

House Music

With the production of Champagne strictly controlled, it's the "house style" that differentiates one brand from the other. Text: **Lindsay Groves**

"I drink Champagne when I'm happy and when I'm sad. Sometimes I drink it when I'm alone. When I have company I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I'm not hungry and I drink it when I am. Otherwise I never touch it, unless I'm thirsty." Lily Bollinger

Who could argue with Madame Bollinger? If only everyone could manage a glass of Champagne a day, the world would be a much happier place. However, for most of us Champagne is still only for special occasions or an occasional indulgence. In the world of luxury goods, Champagne is the most precious jewel in the French crown.

Champagne is exported to 171 different countries. As of 2006, worldwide shipments were as high as 321 million bottles, with nearly 80% in the non-vintage brut category. Each major Champagne House produces a non-vintage cuvée – an assemblage of a number of different base wines. In a region where wine production is strictly controlled, this unique assemblage or "house style" is what differentiates one brand from another.

To get an idea of how similar these wines can be prior to blending, remember only three varieties of grapes are grown in Champagne, and everything is regulated – vine density, yields, vineyard practices, pruning, harvesting, and so on. Winemaking procedures are also controlled, from what strain of yeast is used to how long the wine rests on its lees. The minimum ageing requirements are 15 months for non-vintage and 36 months for vintage wines, although many producers surpass this minimum.

However, when blending wines, the producer can play



with a number of variables; percentages of the three varieties used, grapes from different parcels/vineyards/villages/crus, different vintages (reserve wines), etc. In some cases, as many as 70 base wines 15 or more years old may be blended to make a single cuvée. The assemblage process aims to produce a wine that is much grander than its individual components.

Another reason for non-vintage blends is that they make for consistency whereas vintages can vary from year to year. With a variable climate, harvests in

the Champagne region can be unpredictable. By using reserve wines, it is possible to make a consistent product even in less than perfect years.

What's more, the Champenois have been ingenious in the marketing of their wines. Until the relatively recent emergence of big brands from the New World, the Grandes Marques Champagnes were the only few recognized around the world.

With Champagne's myriad choices, how can you decipher which brands will be suited to your taste? One way is to try them all! But with a total of 264 Champagne houses (accounting for 97% of all exports outside Europe) you would have your work cut out for you. Only 97 houses out of the 264 account for over 95% of négociant sales (through brokers) and, narrowing it down further, just 10 houses account for 55%.

Champagne houses consider their basic non-vintage Brut Champagne to be the epitome of their "house style". By taking a closer look at the classic N/V assemblages of some of the Grandes Marques we can gain an insight into their differences.

Guide to the major House Styles of Champagne

Specifications, philosophy and tasting notes



AYALA

Location: Ay-Champagne

Total Production: 50,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Majeur

Blend: 30% Chardonnay, 45% Pinot Noir, 25% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: 2.5 years followed by 3 years in bottle after disgorgement

Typical Tasting Note: Pale gold colour. Dry and light bodied with refreshing acidity, soft mousse and aromas of citrus, mineral, honeysuckle and green apple. A balanced and unpretentious blend.

Cellaring Potential: Short term. (2-3 years). The house of Ayala is one of the original 18 négociants who founded the Syndicat des Grandes Marques de Champagne in 1882. It is considered to be one of the smaller producers.

BILLECART-SALMON

Location: Mareuil-Sur-Ay

Total production: 60,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Réserve

Blend: 30% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir, 35% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: not specified

Typical Tasting Note: Medium straw colour. Nose of white flowers, pear, unripe apricot and delicate citrus. Dry and light to medium bodied with a good backbone of acidity and a fine mousse. Great purity of fruit and finesse.

Cellaring Potential: Long term. Up to 10 years in appropriate conditions. The grapes used by Billecart-Salmon come from a number of vineyards in the Marne département. Some of the reserve wines are cellared in older Burgundian casks.

Champagne Varietals

Only three varieties are used in Champagne:

Chardonnay adds finesse to the blend, also capable of long-term ageing.

Pinot Noir adds structure and backbone to the blend, also capable of ageing and often contributes mushroomy aromas in its old age.

Pinot Meunier adds flesh and fruitiness to the blend. Makes the blend more approachable and supple but is not meant for ageing.

BOLLINGER

Location: Ay-Champagne

Total production: 100,000 cases

Name of N/V: Special Cuvée, Brut

Blend: 60% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: 36 months

Typical Tasting Note: Medium gold colour. Bouquet of bruised apple, sourdough and green nettle. Dry and light to medium bodied with racy acidity and a silky mousse. Restrained fruit on the palate with notes of acacia and

brioche. Muscular, complex and mellow, but can be austere in its youth.

Cellaring Potential: Long term plus. The grapes used by Bollinger are obtained from 30 different crus, 80% of which are Grand Cru and Premier Cru rated. A portion of the base wines is fermented in small oak casks to add complexity to the blend. The reserve wines are stored in magnums; this is a tradition that most Champagne houses have abandoned. The reserve wines used in the N/V assemblage can be as much as 15 years old (although reserve wines generally represent only 6-8% of the blend). The amount of sugar added with the dosage is kept to a minimum; the Brut contains 6-9 g/l sugar. Another interesting fact is that all Bollinger Champagnes are disgorged 12 weeks prior to shipment to ensure that the wine is in the freshest condition possible upon reaching the customer. This house is well known for the great ageing potential of their wines.



DEUTZ

Location: Ay-Champagne

Total Production: 75,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Classic

Blend: 30% Chardonnay, 38% Pinot Noir, 32% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: An average ageing period of three years

Typical Tasting Note: Pale to medium gold colour. Aromas of white flowers, apple, pear and marzipan. Dry with racy acidity, firm structure and great finesse. Crisp and fruity on the finish.

Cellaring Potential: Long term. The grapes used by Deutz come from 30 different crus in the Marne département, with an average rating of 97%. The wines are encouraged to undergo malolactic fermentation to soften the acidity. The final Brut Classic blend contains 20-40% of reserve wines.

GOSSET

Location: Ay-Champagne

Total Production: 50,000 cases

Name of N/V: Grande Réserve Brut

Blend: 42% Chardonnay, 45% Pinot Noir, 13% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: not specified

Typical Tasting Note:

Pale coppery gold hue with a rich, full nose of spice, honeysuckle, round apple, earth, truffle and yeast. Dry with vibrant acidity and a very smooth mousse with a biscuity richness. Well balanced with great complexity.

Cellaring

Potential: Long term. Gosset is

actually the oldest

known producer of wine in Champagne, tracing its roots back to Pierre Gosset in 1584. The grapes come from 45 different villages in the Marne département, mainly from Grands Crus and Premiers Crus with an average rating of 95%. In the

production of their wines, they use some wood and avoid malolactic fermentation. All riddling and dégorgement is carried out by hand. The finished blend contains approximately 24% reserve wines at an average age of two years.

KRUG

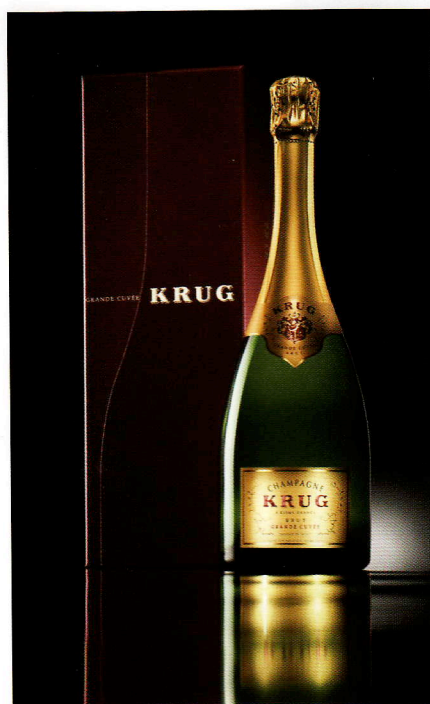
Location: Reims

Total Production: 40,000 cases

Name of N/V: Grande Cuvée, Brut

Blend: 45-55% Pinot Noir, 25-35% Chardonnay, 15-20% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: minimum 6 years



Typical Tasting Note: Medium honey-gold colour. Aromas of honey, caramel apple, toast, nuts/roasted nuts, acacia flower and dried fruit. Dry and full bodied with a soft, luxuriously creamy mousse and a fresh finish. Rich, opulent and complex.

Cellaring Potential: Long term plus. Krug uses its best wines to blend its N/V, supposedly working backwards to make the N/V first and the vintage cuvées afterwards. The 'Grande Cuvée' is therefore considered to be its flagship wine. The blend can consist of up to 50 different wines, from 20-25 villages, and 35-50% of reserve wines from 6-10 different vintages. The base wines are fermented in 205 litre old, fairly neutral oak barriques. The reserve wines are then stored in oak foudres. These are wines that will truly benefit from ageing,

unlike most other Champagnes.

LANSON

Location: Reims

Total Production: 500,000 cases

Name of N/V: Black Label

Blend: 35% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir, 15% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: 3 years

Typical Tasting Note: Dry and light bodied with steely acidity. A round texture with a creamy mousse offsets fresh nuances of green apple, white flowers, grapefruit, minerality, and faint bread dough.

Cellaring Potential: Short term. This house dates back to 1760, when Francois Delamotte began the production of Champagne. In 1828, Jean-Baptiste Lanson was taken on as a partner, and after the last of the Delamotte family, Lanson gained full control and the name of the Champagne was officially changed to Lanson. The grapes used by this house come from 50 or 60 different crus. None of the Champagnes produced by Lanson undergo malolactic fermentation, resulting in a more austere style, and can benefit substantially from ageing several years after disgorgement.

LAURENT-PERRIER

Location: Tours-Sur-Marne

Total Production: 500,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut L-P

Blend: 45% Chardonnay, 40% Pinot Noir, 15% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: 3 years

Typical Tasting Note: Medium gold with green highlights and gentle bubbles. A bouquet of spicy apple, yeast, butter, honey, oats and meadow flowers. Dry with bright acidity and medium bodied. Round mouthfeel with more apple on the palate.

Cellaring Potential: Short term. This house dates back to 1812, when the Laurent family gave up their trade as coopers and started selling Champagne. Made exclusively from grapes from very ripe harvests and blended from 55 crus with an average rating of 94%. 10-20% of the final blend is composed of reserve wines, and a total of 12 g/l sugar is added with the dosage.

MERCIER

Location: Epernay

Total Production: 500,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut

Blend: 10-15% Chardonnay, 45-50% Pinot Noir, 40% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: not specified

Typical Tasting Note: Pale straw colour with tree fruit aromas, bread dough and floral notes. Dry and light to medium bodied with a creamy mousse, zesty acidity and round, ripe fruit on the palate.

Cellaring Potential: Short term

MOËT & CHANDON

Location: Epernay

Total Production: 2 million cases

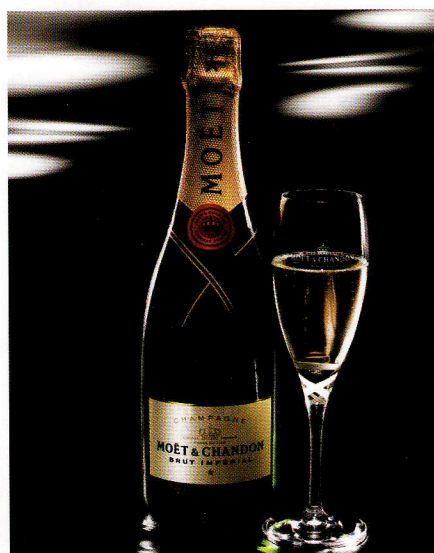
Name of N/V: Brut Impérial

Blend: 10% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir, 40% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: not specified

Typical Tasting Note: Pale gold with a fresh bouquet of freesia, apricot, grapefruit and apple. Dry and light bodied with crisp acidity and a vivacious mousse. An elegant wine that can develop toasty aromas if aged minimum a year or so after purchase.

Cellaring Potential: Short term (2-3 years).



MUMM

Location: Reims

Total Production: 625,000 cases

Name of N/V: Cordon Rouge

Blend: 45% Pinot Noir, 25% Pinot Meunier, 30% Chardonnay

Ageing on lees: 3 years

Typical Tasting Note: Pale gold with aromas of grapefruit, peach, apple, nuts and honey on the nose. Dry and light to medium bodied with a long finish. Fresh



and classic.

Cellaring

Potential:

Short term. Wine for the Cordon Rouge label comes from approximately 77 crus, located in various départements throughout Champagne. Many of the crus are rated as Grands and Premiers Crus, the average overall rating of the Mumm vineyards being 94%. The blend includes 10-20% reserve wines up to five years of age and the final dosage comes in low at 8-10 g/l sugar.

PIPER-HEIDSIECK

Location: Reims

Total Production: 420,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut

Blend: 15% Chardonnay, 55% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: 24 months

Typical Tasting Note: Citrus peel, green apple and bread aromas on the nose. Dry with a creamy mousse and lean acidity.

Cellaring Potential: Short term (2-3 years).

POL ROGER

Location: Epernay

Total Production: 108,500 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Réserve

Blend: 33% Chardonnay, 33% Pinot Noir, 33% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: 36 months

Typical Tasting Note: Medium straw-gold colour with aromas of brioche, apple, citrus and a touch of gentle pepper. Dry and light bodied with balanced acidity and a vigorous mousse. Exuberant and classy with great finesse.

Cellaring Potential: Long term. Marketed as "the gentlemen's Champagne", Pol Roger was also a favourite of Sir Winston Churchill, hence the name of their prestige cuvee

– Cuvee Sir Winston Churchill. Brut (White Foil).

POMMERY

Location: Reims

Total Production: 500,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Royal

Blend: 35% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: not specified

Typical Tasting Note: Pale straw with green highlights. Dry and light bodied with lively acidity; this blend is delicate, lacy and elegant. Creamy mousse is complemented by citrus, green apple, floral and light bread notes on the palate.

Cellaring Potential: Short term (2-3 years). Pommery is another Champagne house to boast about the story of a famous widow. The house of Pommery is said to have pioneered the brut style in 1874 with the release of its Brut 'Nature'. At the time, many other Champagne houses added sugar to their wines to cover up imperfections, as the brut style leaves the wine in its most naked state, "without make-up". Pommery is also famous for its crayères: Roman chalk pits connected by corridors creating a full 18 kilometres of cellar in which to store their bottles. Pommery encourages wines destined for the Brut Royal label to undergo malolactic fermentation.

LOUIS ROEDERER

Location: Reims

Total Production: 216,700 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Premier

Blend: 30% Chardonnay, 62% Pinot Noir, 8% Pinot Meunier



Ageing on the lees: 3 years

Typical Tasting Note: Pale gold colour.

Bouquet of white flowers, lemon zest, grapefruit, green apple and pear. Dry and light to medium bodied with focused acidity and a rich, creamy mousse. Deeper biscuity aromas on the palate with a fresh finish.

Cellaring Potential: Long term. Louis Roederer supplied Champagne to the Russian royal family, their premium cuvée 'Cristal' was created for Tzar Alexander II and was originally bottled in a clear crystal bottle. Roederer procures grapes from the Montagne de Reims, Côte des Blancs and Vallée de la Marne regions.

RUINART

Location: Reims

Total Production: 167,000 cases

Name of N/V: 'R' de Ruinart Brut

Blend: 40% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir, 10% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on lees: not specified

Typical Tasting Note: Medium straw colour with notes of candied citrus, brioche, apple and mineral. Dry with a vigorous mousse and exceptional purity of fruit, stemming from the large portion of Chardonnay employed in this blend. Fresh, delicate, rich and satisfying.

Cellaring Potential: Long term. Ruinart is known to be the oldest established Champagne house, founded in 1729 by Nicolas Ruinart. They were also first to acquire their crayères (chalk pits), which were classified as a historic monument in 1931. Ruinart unlike most houses bases its blends heavily on Chardonnay.

TAITTINGER

Location: Reims

Total Production: 355,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Réserve

Blend: 38% Chardonnay, 42% Pinot Noir, 20% Pinot Meunier

Ageing on the lees: 3-4 years

Typical Tasting Note: Medium straw colour. Dry, light bodied and well balanced with very fine, persistent mousse. Green almond, apple, acacia and lime blossom on the palate with a luscious texture and good complexity. Very elegant and refined.

Cellaring Potential: Short term. The

Champagne terminology

Non-vintage: A blend of wine from more than one vintage. The majority of the blend must be from the current vintage, and in some cases only five to ten percent of reserve wines are added.

Vintage: Must be by law 100% from the stated vintage. Vintage champagnes are only made in exceptional years. However, the particular Houses are left to declare their own vintages, unfortunately resulting in Vintage champagnes made in less than stellar years.

Blanc de Blancs: Translates as "white from whites", meaning the wine was made from 100% Chardonnay grapes (the only white grape variety used in champagne).

Blanc de Noirs: Translates as "white from blacks", meaning the wine has been made with one or both of the black grapes varieties permitted: Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier.

Rosé: This is one of the very few circumstances when white and red wine is blended to make a pink colour. The reason why red wine is added for colour as opposed to making the wine in a *saignée* method is for the sake of consistency.

Non-Dosage/Extra Brut: Wines that have no sugar added at the dosage stage when the bottle is topped up after disgorgement. Many believe the non-dosage style showcases the wine in its purest form, without sugar to tart it up and compensate for any shortcomings.

Prestige Cuvées: The top vintage wine of a Champagne House. Examples are Dom Pérignon (Moët & Chandon), Cristal (Roederer), La Grande Dame (Veuve-Cllicquot).



house of Taittinger draws from 40 different vineyards to source the grapes for its Brut Réserve Cuvée. With Chardonnay-dependent blends, a lot of the fruit is found in the Côte des Blancs département.

VEUVE-CLICQUOT

Location: Reims

Total Production: 83,000 cases

Name of N/V: Brut Yellow Label

Blend: 55% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Meunier

Ageing: 24 months ageing

Typical Tasting Note: Pale to medium gold. Dry with zesty acidity and a creamy mousse. Clean fruit flavours of green apple, citrus, honey, biscuit and quince



are showcased on the palate, followed by a refreshingly crisp finish. A classic, consistent non-vintage Champagne.

Cellaring Potential: Short term. Instantly recognizable because of its bright yellow label,

this house is well known for the story of the pioneering widow (Veuve) Clicquot who successfully built up the company after the death of her husband. The grapes that go into the Yellow Label Brut come from 50 different crus, covering more or less every département in Champagne. The majority of these crus are rated either as Grands or Premiers Crus. The wines undergo malolactic fermentation, which the company describes as a "decisive element in the Veuve-Cllicquot style". 25-40% of the Yellow Label blend is made up of reserve wines, and the dosage is minimal (10 g/l sugar). It is recommended that the N/V wine is cellared for a couple years after purchase in order for the typical biscuity aromas to develop. •

Based in Toronto, Sommelier Lindsay Groves is one of Ontario Hostelry Institute's "Top 30 Under 30". Lindsay tastes as many champagnes as is humanly possible!