rich and full, with dark cherry fruit, clean acidity and spice. Extremely elegant and balanced. My very favorite Bouzy Rouge, and perfect for most of your holiday meals. Hello, turkey!



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