

566 WINE News

We take the trouble to find the best bubbles: Champagne.



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Great Times for Champagne!

By Gary Westby

Every year, the K&L Champagne team (Mari Keilman from Hollywood, Scott Beckerley from San Francisco, Kyle Kurani and I from Redwood City) get together for an-all day tasting of the big Champagne houses' offerings. This year I found the quality to be better than ever. I can't remember basic, non-vintage Champagne tasting better. The financial crisis of recent years had a strangely positive effect on quality, by allowing the producers to age their Champagne longer, under perfect cellar conditions. Although demand in the U.S. has never been stronger, worldwide, and especially in

Europe, Champagne sales are a little slow. The big houses have reacted by being more selective with grape purchases, and lower turnover has increased the aging of the wines on the lees. The dollar is also strong versus the Euro, and while a few big houses are abusing the U.S. market by raising prices here in spite of the currency windfall, we have seen some price reductions, and I am confident we will see more. Our direct purchases are offering values that are better than ever, and our Champagne Club has the budget for the best selections in its history. It is a great time to be a Champagne lover!

Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Champagne

(\$48.99) No producer from our direct portfolio has made such an impact so quickly. All of the fruit in the Pierre Paillard Champagnes comes from their estate in the Grand Cru of Bouzy. This Champagne is composed of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay and has wonderful pie crust and savory Pinot Noir aromas and flavors. Fans of big styles like Bollinger, Egly-Ouriet and Marguet should try this!



Arthur Marc "Initiale Noir & Blanc" Brut Champagne

(\$29.99) Our newest direct import has been around a long time... The current owners are 12th generation growers! This very well balanced Champagne has the tiniest of bubbles and a dry, subtle flavor profile. It comes from estate vineyards in the Western Valley of the Marne from a village called Fleury-la-Rivière. Unlike the powerhouse wines of the neighbors who grow mostly Meunier, this is delicate and pure. What a deal!



Michel Lorient "Authentic" Brut Champagne

(\$29.99) How can we offer an all-estate Champagne with 50% reserve wines, aged for three years on the lees, made by the president of the independent vigneron, for this price? A direct buy and a dollar that is king helps! If you have never had the top-class, round, rich yet refreshing 100% Meunier Champagne of Michel Lorient, now is the time. He is one of the best growers in Champagne, and still works with one of the old Coquard basket presses and "Le Creuset" style enamel-lined tanks in the winery.



Launois: Cream of the Côte des Blancs

By Scott Beckerley

Launois has long been one of my very favorite Champagne houses. I have had the pleasure of visiting the winery, the vineyards, and the museum that is on the property. Launois has also been a hit with our customers for its unique blend of Côte des Blancs minerality and salinity, with the added distinction of Launois' typically small bead and delicate creaminess.

The "flag bearer" is the Launois "Cuvée Reserve" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99). This beauty is all Grand Cru fruit (as are all of the Launois offerings) and is wonderfully smooth, subtle and creamy. Lemon curd, yellow apples, pine nuts and bread dough are the dominant flavors. Absolutely delicious! Collectors, do not miss the magnums—they come and go in an instant!



Two generations of Launois: Bernard and Severine in their winery in Mesnil.

A unique follow-up (or starter!) to the Cuvée Reserve is the even more delicate Launois "Quartz" Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne (\$39.99). This perfect-as-an-aperitif Champagne has four atmospheres of pressure versus the usual six. The result is less yeast and nuttiness than the Cuvée Reserve and more cream, brioche, and even more delicacy. So easy to drink that you'd better be careful—the bottle will be gone before you know it!

The Launois "Veuve Clemence" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$44.99) comes solely from older vine fruit (up to 40 years old). It has beautiful, fresh pear fruit with vanilla notes and just the right amount of citrus. Deep and flavorful, it's a superb mouthful of Champagne.

Last, but certainly not least, is the magnificent 2006 Launois "Special Club" Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne (\$59.99). This special reserve bottling is allocated, and the fruit comes from the best, and oldest (50 years plus), vines on the property. This is a more typical Côte des Blancs style, with precise minerality and acidity. This particular vintage is a contrast to the 2004 vintage, which had laser-like acidity. The 2006 has a very rich nose with lots of cream, pear fruit, vanilla and toasted nuts. Quite rich on the palate, with dark, yellow apple fruit, baking spices and almond notes. As usual, the finish is long, long, long, on this wine. Very collectible, and from my personal experience, a really good Champagne for the cellar. Magnums (\$129.00) of this are also available in even smaller quantity, so don't wait. Enjoy!



Value and Luxury from Champagne Louis Roederer

By Kyle Kurani

Champagne Louis Roederer is a Grand Marque Champagne house, and then some: they are also a grower. For those of us who love to drink "grower Champagne" because we care about the production and the quality of the grapes going into the bottle, Louis Roederer does many of the things that usually only much smaller producers take the time and care to do. They are the largest owners of biodynamically farmed vineyards, 160 acres to be exact, and all of their vineyard sites rank within the top 5% of vineyards in the whole of Champagne. Their dedication to quality certainly is more than just lip service—it shines through in all of their wines.

Each year we have a Champagne Summit here at K&L, where we taste over a hundred bottles of bubbles—it's tough, but someone has to do it. After the day was done, looking over our notes, it was very clear to me that Roederer provided the best bookends of any Champagne producer we tried that day, giving us one of the one of the best bottles of Champagne we tasted for \$40 dollars, and also one of the best bottles of Champagne we tasted for \$200.

Louis Roederer "Brut Premier" Champagne (\$39.99) is comfortably one of the best bottles for \$40 from any of the Grand Marque houses. It is full-bodied and round, packed full of fresh baguette and pie crust, and so much texture. The palate is lifted, with apricot and chalk, hints of almonds and cream, beautifully supported by the reserve wine lending depth and complexity. Robert Parker perhaps sums it up best by saying: "The NV Brut Premier is a gorgeous wine that stands head and shoulders above the vast majority of wines in its price range." A perfect bottle for the many occasions that demand great Champagne.

2007 Louis Roederer "Cristal" Brut Champagne (\$199.99) is still of the most beautiful tête de cuvées in the world of Champagne. Like a fine diamond, the cut and clarity of the wine shine through the glass like few others. Crystalline and precise, the palate is full of fresh orchard fruit, spiced apple tart, and a quartzite minerality that is finesse and pure elegance. Age-worthy, to be sure.



Stretching the Dollar is Delicious with Baron Fuente

By Mari Keilman

As much as I love the upcoming holiday season, there's just the tiniest part of me that dreads it. No, it isn't the thought of unwanted in-laws or poorly conceived gifts, but the sad yet accepted fact that my wallet will be a lot lighter come January. And while I love lavishing my family and friends with gifts, ironically, the majority of my *dinero* usually goes towards blanketing the dining room table with good food and great wine. Think about it: a 15-pound turkey here, a standing rib roast there; throw in a few cases of wine and bubbles to pair with them, and pretty soon you realize that you're going to be eating Top Ramen after the New Year. Fortunately, Gary has far exceed expectations and has created a Direct Import portfolio of grower-producers that is top-notch in quality and extremely easy on the pocketbook. One of my favorites is Baron Fuente.

2006 Baron Fuente "Grand Millisime" Brut Champagne (\$29.99) is a blend of 45% Chardonnay, 40% Meunier and 15% Pinot Noir, and is the perfect vintage Champagne that I will be putting on my dining table this holiday season. So incredibly layered, the nose can only be described as elegant and sophisticated. Distinct aromas of green

apple, lemon curd and fresh toast are in harmonious balance with ripened pomaceous fruit, minerality, toast and leesiness that can only be achieved through vintage and bottle age. Once you get over the ridiculously amazing price for this vintage Champagne, the 2006 Baron Fuente "Grand Millisime" is a no-brainer.

Baron Fuente "Esprit" Brut Champagne (\$34.99) is a perfect example of how truly elevated Champagnes can become when they are left to age on their lees for an extended period of time. Disgorged after seven years *sur lees*, the Esprit (which is equal parts Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay) is left with an incredibly integrated nose of yeasty brioche, dried fruit and almonds. The extended aging is most apparent on the palate, with its incredibly rich and vinous texture. The true joy of the Esprit is a ridiculously long and persistent finish that is reminiscent of a great, nutty sherry.



Franck Bonville Champagne: Revisiting a K&L Darling

By Heather Vander Wall

If you have ever walked into a K&L and asked about Champagne, or browsed our staff reviews online, you will have noticed a disproportionate buzz surrounding the Franck Bonville wines. Why do we love these wines, and what makes this Champagne the most-consumed Champagne among our staff?

As I work mostly with Burgundy, I think a lot about location. Within Champagne, the Côte des Blancs, just south of Epernay, is the best area for growing Chardonnay. Right in the middle of this east-facing slope are the two grand cru villages of Avize and Oger. Olivier Bonville's estate is composed of holdings in these two villages. In addition, Bonville is a grower-producer, meaning he has the opportunity to trace the wine from vineyard to glass—important not only for quality management, but for a winemaking vision. Knowing your terroir is key in making outstanding wine.



Olivier Bonville pouring his Champagne in the Belles Voyes vineyard.

Franck Bonville Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$34.99) Yes, this is Bonville's "entry level" Champagne, all grand cru and all blanc de blancs. Let's put this in perspective: if we were talking about grand cru wine from the Côte d'Or, we would expect to pay at least \$100 a bottle, but this Champagne is \$34.99. Once the wine is opened, what should you expect? A pure, clean, and focused wine that is extremely subtle. This wine is all about the chalky, mineral notes from the terroir from which it hails. There are no overblown fruit or nutty notes here. Hints of citrus zest, white pear and blossoms complement, but do not overshadow this elegant, terroir-focused wine.

Franck Bonville "Belles Voyes" Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne (\$69.99) Almost any staff member will tell you that this is the best Champagne we carry. The grapes come from a small plot in Oger with vines planted 1928-1932, bearing fruit with a very complex aroma and flavor profile. In addition, the Belles Voyes cuvée is based only on the best years, the current release being 2008. The wine, like Krug, is vinified in used oak barrels (*fûts de chêne*), rather than stainless steel, and aged for an extended period before disgorgement and release. The result? An incredibly complex wine with a clear, chalky, mineral drive enhanced by elegant autolytic and exotic spice aromas. I'm not sure when I've encountered such balance in a Champagne between elegant, taut, chalky notes, and a rich brioche texture. The whole is tinged with tangerine zest and cardamom, but in all honesty, to describe the wine properly would take far more space than the scope of this article. So I will conclude by adding to the enthusiasm of my colleagues for this producer, and recommending a bottle for your next occasion.

Champagne Highlights for the Gift-Giving Season

2002 Thiénot “Cuvée Alain Thiénot” Brut Champagne

(\$99.00) This spectacular bottle is the perfect gift for the Champagne lover who has had it all. This all-estate blend of 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay was just released after more than 10 year of aging on the lees, and comes from vineyards that the Thiénot family bought from the Krugs in the '80s. The crus included in the blend are a list of some of Champagne's very best: Avize, Chouilly, Grauves, Ay, Rilly and Hautvillers. It has high class, authentic toast and nuts from the long aging on the lees, and top-notch creamy breadth from the fantastic vintage. This drinks very well now at 13 years old, but could be kept for another decade in a good cellar. This will be a treat for whomever you gift it to!



Krug the most transparent wine in the business. This is powerful, vinous Champagne with a web of intricate flavors and near-infinite complexity, but never comes across as heavy. This is a Champagne that even the most jaded palate will never tire of, and a great treat for the most special of friends for a holiday gift.

Bollinger “Special Cuvée” Brut Champagne (\$59.99)

With the new James Bond movie in theaters, why not give the most suave of spy's favorite bottle? Bollinger has been a longtime holdout for quality in Champagne, and still insists on barrel fermenting their wine. It is aged for four years on the lees, and the blend is predominantly Pinot Noir, which comes through in the black cherry power on the mid-palate. I love this Champagne for its power, but come back to it for its clean refreshment. The soul of Bollinger is their great holdings in the Grand Cru of Ay, a south-facing, steep cru that is the chalkiest of all the Pinot Noir vineyards in Champagne. This allows for great power to be married to elegance effortlessly...If you haven't had any lately, you should check it out!



—Gary Westby

Ariston Aspasic “Carte Blanche” Brut Champagne (\$27.99)

This entirely estate grown Champagne is composed of 40% Chardonnay, 30% Meunier and 30% Pinot Noir from the picturesque country village of Brouillet in the northwest corner of Champagne. Many of you have met the Aristons over the years, and they are just as friendly and fun as the wines they make.



We have been their U.S. importer for over 15 years now, and they offer us value in the bottle like no one else. This Champagne has been aged for five years on the lees, and will fool your friends for \$50-plus Champagne. This is the best thing that we have for a case buy—just make sure that you don't give it all away, because this is a Champagne you are going to want to drink yourself. It is full of toast on the nose, pinpoint bubbles in the glass, and great refreshing zip on the finish.

Krug “Grande Cuvée” Brut Champagne (\$149.99) Of all of the famous names in Champagne, I can think of none that deliver on the promise of quality better than Krug, and especially the Grand Cuvée. This wine is always a combination of at least nine vintages and aged for at least six years on the lees, an investment of time and space that, in my mind, justifies the price. The exact composition of each bottle is accessible on Krug's website with a code on the back of each bottle, making



Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Rosé Champagne (\$57.99)

During the gift-giving season I often turn to one of my favorite grower-producer Champagne houses, Pierre Paillard. Located in the Grand Cru village of Bouzy, Paillard is headed by one of the most likeable guys in Champagne, Quentin Paillard (along with Benoit and Antoine Paillard). As a teacher, I often gave small tokens of my appreciation to my colleagues during the holiday season. I never questioned the gift that would be handed out: the Pierre Paillard Grand Cru Brut Rosé. This rosé is a blend of 70% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir (6% of which is Bouzy Rouge). In the glass the Paillard Rosé is an elegant, pale pink color with a tiny, tight stream of bubbles. On the nose and palate I find fresh red fruits including raspberry, red currant, and freshly picked strawberries alongside citrus notes. The Paillard Rosé is a delicate, delightful rosé to gift as a gift to others as well as yourself!



—Doug Burress

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